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White House, Chocolate City: Literary Representations of D.C. from 1990 to 2000

Since its designation as the nation's capital district in 1791, Washington D.C. has existed in a precarious and contradictory relationship to the United States. D.C. is simultaneously a city representative of American democracy and a city built with the labor of enslaved people; the capital of a nation that prides itself on its democratic values, and a majority-Black city where residents still cannot elect their own Congressional representatives; it is a city where local politics and lived experiences have long been in tension with the federal narrative of what America does and should look like.

These long-standing tensions came to a head in 1990, when Marion Barry — D.C.'s second mayor, and second Black mayor — was arrested for cocaine use and possession in a federal sting operation (Brown). Although Barry would be reelected five years later, after serving a two-year federal prison sentence, it was into a very different local political system: in 1995, the Republican Congress created a five-member Financial Control Board with complete control over the city's finances, stripping D.C. of the power to control its own budget (Brown). Although the board was suspended in 2001, Congress retains the power to overturn any D.C. law. District residents continue to fight for complete "home rule," including non-voting Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton's repeated calls for D.C. statehood (Musgrove).

How does the literature written and set in D.C. during this time imagine the capital city as a space of democratic success or local (im)political failure, and how do these strikingly divergent imaginings shape contradictory conceptions of the American nation? What tensions and contradictions arise when the site of an "urban literature" is also the setting of our "national literature" — or when it is not? And how has Washington, D.C.'s simultaneous existence as a racially segregated city and as metonym for the nation eluded critical literary attention? I propose that the late twentieth century is a particularly potent era for analyzing these questions because it marks a period when national politics diverged starkly from the local realities of the District's majority-black population. My thesis seeks to address these questions through close comparative analysis of two central texts that address the question of "home rule" through their focus on the D.C. home: Marita Golden's 1989 *Long-Distance Life* and Ward Just's 1997 *Echo House*.

The majority of extant criticism regarding D.C. literature focuses only on the city's political life: Sarah Luria's *Capital Speculations*, an analysis of early District architecture, and Jeff Smith's *The Presidents We Imagine* are notable examples. Strikingly, the texts that do discuss the lived experiences of D.C. residents tend to be not literary but sociological or historical in form. This critical divide relegates Black D.C. writers to objects of study rather than producers of their own culture who are capable of imagining the capital city in different ways; and, critically, it also ignores the active role of White writers whose writing imagines a majority-White D.C. that has not existed since the 1960s. Using literature to look beyond sociology's narrow focus on how D.C. is socially and geographically constructed allows us to understand the gaps between what D.C. "is" and how it is constructed and imagined by different writers. In the service of this more complex literary analysis, I draw upon the critical lens provided by Toni Morrison in her seminal work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison argues that White conceptions of freedom are dependent on "the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment — the critical absence of democracy, its echo,

shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans” (48). Focusing on literature in D.C. — the supposed center of American democracy — brings these contradictions and critical absences to the forefront. In addition to Morrison’s guiding analysis, my research will also incorporate secondary texts in literary criticism and critical race theory, including Jess Row’s *White Flights: Race, Fiction, and the American Imagination*, which provides a framework for analyzing whiteness and omission in fiction as a White writer; and Frank B. Wilderson’s *Red, White, and Black*, which informs my thinking on how White and Black artists imagine and represent race.

Using these critical tools, my analysis will center on the comparison of two primary source texts: Marita Golden’s 1989 *Long-Distance Life* and Ward Just’s 1997 *Echo House*. In choosing these primary texts, I have focused on fictional works that engage in some meaningful way with D.C. as a city. This selection frame excludes the vast majority of political thrillers and murder mysteries set in D.C. that imagine the city solely as the center of government and not engage with it as a setting beyond vague references to “Congress” or the “White House.” Although such texts provide a way in to understanding how D.C. is imagined as part of a national narrative of federal politics, I am more interested in how authors who are attuned to D.C.’s political and social landscape make active choices about how to represent it in their fiction — what is included, and what is excluded. In Ward Just’s 1997 novel *Echo House*, for example, the uniqueness of the eponymous fictionalized house in Rock Creek Park is structured by Just’s characterization of Washington as a place where no one “really” lives besides the White political Behl family. In Marita Golden’s 1989 novel *Long-Distance Life*, similarly a family saga, three generations of a Black family navigate a D.C. scarred by its 1968 riots, a city that is simultaneously a “Black world” (13) and a space where “white men with power lived and worked and drew the lines that checked the perimeters of Black hopes” (14). In Golden’s D.C., Nathaniel visits a house “a block away from Rock Creek Park” — in the same time and the same vicinity as *Echo House* — not to attend a political dinner party, but to buy cocaine from a “successful Black businessman” (279). It is in the slippages between these divergent imaginings of D.C. — in Just’s failure to imagine the existence of Golden’s Nathaniel and her “successful Black businessman” — that my analysis is most interested.

By reading these texts through the lens of Morrison’s “Africanist presence” in literature, I will argue that the absences and tensions in fictional representations of D.C. are not contradictions within, but rather constitutive of the American narrative of nation. Although Golden and Just imagine D.C. differently, and for different purposes, each of their imaginings structures a particular conception of the relationship between city and nation, and of the citizens who make up that nation. Specifically, I hope to argue that Just’s omission of local politics and D.C.’s Black population allows him to imagine a nation in which power is structured only by White federal political machinations, whereas Golden’s D.C. is rooted in a history of antiblack racism and inequality that challenges Just’s imagined democracy. By reading the contradictions embedded within these texts, I will demonstrate how the denial of freedom rooted in the U.S. national project continues to be replicated in conceptions of our capital city.

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