

## **The Rhetoric of Race:**

### **The Use of Racial Stereotypes in Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct Novels**

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#### [Abstract](#) [Resumen](#)

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**Palabras Clave:** Retórica, estereotipos raciales, Ed McBain, novela policíaca.

According to John Jeffries, “American culture, popular and otherwise, treats blacks as though they are both invisible and highly conspicuous at the same time. Blacks are ignored while their status as inferior others dictates that their behavior is heavily and constantly scrutinized” (160). In Ed McBain’s 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series of police procedural novels, representations of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Italians, and other ethnic groups are deliberately anti-racist, although by making these groups both visible (drawing attention to their mistreatment) and invisible (as “equal” members of society, like everyone else) at the same time, McBain’s images sometimes appear more stereotypical or one-dimensional than they are intended to be. In using his rhetoric of anti-racism, McBain sometimes resorts to a type of hyper-realism intended to show “the way things really are” for black detectives such as Arthur Brown. In the novels, “good” men are fair and objective in their quest for justice and in their dealings with diverse peoples, whereas “bad” men are either overtly racist or at least non-compassionate towards the plight of the underprivileged.

## 1. RACE IN THE DETECTIVE NOVEL

Andrew Pepper states that “the contemporary American detective novel, in particular, has sought to depict society in all its diversity—as the detective attempts to discover who has done what, he or she necessarily comes into contact with individuals drawn from different backgrounds and cultures” (241). Perhaps this is why the American detective story, in novel, film, or television form, has become so enormously popular—because the detective, and especially the police detective, has daily contact with a more diverse sampling of society, in terms of race, ethnicity, and class, than probably any other single figure. The struggles between races and classes and the detectives’ ambiguous positions within both make for dynamic reading (and viewing). Pepper also reminds us that

while there might ultimately be only one ‘language of truth,’ that of the hard-boiled investigator, his or her voice, according to Bakhtin at least, will necessarily reflect the full diversity of his or her social milieu because language is constructed via a process of what he calls ‘dialogics’ (whereby each voice or utterance only takes its meaning in relation to other voices or utterances and therefore reflects all the voices in a given society. (241)

On a less theoretical note, McBain’s detective novels include the voices of people from many different races and classes, because his detectives interview and converse with a widely diverse range of people in their working lives—really the only thing they all have in common is their connection, direct or indirect, with a crime. And in addition to this presentation of diverse minor characters, McBain also makes some of his main detectives diverse, themselves. Pepper points out that African-Americans will likely “try to choose

which parts of their ethnicity to make a part of their lives,” while “an equal, if not greater, external force . . . seeks to categorize them merely as black” (244). Arthur Brown appears to choose “blue” over black as his primary identification, and then selects which already racialized aspects of his character to emphasize, in given contexts. As Kathleen Gregory Klein’s collection, *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, illustrates, detective fiction “can be used to teach cultural diversity both in the classroom and to the general reader” (Pepper 256), and this appears to be part of the author’s plan.

According to Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald,

non-mainstream detectives explore cultural differences—in perception, in way of life, in visions of the world—and act as links between cultures, interpreting each to each, mainstream to minority, and minority to mainstream. Their function as emissaries between different groups is a natural outgrowth of the intermediary function of many traditional American hardboiled detectives, figures who moved easily between their upper-class employers and the shadowy criminal underworld, or perhaps between the lower-middle-class police and aristocratic crime victims or criminals. Ethnicity has replaced class barriers, but the need for linking problem-solvers remains the same. (60)

Macdonald and Macdonald discuss the ethnic detective as a new phenomenon in American detective fiction, and it is true that not many authors had yet jumped on the multicultural detective bandwagon when Ed McBain began his series in the 1950s. Although he was often less prominent than others such as Detective Steve Carella (mistakenly called “Joe Carella” in Macdonald’s and Macdonald’s article) in the early 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series, black Detective Arthur Brown has existed since the first beginnings

of the police procedural genre, and Meyer Meyer, a Jewish detective given to reflections on anti-Semitism, has continuously worked alongside the Italian-American Carella, as a major part of the Precinct's detective team. In Ed McBain, ethnic detectives (who exist as part of "the lower-middle-class police") move between problems of race and class, interpreting and reflecting non-mainstream cultures for the education of the pop fiction reader. Ethnicity has "provided the detective genre with more direct opportunities for political and social commentary" (Macdonald & Macdonald 86), and McBain has used these opportunities well. According to Macdonald and Macdonald,

the writers of mysteries with ethnic detectives best use ethnicity when they depict crossroads encounters between sympathetic or at least understandable characters; despite differences or tension, the characters or the detectives explore cruxes and elucidate them for the reader. In the best works, these encounters, differences, and tensions are made integral to the plot and to the detection [. . .] In addition, such writers face the difficulty of truly representing another cultural perspective and the tendency of reading their own interpretations into others. If the alien culture is given its true voice, readers are likely to have difficulty understanding or relating; thus, a guide or go-between is essential. Yet, by their very nature, such guides or interpreters must translate attitudes, values, and perceptions into terms that make some sense to readers. In other words, the alien must become, to some degree, nonalien and familiar. (94)

Arthur Brown is not the Coffin or Gravedigger of Chester Himes's violent, radical satires—he is recognizable as a cop, a lower-middle-class working man who has much in common with his white colleagues, including his value system. Therefore, McBain uses

the familiarity of the police detective as a popular culture figure as the home base from which Brown can branch off into explorations of his particular cultural difference.

Robert P. Winston and Nancy C. Mellerski come closest to expressing my idea of the sociological value of Ed McBain's fiction, in their ideological study of the police procedural genre. They refer to Foucault's definition of the police as

an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with. Police power must bear 'over everything': it is not however the totality of the state nor of the kingdom as visible and invisible body of the monarch; it is the dust of events, actions, behaviour, opinions—'everything that happens' . . . (213) (qtd. in 8)

Winston and Mellerski write that "[t]he fact that the procedural is generally written in serial form confirms that the ongoing Panopticism envisioned by Foucault is in fact occurring in this category of mass culture . . . The need to rehearse the surveillance of deviance in this fashion also indicates, however, the reluctance of individuals to accept this level of state control" (8). In other words, McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series can be said to continuously enact a form of panopticism—the author and his characters repeatedly "police" society by exploring issues of criminality, justice, race, class, work, and masculinity. However, this type of policing is not a dictatorial or oppressive type of surveillance and enforcement. Since these same issues are brought up in every novel throughout the series' half-century-long history, we can assume that they have not been resolved and that the public (expressing its agreement by continuing to purchase the novels) craves more and more discussion and negotiation of these unresolved issues that continue to trouble modern urban society. In this sense, then, despite Winston's and

Mellerski's comment that police procedural novels (like Golden Age mysteries) allow the reader to remain self-righteously detached from any real socio-political issues (which can be "subject[ed] to scrutiny in a non-threatening way" (8)), they go on to admit that the genre "does not always conclude with a satisfying restoration of order which confirms the value of the society being scrutinized" (8-9). McBain's novels often end on a much more ambiguous note.

## 2. RACE IN THE 87<sup>TH</sup> PRECINCT

Similarly, George N. Dove has written that "[t]here are not many 'messages' in the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series" (*Boys* 120), although his statement is far from the truth. In fact, race and class as themes are focused on more often than any others, throughout the entire span of the series. McBain seems to be much more interested in spreading "messages" through the medium of popular entertainment than he is in challenging the reader's ability for "ratiocination."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Leitch believes that the "chronicles of the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct . . . are less interested in the motives for crime as in its meanings, less interested in a crime's solution than its effects on the victims, on the investigators, on the whole urban world McBain is at such pains to evoke. The results are frequently messy because crime, despite its Golden Age image, is anything but a neat puzzle" (Leitch 33). In the case of McBain's works, moreover, the narrator deliberately troubles the reader's sense of self-complacency by repeatedly drawing attention to the fact that everyone in a society is implicated in its flaws. Every time McBain writes (as he does with startling frequency) of the ghettoization of blacks or Hispanics, or the anti-Semitic jokes leveled at Meyer, the reader, particularly if he or she is an urban dweller, cannot help but squirm.

Readers may be able to feel good about themselves if they can most closely

identify with Steve Carella, the “average guy” hero who is not racist, but even Carella is not colour blind. In 1999’s *The Last Dance*, McBain writes, “Any white or black person in America who told you he or she was color blind was lying” (187). And even though Carella “would hide Meyer in his basement in a minute and fight a thousand Nazis who tried to break down the door” (128), “he had felt strange celebrating Passover with him” (128). Thus, even the most self-consciously anti-racist readers might be jarred into a realization of their own subtle enactments of racist belief. This is a large part of McBain’s project—to paint as realistic a picture of society as he can without sacrificing narrative interest, and to force the reader to think about some of the issues he raises.

The police environment is perfect for raising discussions of race and class, in particular, since police are confronted with controversial decisions such as racial profiling, on a daily basis. For example, in 1995’s *Romance*, Detective Kling notices that some reporters questioning a stabbing victim have not asked her the race of her attacker. Kling thinks, “Maybe journalists weren’t allowed to. As cops, he and Carella would ask that question the minute the others cleared the room” (55). The police know that race sometimes plays a role in crime, but they must also tread a thin line between thorough investigation and political correctness. As Christopher P. Wilson points out, with the advent of 1960s civil rights protests, “police suddenly found themselves not heroes of an American consensus, but accused as provocateurs: on the streets of Birmingham [Alabama] and Detroit and Los Angeles, at the riots at the Chicago Democratic Convention, and of course among the disruptions on college campuses during the Vietnam War itself” (*Cop Knowledge* 95). Ever since, with the media saturation of incidents such as the Rodney King beating, the police in America have been labeled as racist brutes who use unnecessary force to lock up anyone who does not fit their

conception of a decent citizen. Beginning with the increased professionalism and bureaucracy of the 1950s and '60s, "To this day, street patrol continues to be exercised in highly differential ways by neighborhood, race, and class, as a matter of policy and training, not happenstance or overzealousness" (Wilson 96). "Preventative" profiling by race is seen by many as nothing more than the official sanctioning of racist behaviour. Knowing that the popular image of the police has been an increasingly negative one, McBain has tried to contribute to the formation of a more positive image for America's police. His series has always been designed, as he himself admits, to foster a more sympathetic view of the police. When combined with his personal anti-racist politics, this tactic of representing policemen as seekers of justice for all proves to be a good rhetorical strategy for getting readers interested in the racial issues that police encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Charles L.P. Silet's 1994 interview with Ed McBain confirms the author's desire to write more and more social commentary into his series. In this interview, McBain/Hunter refers to the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series as "an offspring of *The Blackboard Jungle*" (394), Hunter's 1954 novel of racial tensions in an urban high school, later made into a successful film starring Sidney Poitier. For both *The Blackboard Jungle* and the 87<sup>th</sup> series, Hunter says, "the ethnic breakdown pretty much followed what the ethnic breakdown of New York City was at that time" (394). As the series has evolved, in fact, his police procedural novels have included more and more depictions of the ethnic and racial problems of The City. The author himself admits that "over the years the crime novels have become even closer to *The Blackboard Jungle* than the early ones" (395). As The City has developed around him, the socio-political commentary in the novels has developed as well, reflecting changes in the ethnic makeup of the American city and the



continuous evolution of race and class tensions, crime, and the general social crisis that still exists now more than ever, in seems, in American society.

Of course, as Deborah E. McDowell and others have pointed out, much of the racial commentary being written in American culture is written by white men, about black men. In this way, even anti-racist authors such as McBain could be accused of merely replicating the gaze of the dominant white male over non-whites, both male and female (366). However, McBain himself descended from poor Italian immigrants, and of his five main detective characters, three are *not* white anglo-protestants. From the very beginning of the series, McBain has always attempted to infuse his books with a realistic sense of what life must be like for the underprivileged non-whites who immigrate to the Big City, hoping for a better life. In the neighbourhood of Culver Avenue and Grover's Park,

[h]ere, bludgeoned by poverty, exploited by pushers and thieves and policemen alike, forced into cramped and dirty dwellings, rescued occasionally by the busiest fire department in the entire city, treated like guinea pigs by the social workers, like aliens by the rest of the city, like potential criminals by the police, here were the Puerto Ricans. (*Mugger* 65)

The 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct's ghetto area is partly Irish, Italian, and Jewish, but "predominantly Puerto Rican" (*Mugger* 65) in 1956, later giving way to the Koreans. McBain may be sentimental about the City, but he does not gloss over the failure of the so-called "melting pot" model of urban American life:

The melting pot [. . .] never seemed to come to a precise boil, but that didn't bother any of the residents; they all knew it was nonsense anyway.

Even though they all shopped the same supermarkets and clothing stores; even though they all bought gasoline at the same gas stations and rode the same subways; even though they washed their clothes at the same laundromats and ate hamburgers side by side in the same greasy spoons, they all knew that when it came to socializing it was the Irish with the Irish and the blacks with the blacks and the Puerto Ricans with the Puerto Ricans and never mind that brotherhood-of-man stuff. (*Ice* 85)

Since McBain sees his squad room as a microcosm of New York City specifically and American society more generally, his detectives must have the same ethnic mix and should represent members of the various racial and ethnic communities that exist in Eastern America. George Dove writes that

in a police story the audience expects at least a token Black, a Puerto Rican (in the Western U.S. he would be a Mexican), a clown for laughs, a black sheep (on a police squad he might be either a crook or a sadist, or both), and a little guy who will fool you with his strength and prowess. If the writer is short on imagination he will fill up the list with stereotypes who do and say the expected things. If he is a master of fictional creation, like McBain, he will satisfy our expectations and also make those characters genuine people each of whom belongs in the story and is yet an individual in his own right. (*Boys* 108)

Arthur Brown, Frankie Hernandez, Richard Genero, Andy Parker, and Hal Willis fulfill these roles, respectively. Although Puerto Ricans are given a great deal of attention in the series, most of these characters are either criminals or victims, and the one Puerto Rican detective rarely enters the stories. Similarly, only one black detective appears on

the squad, but he is given much more attention on a regular basis. Although only two of the squad's detectives are visible racial minorities, readers should remember that when McBain began the series in the 1950s, and established his family of characters, the weighted mix of Irish, English, Italian, and Jewish cops over blacks and Hispanics was likely quite realistic. However, the author also deliberately chose a wide variety of ethnicities for his cops because he wanted to make certain points about the prejudices faced by different communities in the neighbourhood. Even if, in the real New York precinct that the series is loosely based on, nine black, two Hispanic, and one white detective worked on the squad, that mix would not fare well in a fictional series designed for drama and social commentary, because the inter-racial interaction would be far more limited.

### **3. REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKS IN POPULAR CULTURE**

According to Stuart Hall, “the struggle over cultural hegemony . . . is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else.” Although no one can escape “the configurations of cultural power” (“What is this ‘Black’?” 24), popular culture can play with, experiment with, and possibly even work to change those power relations, whether they are racially configured or based on class or gender, or all three. Hall is guardedly optimistic about twentieth-century changes to the racialized power structure, noting that, in today's postmodern society, “what replaces invisibility [for blacks] is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility” (24). According to John Jeffries, since the nineteenth century, “the analytic construct ‘race’ was reified by American culture, popular and otherwise” (157). In American popular culture, especially, representations of blacks frequently seem exaggerated, stereotypical, and one-dimensional, although their

progressive presence in a greater variety of roles in television, film, literature, and advertising is at least superficially politically correct. As Robert Staples writes, the black male's "cultural image is typically one of several types: the sexual superstud, the athlete, and the rapacious criminal" (375). Ed McBain's novels have undergone a similar progression from stereotype to greater variety in representation, despite a continued focus on surface behaviours. Right from the beginning of the 87<sup>th</sup> series, black language and culture was rather conspicuously used to help facilitate the "realism" of McBain's style, but it was also most often used in a pointedly anti-racist context. This type of contradictory impulse is typical of popular culture in general. As Stuart Hall writes,

[. . .] as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology—the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur. It is rooted in popular experience and available for expropriation at one and the same time. (26)

Much like a person can be "black *and* British" (Hall 29), a person can also be black *and* a cop, or of Italian background and yet 100% American at the same time.

Jeffries writes that "urban culture exposed" the dire situation of those subjugated by others for private gain, while at the same time "perpetuat[ing] the more romantic, progressive image of itself" (158). McBain's series has the same effect: it exposes the

cycle of racism in urban America but also romanticizes the notion of the City teeming with diverse life—the Big Apple. McBain does not show the city from the viewpoint of the black community, as Chester Himes attempted to do in his darker, more violent novels; instead, he shows the white, middle-class reader the right (non-racist) and wrong (racist) ways to behave in contemporary society, and sometimes uses racial stereotypes to do so.

#### 4. “BETTER MEN”: DETECTIVE ARTHUR BROWN AND OTHER “GOOD” COPS

McBain’s desire to portray cops as the good guys clearly surfaces in the novels, although the characters are often more ambiguous than this comment would suggest. Steve Carella is really the only character who virtually never does anything wrong. Conversely, criminals in the series, such as the junkie burglar in *Sadie When She Died*, are often shown to have more “good guy” qualities than the rich businessmen they steal from. Among the detectives of the series, three have stood out over the years as “bad guys,” through the same main faults of using unnecessary force, taking the odd gratuity, and being racist. Roger Havilland (who is killed by 1958<sup>2</sup>) and Andy Parker of the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct and Ollie Weeks of the 88<sup>th</sup> Precinct serve to demonstrate for the reader what a good cop does *not* do.

As early as *The Pusher* (1956), the “good” detectives of the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct demonstrate their ability to pursue blind justice, free from racial or ethnic prejudice. When a woman’s son is killed, she asks Carella, “Will it matter that we are Puerto Rican?” and Carella replies, “If someone killed him, we’ll find him” (25). Carella, Kling, Meyer, Hawes, and other members of the squad are “good” cops because they seek justice for all. Being white cops, however, (although Meyer is Jewish and has his own

issues with anti-Semitism), their perspective on race is generally to treat it as invisible—or as though it should be invisible. Detective Arthur Brown, the only black detective on the squad since David Foster was killed in the first novel of the series, offers readers a different perspective.

As Dove writes, Brown is a detective “who takes pride in his color and resents slurs on his race, and at the same time does not want to think of himself as a Negro” (*Boys* 110). Color should not be an issue for him, but it is, and McBain reflects this tension well. Even by the time of 1995’s *Romance*, “Artie” Brown is still usually introduced to a story through descriptions of his colour and body. McBain describes him as a “big black guy who look[s] like a contract hitter for either the Crips or the Bloods,” with “brawny shoulders” and “ham-hock fists” (167). His physical size and ability to intimidate others with his black masculinity can be read as constituting a racist representation, but it is closer to a self-conscious use of cultural imagery for the purpose of showing that image as an exaggeration fueled by the media.

1970’s *Jigsaw* could perhaps be called Arthur Brown’s novel. Brown and Carella team up to solve a cold case of robbery, but the plot is less significant than the racial commentary that surrounds it. Since Brown is one of the main investigators on the case, his encounters with racism give McBain plenty of fodder for narrative examinations of racial issues. The opening lines of *Jigsaw* tell us,

Detective Arthur Brown did not like being called black. This might have had something to do with his name, which was Brown. Or his color, which was also brown. Or it might have had something to do with the fact that when he was but a mere strip of a boy coming along in this fair city, the word “black” was usually linked alliteratively with the word “bastard.” He

was now thirty-four years old and somewhat old-fashioned, he supposed, but he still considered the word derogatory, no matter how many civil rights leaders endorsed it. Brown didn't need to seek identity in his color or in his soul. He searched for it in himself as a man, and usually found it there with ease.

He was six feet four inches tall, and he weighed two hundred and twenty pounds in his undershorts. He had the huge frame and powerful muscles of a heavyweight fighter, a square clean look emphasized by the way he wore his hair, clipped close, clinging to his skull like a soft black cap, a style he had favored even before it became fashionable to look "natural." His eyes were brown, his nostrils were large, he had thick lips and thicker hands, and he wore a .38 Smith & Wesson in a shoulder holster under his jacket. (1-2)

Brown does not try to hide his blackness, but neither does he wear it like a badge. Like Carella, who refuses to call himself Italian-American, he considers himself first a man and second a cop. Because he is one of the "good" guys in the series, race does not matter to Brown theoretically, but in practice he is faced with considering it on a daily basis. McBain draws attention to Brown's physical appearance, using racially coded language that describes him as specifically a *black* man. Like the stereotype, he is big, strong, and intimidating, and possesses the facial features and other characteristics that society recognizes as "African." Even as recently as 2002, he is described as "huge and menacing and dark and scowling" (*Fat Ollie's Book* 36). He can be secure in his masculinity because he is large, and perhaps also because as a cop, he has a certain amount of power that most other black men are not allowed. In fact, one character refers

to him as “big like a cop” (62), suggesting that his physical size is meant to be more of an indicator of his “copness” than of his blackness.

The reader is also told that he lived in a ghetto until he was twenty-two years old (2); thus, he is an “authentic” black man who can understand the experiences of the underprivileged urban black community. In Chapter Four, as Brown enters an apartment building, we learn that he “knew such slums well . . . The stench that assailed Brown as he climbed to the third floor brought back too many memories of a lanky boy lying in bed in his underwear, listening to the sounds of rats foraging in the kitchen” (49). His sister Penny, a member of a street gang, died of a heroin overdose at the age of seventeen (50). So, even though McBain’s project is ultimately anti-racist, he is not above using an overblown cliché of an urban black man, to get there. For example, in reply to a woman’s question, “You ever been to bed with a white girl?” Brown replies, “Believe it or not, Miss Ferguson, my fantasies don’t include a big black Cadillac and a small white blonde” (106). Later, he even jokingly points out to Carella that on television, black men never get the women (112). In fact, McBain uses a similar tactic when trying to challenge any stereotype, including that of the homosexual. Brown, attempting to determine whether or not a man is “a fag,” listens for “homosexual cadences” in his voice and watches for a “limp wrist,” finally admitting to himself that “[t]he biggest queen he’d ever known had been built like a wrestler and moved with all the subtle grace of a longshoreman” (67). Like much popular culture, therefore, McBain frequently both uses and dispels common stereotypes of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Brown’s frustrations as a black man are visible in every novel in which he plays a part. While interviewing the relative of a murdered man, for example, Brown is subjected to racism by the woman, who “direct[s] her entire conversation to Kling, even though



Brown ask[s] most of the questions. Brown was used to this; sometimes even the *blacks* turned to the white cop, as though he himself were invisible” (*Ice* 169). In another instance, he arrives at the door of a prostitute to question her, only to be told, “I don’t take niggers.” McBain writes, “Brown didn’t know whether to laugh himself silly or fly into an offended rage . . . He decided to find it amusing” (*Jigsaw* 114-15). Brown, because of his skin colour, has been made more aware than any other cop on the squad just how much of a performance masculinity really is. He knows that how people see him does not always match up with how he sees himself.

He sometimes uses this knowledge to his advantage, playing on people’s stereotypical ideas in order to intimidate them into providing information. Richard Majors, in describing what he calls the black “cool pose,” writes, “In learning to mistrust the words and actions of dominant white people, black males have learned to make great use of ‘poses’ and ‘postures’ which connote control, toughness, and detachment. All these forms arise from the mistrust that the black males feel towards the dominant society” (83). Brown, like other black males, has learned the typical poses that they use to protect themselves from white dominance. However, unlike these black men, Brown is partly a member of the dominant society, being a policeman, and also trusts the white men with whom he works. These differences in his social position mean that he can use such poses self-consciously, to his own advantage. For example, in *Eight Black Horses*, we are told that when he wants to intimidate others in order to gain information or simple compliance, “Brown play[s] Big Bad Leroy, born in a ghetto garbage can, shooting dope since he was six years old, done time at Castleview upstate, seen the light afterward and became a cop by way of penance for his formerly evil life” (3). Sometimes, McBain suggests, people’s assumptions can work in a cop’s favour.

Similarly, in *Jigsaw*, Brown plays into a Southern white woman's learned fear of black men. But before he agrees to play the part, Carella and Hawes have to come to terms with their own anxieties over possibly offending their friend with the suggestion. Carella believes the tactic will work on the woman—that her racism is so deeply ingrained that the mere appearance of Brown at her door in the middle of the night will be enough to scare her into a confession. The narrator explains the two detectives' dilemma:

Carella informed Hawes that certain prejudices and stereotypes died very hard deaths, as witness Hawes' own reluctance to even *broach* the idea to Brown. Hawes took offense at that, saying he was as tolerant a man as ever lived, in fact it was his very tolerance that *caused* his reluctance, he simply didn't want to offend Brown by suggesting an idea that probably wouldn't work anyway [. . .] Hawes shouted that Brown's feelings were more important to him and to the well-being of the squad than solving any goddamn murder case, and Carella shouted back that prejudice was certainly a marvelous thing when a white man couldn't even explore an excellent idea with a Negro for fear of hurting his feelings. (182)

After a few tense moments when they explain the plan to Brown, the black detective embraces it wholeheartedly, saying, in “a deliberately broad dialect,”

“We goan send a big black nigger man to scare our Georgia peach out'n her skin! Oh, man it's delicious!”

Prejudice is a wonderful thing.

Stereotypes are marvelous.

At two o'clock in the morning, Suzie Endicott opened her door to find that the most terrifying of her Southern fantasies had materialized in the

gloom, a Nigra come to rape her in the night, just as her mother had warned her time and again. (184)

Through Brown's performance and her own prejudice, Suzie sees him as "a sex-crazed maniac" prone to "animal lust" (186). In his attempt to encourage her confession, Brown

[ises] out of his chair to his full monstrous height, muscles bulging, eyes glaring, shoulders heaving, r[ises] like a huge black gorilla, and hulk[s] toward her with his arms dangling at his sides, hands curled like an ape's, tower[s] over her where she sits small and white and trembling on the edge of her chair, and repeats in his most menacing nigger-in-the-alley voice, "You can tell d'troof *now*, Missy, unless you cares to work it out some *other way!*" (187)

Following this act, she immediately confesses that she fabricated an alibi for the suspect, and Brown returns to his usual professional language and demeanor (187). McBain attempts in this scene to show what Suzie Endicott sees through her racist eyes as she looks at the black detective, but the scene also demonstrates that the author is not afraid to mention and even use for the case's benefit extremely racist language and stereotypes. In this way, McBain plays with the prevalent cultural image of black masculinity, even in some very non-politically correct ways.

In the course of his daily work, Detective Brown also has to deal with prejudiced fellow police officers. In *Kiss* (1992), Brown is forced to work with Andy Parker, a detective who is both racist and a slob. During his years on the job, Brown has learned to have patience when dealing with such characters, and tends to avoid using his substantial size as a weapon. "Only people who have white names anymore are black," Parker says, while Brown is within earshot. McBain writes, "He seemed not to realize that Brown

was standing near the door, looking as tall and as wide as a mountain. Brown said nothing. He felt like throwing Parker out the window, but he didn't say a word" (140). Although he could easily toss Parker anywhere he wanted to, Brown chooses to ignore the bigoted detective, deeming him unworthy of his time and effort. Like Meyer, who faced a great deal of anti-Semitic ridicule growing up, Brown has had to learn patience when dealing with ignorance.

More recently, the novels have begun to include black female characters in significant roles, such as the character of Sharyn Cooke. *Romance* begins with a race riot in the park: "Blacks and whites rioting. Blacks and whites shooting each other, killing each other" (3). In this novel, which is perhaps more about race than any of McBain's other novels, the setting is explicitly stated to be New York City, in sharp contrast to the ambiguous setting of "Isola" throughout most of the series. One of the main cultural features of New York City is of course its lifelong preoccupation with racial tension. We learn about the riot when Detective Bert Kling telephones Deputy Chief Surgeon Sharyn Cooke to ask for a date. Sharyn is black and the race issue is foremost in her mind, but Kling only seems to be concerned about his lower rank affecting their potential relationship. The narrator lets the reader into Sharyn's private thoughts during their awkward conversation. Kling says,

"I thought it might make a difference. That I'm just a detective/third."

"I see."

No mention of his blond hair or her black skin.

Silence.

"Does it?" he asked.

She had never dated a white man in her life.

“Does what?” she said.

“*Does* it make a difference? Your rank?”

“No.”

But what about the other? she wondered. What about whites and blacks killing each other in public places? What about *that*, Detective Kling?

“Rainy day like today,” he said, “I thought it’d be nice to have dinner and go to a movie.”

With a white man, she thought.

Tell my mother I’m going on a date with a white man. My mother who scrubbed white men’s offices on her knees. (*Romance* 4)

Race is not an issue for Kling, because it has never been an issue for him before. His blond hair, white skin, and Anglo-sounding name have made race invisible for him, whereas Sharyn is forced, in American society, to be forever conscious of her skin colour. In his landmark book, *White*, Richard Dyer writes, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). For Kling, he and Sharyn are “just people” where race is concerned, although he is extremely conscious of their difference in class and social status. As a white man in America, Kling’s personal identity is defined by his work and by the amount of money he makes—not by his race (at least not consciously). When they talk a second time, Sharyn speaks in “a sort of exaggerated black English whenever she [is] saying something [Kling is] sure make[s] her uncomfortable” (69). She is so self-consciously aware of their colour difference that she wonders aloud, is “this just de white massa hittin on de l’il house nigguh?” (68). Kling eventually admits that he is attracted to her in part because of her

blackness, but he obviously has far less of an emotional investment in the concept of race than does Sharyn. By 2002, though, Kling “ha[s] become overly sensitive in his dealings with black people,” attempting to “see all black people through Sharyn’s eyes. In that way, all the color bullshit disappeared” (51-2).

Thus, Bert Kling, like Steve Carella, is depicted as a “good cop” through his apparent blindness to colour. Race is not invisible for the narrator, however. When characters, even minor ones, are black, the reader is specifically told that they are, even when such information does not necessarily seem relevant to the narrative. For example, when Carella visits a luxurious apartment building in order to interview a potential suspect named Mr. Morgenstern, the narrator immediately notes that “a uniformed black doorman” lets him in and a “uniformed black maid” opens the door to Morgenstern’s apartment (*Romance* 79). Later, McBain writes, “Carella guessed she was no older than twenty-three, a pretty woman with sloe eyes and a *café au lait* complexion. He guessed Haitian only because so many of the new black immigrants *were* Haitian. Without uttering a word, she left the room again” (81). Carella notices the woman as coloured, but also considers her age, her beauty, and her possible geographical origin. Her presence and behaviour as a servant to a rich white American are, far from being invisible or irrelevant, deliberately brought to the reader’s attention. Carella notices race, as all police do, but, unlike the “bad” cops of the series, he does not judge character based on race and recognizes the vast differences between the many “black” inhabitants of New York City. Because of his consistent “ability to get along with people” and his “basic humanity” (Dove, *Boys* 83), Carella changes the least of any of the detectives, throughout the series. He simply has less far to go toward becoming a “better man.”

## 5. FAT OLLIE WEEKS AND OTHER “BAD” COPS

The “good” detectives of the 87<sup>th</sup> squad, including Kling and Carella, do not notice race unless it pertains to a case—they treat (or at least believe they treat) every person fairly, regardless of colour. As a contrast to their behaviour, McBain also depicts in his novels some stereotypically “bad” cops and characters for whom race is an indicator of a person’s worth as a decent or indecent member of society. The two main racist cops of the series are Andy Parker and Ollie Weeks. While Parker is clearly a bad person all around, Ollie’s character is portrayed as more ambiguous, especially in recent works.

Andy Parker believes that “[a]ll black people *are* stupid” (*Fat Ollie’s Book* 129) and that “*all* Puerto Rican girls loo[k] like hookers” (174). He refers to people of Spanish decent as “spics” or “half-spic” (177), as does his friend Ollie Weeks. But Parker is not as good of a detective as Ollie (his motto is that “everything can always wait till tomorrow” (185) ), and also shows himself to be incapable of change, unlike Weeks. When Ollie reveals his friendship with a Puerto Rican female cop, Parker tells him, “Don’t go dating a cop. Especially a Puerto Rican one” because “she’ll cut off your dick for a nickel and sell it to the nearest cuchí frito joint” (242).

Detective Oliver Wendell Weeks of the 88<sup>th</sup> Precinct is “a terrible bigot, but he happen[s] to be a good cop” (*Kiss* 30). Meyer sees him as something akin to a “fat Nazi bastard” (*Romance* 126), and none of the “good” cops of the 87<sup>th</sup> want to find themselves working a case with him, despite his miraculous ability to solve cases in between racist remarks and enormous meals. After trying to provoke a conversation about the movie *Schindler’s List* with Meyer and getting a cold response, Ollie decides that he “[doesn’t]

give a shit one way or the other” if six million Jews were really exterminated in the Holocaust or not (126). In fact,

Ollie did not particularly like Jews . . . Then again, Ollie did not like black people either, whom he called “Negroes” because he knew it got them hot under the collar. For that matter, he wasn’t too keen on Irishmen or Italians, or Hispanics, or Latinos, or whatever the tango dancers were calling themselves these days. In fact, he hadn’t liked Afghanis or Pakis or other Muslim types infiltrating the city, even *before* they started blowing things up, and he didn’t much care for Chinks or Japs or other persons of Oriental persuasion. Ollie was in fact an equal opportunity bigot, but he did not consider himself prejudiced in any way. He merely thought of himself as discerning. (*Fat Ollie’s Book* 18)

Through clearly labeling him “a bigot,” McBain portrays Ollie’s attitudes and remarks concerning people of various ethnicities or nationalities as being the exact *wrong* things to believe and to say. The author enforces this rhetorical conclusion by showing the “good” characters’ reactions to Ollie’s racist quips. For example, when Weeks refers to a potential shooter as a “jig,” Steve Carella corrects, “Some people might consider your ‘slang’ racist” (*FOB* 28). Similarly, Bert Kling defines himself as anti-racist when he denounces Ollie’s use of the phrase, “a nigger in the woodpile” (48). “There’s a vast difference between being politically incorrect and being racist” (28), Ollie insists, but Carella, Kling, and the reader know there is not. As McBain points out through this rhetorical strategy, the difference is only semantic.

The difference between Carella and Weeks is again made clear when the two are studying a crime scene together: “For Carella, there was only a sense of loss, the same



pain he felt whenever he looked down at a torn and bleeding corpse on the sidewalk. Ollie looked at the stage and saw only a puzzle that needed to be solved” (*FOB* 30). Carella is a humanist detective who feels empathy for the victims and survivors, whereas Weeks’s main interest lies in finding the clues to solve the puzzle of the crime. Despite his crass speech and slovenly demeanor, Ollie Weeks more closely resembles the stereotypical murder-mystery detective than Steve, who has often been described as akin to a rabbi or priest. A “good” detective (and a good man) is not only fair, but compassionate as well.

In “The Fat Detective: Obesity and Disability,” Sander L. Gilman comments that fat detectives’ bodies “provide an image of obesity that masks their sharp powers of observation and deduction” (274). Yet Gilman also writes that the “fat detective seems to think with his gut,” in an intuitive, emotional, almost feminine way (273). Since deduction and intuition are almost opposites, Gilman’s argument is not without flaws. Ollie Weeks attempts to solve cases with reasoning and legwork and through the help of informants, and distances himself emotionally from situations that would effect the more sensitive Carella. In fact, Ollie’s pose of bigotry might be no more than a wall he has constructed to further this distancing act, in parallel to the “wall” of flesh he has constructed around himself, physically. Like Andy Sipowicz on ABC’s *NYPD Blue* (whose creation may very well have been influenced by McBain’s Parker and Weeks characters), Ollie is “a man of . . . clear prejudices. He is a muscular man gone to fat” (Gilman 277). Gilman writes of Sipowicz, “His mode of approach is that of the hard-boiled detective, the muscular detective gone to seed, but his fat body is also seen as an external sign of an empathetic nature” (278). Similarly, Ollie is also rough and crass in a hard-boiled way, and is “muscular” only in the figurative sense. His “empathetic nature,”

if he has one, is carefully concealed beneath layers of prejudiced remarks—his own rhetorical strategy for keeping unwanted emotions away. Unlike Gilman's conclusion that "[b]eing fat is what frames [the detective's] ability to function as a thinking machine" (279), Ollie's obesity is shown by McBain more as a symbol of his social slovenliness, when combined with his lack of hygiene and his outward racism.

But however anti-racist McBain's novels are meant to be, the reader cannot ignore the fact that Ollie Weeks is also used as a comic foil—his comments, even many of the racist ones, are often portrayed as humorous. *Fat Ollie's Book*, published in 2002, makes Ollie the more-or-less likable hero of the novel, despite his famous insensitivity. When interviewing a possible witness to the story's main crime, the murder of a councilman, Weeks does not attempt to hide his obvious prejudices against "non-Americans" and gays. After mispronouncing Charles Mastroiani's name, he asks the man, "You know, have you ever thought of changing your name? . . . To something simpler? . . . Like Weeks, for example. Short and sweet and easy to say. And people would think you're related to an American police detective" (13). Ollie is also surprised to learn that Charles refers to himself as Chuck, even though, as the detective puts it, "most Chucks are fags" (13). He is indiscriminately prejudiced.

When Ollie's manuscript is stolen out of his car, the reader learns that his political incorrectness seemingly has no bounds. To the beat cop who has somehow missed seeing anyone smash the car window and grab the briefcase, he asks, "They hiring deaf policemen now? . . . Excuse me. Hearing-*impaired* policemen?" (17). Even though his manner is abrupt and his words are often offensive, readers may find themselves applauding some of his pointed sarcasm. In addition to sometimes "telling it like it is," he also reflects the white male backlash against political correctness and equal

opportunity programs such as affirmative action. For Ollie, “Black Means Flak” (104). According to him, blacks think that “everybody in the whole fucking world is hassling [them]” and he has no patience for the Reverend Gabriel Foster, a black rights activist who sometimes causes trouble just for media attention (49). Foster relates that he got into a fight with the victim, Henderson, because he

was all for toughening the state’s already Draconian drug laws, laws that are methodically clearing young black people off the streets . . . and throwing them into already overcrowded prisons that are costing taxpayers a fortune to maintain. Instead of helping these youths to become productive members of a thriving community, we are instead turning them into criminals. I pointed this out to Lester [Henderson], and I casually mentioned that only a racist pig would pursue a course as politically motivated as the one he was promoting. That was when he tried to pop me. (53)

In passages like this one, McBain succeeds in both getting his own anti-racist, liberal views out into the public arena and keeping his novels entertaining and easy to relate to, on a pop culture level. The novel also uses Ollie to discuss white Americans’s misguided prejudice against immigrants, in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. He “fe[els] anyone who d[oesn’t] look or sound the way he himself d[oes] deserve[s] a swift kick in the ass” (197) and admires a detective named Walsh who describes Arabs as “fucks [who] pray to God five times a day, but then they go out drinking and lap-dancing before they crash an airplane into a building” (238). Using a character like Ollie Weeks allows McBain to reflect white males' anxieties about race and immigration and to censure racist behavior at the same time. By the end of *Fat Ollie’s Book*, Weeks finds himself referring to a

Puerto Rican beat cop as his “girlfriend” (228), showing his more emotional and empathetic side, and letting the veil of prejudice slip. This development may also be a hint of further changes to his racial attitudes, to come in future novels. Along with Ollie, maybe the reader will be influenced to become just a little bit less racist.

When asked his own opinion of the character, Ollie Weeks, McBain replies, Fat Ollie Weeks is a good cop in many respects and also a very likeable character, according to the feedback I get from readers. But that’s the point. I made him a likeable racist because that’s just the kind you have to watch out for. The one who yells nigger in your face is the obvious bigot, and you can avoid him. A guy like Ollie is enormously dangerous, but you can forget it because he makes you laugh. (Gorman 23).

McBain deliberately makes Ollie a morally ambiguous character. In keeping with the rhetoric of realism that pervades the series, he offers the reader a character who is recognizable in modern American society, but hard to pin down. Ollie’s masculinity is compromised (Gilman 279) physically by his bulk but socially, by extension—his attitudes toward difference of any kind clearly label him as inadequate in comparison with the ideal men of the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct.

## **6. RACE AND THE ORGANIZATION MAN**

Andrew Hoberek’s discussion of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* connects the concepts of individualism, organization culture, and anti-racist political commentary. In short, he believes that “Ellison’s aesthetic individualism . . . override[s] his novel’s racial and political concerns” (99). According to Hoberek, “The postwar humanists who first

took up the novel's cause celebrated *Invisible Man* as a triumphant defense of the individual that masterfully transcended its 'merely' racial subject matter" (99). McBain, another postwar humanist, has a tendency to similarly erase racial or ethnic difference in favour of a group equality mentality. Police take their main identity from the organization, and however diverse they may be individually, they are always cops first, black, Hispanic, Jewish, or Italian later. McBain draws attention to difference, mainly to suggest that it should not matter—in America, every person must be considered equal, regardless of individual race or ethnicity. Hence, Carella wants to be seen as an American cop who happens to speak Italian, not an Italian-American man who happens to be a cop. This leveling rhetoric of equality fits well with the postwar humanism during which McBain's writing came of age. However, his more recent works tend to recognize that the issue of race can never be completely put aside. Skin colour will always make Sharyn's and Bert's experiences of the world different, even if they do not consider it important, themselves.

Hoberek writes that "Ellison's aesthetic individualism can be understood as a version of the 'organization-man discourse,' whose preoccupation with threatened individuality accompanies the postwar expansion of the white-collar workforce" (102). But McBain's detectives have worked out a way to feel comfortable being part of an organization. Their balance of proceduralism and humanism allows them to achieve their identities by being "good guys" rather than just being part of a modern, scientific system. Since the 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series is written from the viewpoint of the police organization, it does not fight against the system so much as it works within it. According to Hoberek, *Invisible Man* can be seen as "highlighting 'the intersection of 'white' collar vocabularies with the insidious languages of racism and ethnic exclusion'" (Wilson qtd. in Hoberek

104). Similarly, McBain's novels depict organization discourse as lacking in human emotion, with its overwhelming impersonality of science and technology. White-collar culture "excluded African-Americans" (Hoberek 108), but McBain attempts to bring black white-collar workers into his exploration of the man versus organization issue. In bringing characters such as Detective Brown into the series, he both highlights Brown's difference from his white colleagues and makes him a part of the organization culture to which they all belong.

The "policing" of race going on in McBain's novels is really a policing of white people's attitudes toward blacks (and other visible minority groups), rather than an enforcement of cultural boundaries and regulations placed on blacks themselves. However, his focus on sublimating difference to the organization, or to the idea of the democratic American melting pot, in some ways reinforces the rhetoric of invisibility discussed by cultural critics such as Dyer. Despite or perhaps in part because of his use of racial stereotypes, and through his comparisons of "good" and "bad" cops and the good cops' modeling of properly color-blind behaviors, McBain is able to use his 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series to explore serious racial issues that may be a surprise to find in popular crime fiction novels.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Raciocination" is a term basically invented by Edgar Allan Poe, to explain Auguste Dupin's use of logic in solving cases that have perplexed Paris's bumbling police.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Havilland is killed when he is thrown through a plate glass window in *Killer's Choice*, page 53.

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