



# Night Girl and the Nate-Rock: Material Feminisms and Double Consciousness in Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam*

Lisa Koyuki Smith

**Abstract.** This study focuses on Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), exploring Neely's material feminisms *avant la lettre*, their connection to W.E.B. Du Bois's articulation of double consciousness, narratological understandings of the detective genre, and narratives of racial passing that express the discursive and material complexity of race relations in the United States.

Between 1992 and 2000, Black activist Barbara Neely<sup>1</sup> produced four novels featuring housekeeper Blanche White as amateur detective. While the structure of these novels places them squarely within the detective genre—a crime occurs, and the detective collects clues that eventually reveal the culprit—they also insistently mobilize, and push the boundaries of, the affordances of that genre. The Blanche novels move beyond the baseline requirements of corpse, scene of the crime, and clues to foreground the material conditions of Black working-class female lives in the United States. This study will focus on the first Blanche novel, *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), as a foundational statement of Neely's concerns, exploring her material feminisms, their connection to W.E.B. Du Bois's articulation of double consciousness, and the application of these tools by the Black female detective in her drive to bring ethical redress to the master's house.

The linguistic turn in twentieth-century Western philosophy was a source of powerful tools for postmodern feminist thought, enabling the deconstruction of the oppositional discursive dichotomies that both inform and are informed by the ultimate dichotomy of “male/female,” a binary whose “pernicious logic . . . casts women as subordinated, inferior, a mirror

*Lisa Koyuki Smith* is a PhD candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center studying female survival tactics in narrative fiction, with a focus on care, maternity, women's work, and the embodied female experience.