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Popo And Fifina

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the novel opens, and soon thereafter dead, Poinsettia Jackson is more catalyst than character in Walter Mosley's second *Easy Rawlins mystery, set in Los Angeles in Red-scared 1953. Her murder provides the key to subsequent murders, a window into other characters, and the novel's thematic center. In their reactions to Poinsettia's murder, unorthodox amateur investigator Easy Rawlins and uptight black police detective Quinten Naylor reveal what they have in common—a special sense of responsibility toward black people. When Easy finds Poinsettia hanging in her apartment in one of the buildings he pretends not to own, he thinks she has committed suicide for fear of eviction and blames himself. When Naylor's white partner, accepting too easily the evidence of suicide, asks, "Who's gonna care about this one girl, Quint?" Naylor replies, "I care." The process of solving the murder shifts the blame from Easy to another black man, his rental agent Mofass, to a racist Internal Revenue agent who has exploited blacks' fear of the law in a racist society to extort money from them. As Easy is cleared of blame, however, he realizes he still bears responsibility, for Poinsettia is the victim not simply of murder but of a chain of victimization in which he, too, has participated. When targeted by the corrupt IRS agent, Easy had betrayed a more vulnerable friend of black people, Jewish labor organizer and alleged Communist Chaim Wenzler, just as Mofass had used Poinsettia, more vulnerable than he because of her sex and poverty, to save himself. Thus, though she plays little active role in the novel, Poinsettia is central to its unfolding of the process by which racism can make its victims participate in their own victimization.

• Theodore O Mason, Jr., "Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins: The Detective and Afro-American Fiction," *Kenyon Review* 14.4 (Fall 1992): 173–183.

—Susan L. Blake

POLITE, CARLENE HATCHER (b. 1932), novelist, essayist, dancer, activist, and educator. Carlene Hatcher Polite is among the important artists to emerge from the "second renaissance" of African American culture in the 1960s and 1970s. The author of two experimental novels, *The Flagellants* (1966) and *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* (1975), Polite forged a unique prose style that helped establish innovative modes popularized by later writers. In addition to writing, her widespread career has included professional dance training, performance, and instruction; political organizing; civil rights activism; and academic appointments. Born in Detroit to John and Lillian (Cook) Hatcher, international representatives of UAW-CIO, Polite attended Sarah Lawrence College and the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. From 1955 to 1963, she pursued a career as a professional dancer. Polite performed with the Concert Dance Theater of New York City (1955–1959) and the Detroit Equity Theatre and Vanguard Playhouse (1960–1962), and taught modern

dance in the Martha Graham technique as a guest instructor at the Detroit YWCA (1960–1962), the Detroit YMCA (1962–1963), and as a visiting instructor at Wayne State University.

In the early 1960s Polite turned from dance to political organizing and civil rights activism, joining in the cause with many African American artists and intellectuals. In 1962 she was elected to the Michigan State Central Committee of the Democratic Party. She was coordinator of the Detroit Council for Human Rights and participated in the historic June 1963 Walk for Freedom and the November 1963 Freedom Now Rally to protest the Birmingham church bombings. In 1963 Polite organized the Northern Negro Leadership Conference and was active in the NAACP throughout this time.

In 1964 Polite moved to Paris, where she lived until 1971. The influential French editor Dominique de Roux encouraged Polite's writing, and in 1966 *The Flagellants* was published in French by Christian Bourgois Editeur; Farrar, Straus and Giroux brought the novel out in English the following year. Polite received a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Fellowship in 1967 and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1968. *Sister X* and *the Victims of Foul Play* was published in 1975, four years after Polite's return to the United States. As of the mid-1990s she is a full professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where she began as an associate professor in 1971. Polite continues to work on two other novels.

The Flagellants protests limited gender roles for African American women and men in a racially oppressive society and, by a series of interior monologues and exchanges, explores existential questions of identity that transcend yet must be part of racial cultural liberation. *Sister X* recounts the life of a dead black dancer in Paris who was a victim of foul play, racial stereotypes, and discrimination. Both novels have been underappreciated, though Polite's experimentation with form and attention to the rhythms and dialects of African American oral expression influenced the development of postmodern black fiction, especially the work of later innovators such as Gayl *Jones and Ishmael *Reed.

• Hammett Worthington-Smith, "Carlene Hatcher Polite," in *DLB*, vol. 33, *Afro-American Fiction Writers after 1955*, eds. Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris, 1984, pp. 215–218. Claudia Tate, introduction to *The Flagellants*, 1967; rpt. 1987. Margaret A. Reid, "The Diversity of Influences on Carlene Hatcher Polite's *The Flagellants* and *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*," *Connecticut Review* 18:1 (Spring 1996): 39–50.

—Ronna C. Johnson

Popo and Fifina. A juvenile novel by Arna *Bon-temps and Langston *Hughes with illustrations by E. Simms Campbell, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* was published in 1932. Papa Jean and Mamma Anna, peasant farmers grown tired of farming on the hillsides of

Haiti, decide to pursue Papa Jean's dream to own a fishing boat, a decision that means moving the family from the interior to the coast. The story opens with a procession wending its way to the port village of Cape Haiti, parents leading the way with baby Pensia, followed by two burros laden with the family possessions, ten-year-old Fifina, and eight-year-old Popo.

Their new home is a single-room, windowless shack with a tin roof and a rickety door in a yard that includes fruit trees and fuel for cooking at their fingertips. Papa Jean secures work as a fisherman right away, and he is at sea over the succeeding days, but the reader-spectator is accorded a cultural excursion through home and village by accompanying Mamma Anna and the eager-eyed children through their daily routines.

Before the appeal of newness in Cape Haiti wears thin for the children, Mamma Anna is overtaken with homesickness for her birthplace, and the children join her for a holiday in the hills with Grandma Tercilia and other relatives, providing a brief view of the country Creole culture the family left behind. For Popo the high point of this visit occurs when he steals from his bed one evening, lured by the drums, to follow his young grown-up cousin André to the dance of the Congo.

Back at Cape Haiti, Fifina and Popo are thrilled one afternoon by the sight of a sky full of kites with long tails and singing strings in the hands of children like themselves. Owning a kite becomes their dream, and Fifina suggests a plan to gain their parents' approval. The strategy succeeds, and for several days the children are solely preoccupied with the joy of flying. But just as Fifina predicts, their parents eventually determine that the children are neglecting their other responsibilities. They must set aside the kite so that Fifina can help Mamma Anna at home and Popo can become an apprentice in Uncle Jacques's woodworking shop.

Besides Uncle Jacques, Papa Jean's older brother, the small wood shop employs old Durand, his helper, and cousin Marcel, his youngest son, who is near Popo's age. In no time, Popo focuses approval on a beautiful tray cousin Marcel is fashioning and, because he longs to craft one of his own, wonders if it is not modeled after an established pattern. The surprising knowledge that each tray is of a singular design provokes Popo's difficult question: How can anybody make a design without a pattern? His wonder about the sources of imagination prompts old Durand to observe the "riddle" that you have to put yourself into the design. Popo discovers both the pleasure and the pain of the act as he works his own tray, accompanied by the sad tale of the great King Christophe related by Uncle Jacques.

Later, when the two families picnic together along the coast, a more sober Popo climbs the steep cliffs to visit the lighthouse with Papa Jean, Uncle Jacques, Fifina, and Marcel. En route they pass several abandoned

forts that remind Popo of the sad history of Christophe. The perspective from the lighthouse resonates in Popo's and Fifina's first approach to Cape Haiti, but now there are intimations that they are more grown up.

This juvenile narrative once represented a new genre in African American writing, and it was unanimously praised for its simple charm, its attention to informative details, and its poetic style. It was translated into many languages and remained in print for twenty years.

• Violet J. Harris, "From *Little Black Sambo* to *Popo and Fifina: Arna Bontemps and the Creation of African-American Children's Literature*," *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature* 14 (June 1990): 108–127.

—Charles L. James

PORTER, DOROTHY (1905–1995), bibliographer and curator. In the introduction to Richard Newman's *Black Access: A Bibliography of Afro-American Bibliographies* (1984), Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley writes that her appointment in 1930 as "librarian in charge of the Negro Collection" at Howard University Library in Washington, D.C., was the turning point in her life. She had recently been one of the first two African Americans to receive the master's degree in library science from Columbia University. In accepting the Howard position, she brought the energy and intelligence necessary to make what would become the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center the renowned repository it is today. She has spent nearly six decades collecting, cataloging, and writing about the works of African Americans, Africans, Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans, West Indians, and people of African descent living in the Spanish-speaking countries of South America. Moreover, her own scholarly publications about African American culture and people provide further evidence of her resourcefulness.

In 1914, Jesse E. Moorland gave Howard University most of his private collection about people of African descent, but it and many other items of Africana remained unavailable to readers until Dorothy Porter set about ripping open boxes and cataloging their contents. She determined that the Moorland donation amounted to about three thousand pieces, and eventually edited and annotated one segment of it in *A Catalogue of the African Collection in the Moorland Foundation Howard University Library* (1958). When she retired in 1973, the Moorland gift had grown to over one hundred and eighty thousand items, including those bequeathed to Howard University by bibliophile Arthur B. Spingarn. In fact, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center has developed into the largest and most comprehensive repository on African Americans at an academic institution. Porter's collecting techniques ranged from buying and trading books, to encouraging donations, to actually picking up texts wherever they were available. She saved from the trash