

# Harlem Lives: The Significance of the City in Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle*

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## **Abstract**

This essay intends to analyse the depiction of the fictionalized neighbourhood of Harlem in the late 50s and early 60s in Colson Whitehead's novel *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) and the significance of the theme of the city in this work of fiction. In order to do so, I will be analysing the novel's plot in relation to the presented social scale and its implication for an analysis of the increasingly capitalist society of that time, while also making reference to the concept of American Dream and an enquiry of the concept throughout the years, whilst exploring its meaning to the African American community as well. I will be also mentioning the meaning of the city for that community, considering it as both a space for oppression and for resistance and how that affects the construction of a collective cultural identity. For that I will also be making use of concepts of "postracial" capitalism, as coined by Maria Bose.

**Keywords:** Colson Whitehead; *Harlem Shuffle*; City; Cultural Memory; Racial Capitalism

## **Resumo**

Este ensaio tenciona analisar a representação do bairro ficcionalizado de Harlem durante o fim dos anos 50 e o início dos anos 60 no romance *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) de Colson Whitehead e o seu significado para o tema da cidade nesta obra de ficção. Para isso, analisarei a ação do romance em relação à escala social apresentada e o que isso implica numa análise à sociedade cada vez mais capitalista desse espaço de tempo, fazendo também referência ao conceito de American Dream e a um questionamento do mesmo ao longo dos anos, bem como o seu significado para a comunidade Afro-Americana. Farei também referência ao significado da cidade para essa comunidade, considerando-a enquanto um espaço de opressão e resistência e como isso afeta a construção de uma identidade cultural coletiva. Para isso, usarei o conceito de capitalismo "pós racial", conceito cunhado por Maria Bose.

**Palavras-chave:** Colson Whitehead; *Harlem Shuffle*; Cidade; Memória cultural; Capitalismo racial

## Introduction

Set in the late 50s and early 60s in the neighbourhood of Harlem, New York City, Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle* is a narrative depicting of Ray Carney, a furniture salesman who, at first, starts his illegal activities by reselling stolen goods but progressively gets involved in bigger crimes and starts showing signs of his "crooked" (Whitehead 56) heritage that his dad, a considerable name in the inner circle of Harlem criminals, left him. Thus, Whitehead presents the readers with a *bildungsroman* that shows the transformation of an honest family man in Ray Carney into a big reference for criminals in Harlem. This will be the focus of this essay: analysing a work of fiction that portrays the social scale of African Americans living in Harlem in the time period leading to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (1959-1964) and a detailed topographic description of the erupting neighbourhood, leading to the 1964 race riots in Harlem.

The constant topographic description of Harlem that accompanies the novel's narrative throughout is something seen in city novels of the past, such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* or Ellison's *The Invisible Man* - a book which, as I will try to expose, serves as a reference for this novel. It's part of the American culture to depict the American city as mighty and powerful, the ex libris of American progress, at least since the rebuilding of Chicago after the Great Fire. It's not the first time Whitehead has given such importance to the motif of the city; another great example of it is his non-fiction work *The Colossus of New York*. But to fictionalize the neighbourhood where the author grew up in such a detailed topographic manner is not only a love letter to Harlem, but a declaration of the weight of the cultural memory that there resides for the African American community; the place where a dream that has been deferred for so long finally gathered the strength to explode in 1964, after the murder of an innocent black boy by a white police officer.

There are certain aspects about the author that must be acknowledged in order to conduct this analysis. As Linda Selzer puts it, Whitehead reworks "literary traditions that range from folklore, the slave narrative, literary modernism, postmodernism and black urban fiction, to detective *noir*, magical realism, image fiction and post-soul literature" (393). Almost all of these elements (literary postmodernism, black urban fiction and, to a certain extent, detective *noir*) are present in Whitehead's novel, but other elements, especially the ones of slave

narrative which are related to the author's most acclaimed novels, *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*, are still, in a way, present in *Harlem Shuffle* in the form of an African American cultural heritage that is ever present in Whitehead's most recent titles. Also worth noting, is the way in which "Whitehead frequently challenges notions of American identity and privilege . . . determined by race, class and/or education" (Fain xv) which requires knowledge of themes of cultural and political contexts in order to understand "Whitehead's genre-bending works that are not clearly defined like the diverse cultural heritage of many people who inhabit America" (Fain xv). One last aspect worth mentioning that will be discussed in greater detail further on, is the concept of "postracialism", which, recurring to Kimberly Fain again, is a "theoretical literary movement that challenges racial assumptions of readers by oftentimes neglecting opportunities to mention his protagonists' cultural heritage" (Fain xvii) and, thus, must be tackled in the context of the cultural heritage present not only in Whitehead's characters, but in the significance of Harlem for the African American community.

### **I. The city as a space for oppression and resistance and its tradition in African American culture**

Blyden Jackson wrote in *The Waiting Years: Essays on Negro Literature* that "The Negro Novel is a city novel. It almost always has been" (80). Yoshinobu Hakutani and Rober Butler write in their introduction to their book *The City in African American Literature* that one of the main reasons that justify this affirmation is that: "From the very outset, black people were denied imaginative access to a pre-urban homeland in Africa because the institution of slavery did everything possible to stamp out the memory of that world" (11). So, it's only logical that African American novels are almost always novels/narratives within the urban space. Of course, there were slave stories written by African American slaves which must be taken into consideration, especially when tackling issues of cultural heritage, like the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, but I would argue that only after the beginning of the Great Migration and the blooming of the Harlem Renaissance could the African American community state that they had a cultural identity which was inevitably linked to an urban consciousness, as various authors argue:

Claude Brown . . . is careful to point out that black people in the city are "better off" than their counterparts in the rural South because the city, for all its corruptions and violence, has the vitality and educational possibilities necessary for the "better life"

Brown himself achieved. Amiri Baraka . . . argues that, from the Harlem Renaissance onward, black literature has been “urban shaped,” producing a uniquely “black urban consciousness.” (Hakutani and Butler, 10)

Whitehead’s *Harlem Shuffle* follows a lineage of urban fictions written by African American authors and by Whitehead himself. There’s an aspect to the novel’s Harlem that can be compared, for example, to urban spaces seen in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, as Butler writes that “Ellison’s hero sees his ingenious subterranean ‘home’ (5) as a place of ‘hibernation’ (11) providing him with the kind of new life which traditional American heroes have found in the West” (Butler 124). This could be linked to the idea of borders or city limits because if, for the generality of white Americans, crossing the established borders of the United States in the XIX century and going west was what gave them the opportunity for prosperity, for African Americans, that same land of prosperity had to be found inside the limits of a city, for they rejected pastoral places and could only find a sense of belonging after migrating to the cities in the north: “it remains generally true that African American fiction is largely urban and even anti-pastoral in nature, mainly because rural life has been so strongly linked in the black imagination with slavery and post-Civil War segregation and sharecropping” (Butler 71). In the case of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, that land was the underground of New York City. For Ray Carney, there is also an Ellisonian home in Harlem, the other side of the neighbourhood, the face of Harlem that only crooks knew how to navigate. This other side of Harlem is present for example when Carney helps Pepper, a war veteran turned criminal, find where another crook was hiding: “After that was a barbershop . . . and another pool room Carney had never noticed before. Places in Pepper’s city that were nowhere on his own map” (Whitehead 81). The fact that there were two sides of the same Harlem implies the existence of two sides of Ray Carney, and the transformative aspects of the city are recognized in the novel’s protagonist:

Everyone had secret corners and alleys that no one else saw—what mattered were your major streets and boulevards, the stuff that showed up on other people’s maps of you. The thing inside him that gave a yell or tug or shout now and again was not the same thing his father had. That sickness drawing every moment into its service. (Whitehead 31)

The city’s transformative aspect is one of the heritages of African American writing that Whitehead presents in this novel. However, *Harlem Shuffle* presents itself as a celebration of the city, and like Ellison’s Harlem, it has the power to emancipate

African Americans inside the city limits. Despite this celebration, Whitehead recognizes the flaws of the American city and what it represents.

In the already mentioned *Colossus of New York*, written in 2003, after the terrorist attacks in New York, Whitehead offers a much more nihilistic view of the neoliberal American city, while at the same time depicting anxieties related to the fragility of the city felt after the attacks, as noted by Robert Butler:

Colson's *The Colossus of New York* . . . portrays the dark underside of the American myth of self-creation in the city. Colson's city, unlike . . . the existential city of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which envision the urban world as a protean setting inviting personal transformation, is . . . a firmly nihilistic world. (75)

This could be seen as the other side of Whitehead's perspective on the American city. If, on the one hand, XX century Harlem could be seen as a celebration of African American cultural heritage and an identity that the minority found in the American city; on the other hand, when one steps out of the neighbourhood's limits, a more nihilistic vision of American myths may be the vision one encounters. This negative perspective of the city is also presented in *Harlem Shuffle*, in moments where, as noted, the narrative steps out of Harlem, for example, when the narrator refers to the process of building Central Park:

Then someone came up with the idea for a grand park in the middle of Manhattan, an oasis inside the newly teeming metropolis. Various locations were proposed, rejected, reconsidered, until the white leaders decided on a vast, rectangular patch in the heart of the island. People already lived there; no matter. The colored citizens of Seneca were property owners, they voted, they had a voice. Not enough of one. The City of New York seized the land, razed the village, and that was that. The villagers dispersed to different neighborhoods, to different cities where they might start again, and the city got its Central Park. You'll find the bones. Dig under the playgrounds and meadows and silent groves, Carney supposed, you'll find the bones. (Whitehead 66)

This passage shows various aspects opposed to the individually transformative Harlem that was mentioned initially. It shows a social critic by the author of the "white leaders" who took down housing from coloured citizens in order to build Central Park, which not only debunks the myths of self-creation in the city, but also that the American Dream for African Americans has been long denied by white oppressors, as was the case in this passage. Both myths may work for white Americans, but the erasing of coloured people's houses shows not only an attack on cultural memory and

heritage, but also that the canonical American myths are only attainable to certain white people. Therefore, it is safe to say that “. . . Whitehead's New York . . . [is a] vulnerable monument to American blindness, materialism, racism, and egoism” (Butler 85).

One last passage worth noting regarding the city in Whitehead's text comes from the novel's last moments:

Then it was off to meet Elizabeth. There was an open house for a place on Strivers' Row and he wanted to take a look. Distress sale. Riverside Drive was nice, but it was hard to turn down a chance at Strivers' Row. If you could swing it. It was such a pretty block and on certain nights when it was cool and quiet it was as if you didn't live in the city at all. (Whitehead 318)

This passage suggests that Carney wants to leave the city. A testament for the toll it has taken on him, all the memories of it, the topographic descriptions always present in his day-to-day life. The best sign of cultural memory one could associate the novel to is that Harlem was part of the individuals who lived in it, and it transformed them. Thus, Whitehead's work presents the contemporary reader with a double vision on the American city and its significance for African Americans: on the one hand, the aspects of self-creation and cultural emancipation that Harlem gave to the African American community, a space for resistance; on the other hand, the ever-expanding neoliberal America that erases and oppresses the cultural memory of this said community in order to raise monuments to myths only attainable by some, like the American Dream.

## **II. The significance of the American Dream for African Americans**

As noted above, Whitehead's rendering of the American city has various layers to it, and one of the layers is the debunking of American myths, namely the myth of the American Dream. In this second part, I will address the reasons that make the American Dream unattainable for African Americans, as part of the analysis of the significance of the city in Whitehead's works and for the community they represent.

Going back to Robert Butler's analysis of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he also tackles the correlation between Harlem and the significance of the American city for African Americans and the American dream:

Significantly, he moves to Harlem which is a kind of underground, a “city within a city” (122). His free movements in Harlem repeatedly result in increased self-awareness as he discovers as the falsity of an American Dream which promises

freedom for all but creates an immense ghetto depriving enormous masses of their political, social, and economic rights. (Butler 128)

Just like the hero of *Invisible Man*, Ray Carney increasingly discovers the falsity of the American Dream through living in Harlem, a city within a city, and by living in that crooked side of the city, inside that border, he is able to succeed, not by the standardized process of the American Dream, but by becoming self-aware and increasingly crooked. As satirically argued by James W. Loewen, “many young African Americans concluded that reaching the American Dream by the usual (white) methods excluded them. Instead, they turned to less realistic means of achieving it, such as crime or winning the lottery” (69). This is also the case in *Harlem Shuffle*, in which the African American protagonist is unable to provide for his family and buy a better house in the neighbourhood, so in addition to his daytime job of selling furniture, he starts taking on jobs from criminals and bribing police officers in order to keep them away from his illicit activities. And the novel’s narrative shows Carney’s anxieties towards achieving the (white) American Dream: “Riverside, where restless Manhattan found itself finally spent, its greedy hands unable to reach past the park and the holy Hudson. One day he’d live on Riverside Drive, on this quiet, inclined stretch. . . . One day, when he had the money” (Whitehead 22).

However, the narrator acknowledges not only the unattainability of the American Dream for African Americans, but criticizes the system behind the oppression felt by the community, for example when talking about Wilfried Duke, the most well-known crooked banker in Harlem:

Duke could do what he wanted because he held the money. Foreclose on your property, sit on your business loan, take your envelope and tell you to go fuck yourself. . . . That’s how the whole damn country worked, but they had to change the pitch for the Harlem market, and that’s how Duke came to be. The little man was the white system hidden behind a black mask. Humiliation was his currency. . . .” (Whitehead 197)

Here, Carney acknowledges that the United States is ran by those who have the money and the power, either white people or black people operating according to the white system of oppression, thus depicting the unattainability of the American Dream for African Americans who are either poor or lack the power to be a cog in the white machine of oppression.

James W. Loewen wrote a chapter in the book *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* intitled “Dreaming in Black and White”, which tackles the historical context behind the oppression of the African American community in its journey to achieve the American Dream so that the WASP community could remain the only one to get it. Some of the arguments he states are:

Maybe the antiracist ideology of the Reconstruction era could not have lasted past 1890, having derived in large part from the social events and intellectual developments of the Civil War. Certainly the ideology of imperialism, wafting into the United States on winds from England and Europe, played an important role. . . . The rise of eugenics as a “science” was hardly coincidental. Perhaps most important was our national acquiescence, also beginning in 1890, as Mississippi passed its new state constitution removing African Americans from citizenship. Since the United States did nothing, all other Southern states and states as distant as Oklahoma followed suit by 1907. (Loewen 64)

Again, there’s a direct blaming of the rising capitalist system - imperialism is obligatorily dependant on the capitalist system - in relation to the propagating of an antiracist ideology, like the one mentioned of denying African Americans of citizenship in the American South. The suppositions of the growing capitalist system and its necessary oppressions, like eugenics as a “science”, which was one of the arguments for the rise of fascist regimes, mainly the one in Germany, are put into question when analysing causes for the denying (deferring) of the American Dream for African Americans. As is known, such acts like the one mentioned of a removal of citizenship write a long history of discriminatory and segregational laws imposed on the community, from the Black Codes to Jim Crow laws, which, of course, are a factor in the incapability to achieve the Dream. Since the period of reconstruction until today, some habitational areas in the United States actively discriminate and even advertise themselves as prohibited for black Americans - Loewen takes notice of an article from 1980 called *The Real Polk Country* that makes reference to the fact that: “It is not an uncommon experience in Polk County to hear a newcomer remark that he chose to move here because of ‘low taxes and no niggers’” (Loewen 64). It is safe to say, then, that for the white American Dream to prosper, the black American Dream must cease to exist.

Kimberly Fain claims that

When Whitehead’s words fluctuate between past, present and future tense, he is stressing the ever presence of personal and collective history of the city’s inhabitants.

. . . the city's fable is exposed as both an untenable promise land and a splintered symbol of the American Dream. (87)

And one of the ways that Whitehead depicts the city as this “splintered symbol” is present in the third and last part of the novel, set during the 1964 race riots in Harlem. When meeting with the mobster Chink Montague, Chink says:

“Know what I think? I think they shouldn't have stopped. All these angry niggers up here. Everywhere. They should have burned the whole neighborhood down and then kept going. Midtown, downtown, Park Avenue.” The mobster mimed an explosion with his hands. “Torch all that shit.” (Whitehead 228)

This passage shows the heritage of frustrations felt by African Americans towards an oppressive white capitalist society in one of the moments when, after the murder of an innocent black boy by a white police officer, the people of Harlem gathered the strength to manifest and riot against the oppressive system - in reference to Langston Hughes's iconic poem *Harlem*, the dream that had been deferred for so long, finally gathered the strength to explode.

In the last moments of the novel, after the riots have ended, Ray Carney has an introspective moment when looking at the expanding city, away from the aftermath of the riots:

The neighborhood was gone, razed. Everything four blocks south of the New York Telephone Building and four blocks east of the miserable West Side Highway had been demolished and erased for the World Trade Center site, down to the street signs and traffic lights. This was the aftermath of a ruinous battle. . . . The buildings of the old city loomed over the broken spot, this wound in itself. It was unreal to have your city turned inside and out. He felt unreal those days of the riots when his streets were made strange by violence. Despite what America saw on the news, only a fraction of the community had picked up bricks and bats and kerosene. The devastation had been nothing compared to what lay before him now, but if you bottled the rage and hope and fury of all the people of Harlem and made it into a bomb, the results would look something like this. (Whitehead 317)

These last moments are perhaps the ones which make better allusion to the angst felt by the people of Harlem towards the white oppression - if all the people in Harlem would've rioted, the deferred Dream's explosion would have been much bigger. Big enough to build the World Trade Centre on top of the destruction. Of

course, the razing of the city depicted by Carney serves as an acknowledgement that the white oppressive system had won again (and would continue to win) and ultimately an acknowledgement of what was to come of New York City through the rise of neoliberalist politics and economics, the one present in Whitehead's existentialist portrayal of it in *The Colossus of New York*.

### III. The African American Social Scale and “Postracial” Capitalism

Lastly, I would like to refer the concept of “postracial” capitalism and how that can be applied to an analysis of the social scale presented in *Harlem Shuffle* and how it interferes in the representation of the contemporary American city.

The first point worth noticing is Colson Whitehead's article in *The New York Times*, published in 2009, called “The Year of Living Postracially”, which is a satire directed to those who, after the election of Barack Obama, stated that racism was no longer an existing problem in the United States, hence the phrase “living postracially”, which is directly related to the concept of “postracial” capitalism. In the fourth paragraph, Whitehead ironically states that, if “sociologists say that racism is a construct”, calling African Americans “colored” people is a “branding problem” and continues his ironic discourse by saying that the branding problem consists in “attempts to reduce a wildly diverse community to an ineffectual blanket term” (n. pag.). This is an example of “postracial” capitalism: the oppressive forces coining a different term to an oppressed minority in order for the oppressive force to seem more accepting of the minority and thus being able to continue the capitalist oppression.

Still on Whitehead's article, the author is satirizing those who after the election of Obama said that racism doesn't exist anymore and there should no longer be any sensibilization towards that structural problem, and those who still do it, should tone it down, because they are now living in a postracial world. Toni Morrison criticised this kind of thought with her novel *Paradise*, where a community of African Americans live isolated from the rest of the world, and therefore they think they can't suffer from racism anymore; that would be an example of a community that supposedly lives postracially, in a society with only one race. Of course, that isn't the case as the narrative unfolds and that isn't the kind of society that the author has been known for supporting.

At the end of his article, Whitehead claims that “As the secretary of postracial affairs, I want to . . . get in people's homes and faces. Eat their food”. In the final moments of the satire, Whitehead alerts the readers for the dangers of such extremisms like this one, an all-consuming mentality which gets into people's minds

and alter their perception of things in their favour - he was alerting for a danger that materialized for example in 2016, with the election of Donald Trump, who used populist propaganda to help him in his electoral campaign.

In her 2019 article intitled “Allegories of “Postracial” Capitalism: Colson Whitehead and the Materials of Twenty-First-Century Black Cultural Authorship”, Maria Bose claims that:

“postraciality” names not the end of race but rather the perpetuation of regimes of racial domination by state policies and institutions no longer permitted to invoke racial criteria explicitly. . . . For Whitehead and his critical interlocutors, then, “postracial” ideology enacts itself chiefly at the level of language: concerned with how not to represent race as a relation of economic domination realized through racialized wage differentials and reinforced by the operations of the carceral and national security state, “postraciality” instead defines race through the idiom of cultural difference and particularity - as a dimension of one’s identity that is chosen voluntarily, not ascribed. (420)

As noted before, “postraciality” refers not to the end of race discrimination, but rather the perpetuation by capitalist oppressors of an indirect discrimination that allows for the machine to keep on running, not by directly discriminating, like the Jim Crow laws of segregation, because they can no longer do so, but by applying the same discrimination, like seen in the War on Drugs, without ever referring to the targeted minorities as such. It is then a question of language and directly naming or not naming minorities. This is also something that is seen nowadays in populist politics: the directed discrimination, without ever referring the names of the targeted minorities.

Bose argues that Whitehead shows in his novels a concern for collective identity erasing, which is the equivalent of saying the erasure of cultural memory/identity, because if both the racial caste system and the racializing mechanisms are starting to operate through being increasingly “invisible”, so will the collective identities of the racialized minorities be lost in the “invisible” machine that works towards their oppression, and thus aims to reach their definitions of a “postracial” society, a society with only one race:

the seemingly “invisible” racializing and disciplinary mechanisms that underwrite contemporary digital post-Fordism, a global mode of production for which the management of a predominantly nonwhite labor force will seem to operate beyond the scope of visibility . . . . (Bose 420)

It's safe to say, then, that cultural identity changes in accordance with the needs of capitalism, that now emphasizes "individual preference" and therefore perpetuates the "invisible" racial segmentation mechanisms. The conceptualization of a construction of cultural identity nowadays has to be linked with notions of "race reconceptualization", that is, "creating" race in accordance with the globalized market, making and unmaking racial values "in service of capital accumulation" and giving them to the people that the oppressive system desires to give. This is one of the aspects that Whitehead appeals to in most of his novels, including *Harlem Shuffle*, for example when he refers to Pepper disguised as a waiter:

On a job, wearing the clothes of a waiter or porter gave Pepper free passage among white people. Same way a white man in an official-looking uniform in a Negro neighborhood can get into a lot of places, no sweat. A cop uniform sends one message, a utility man's another. . . . (Whitehead 296)

Lastly, Bose argues that through the allegories of his novel, Whitehead tries to materialize/formalize the literary and economic determinations of a race, which is one way of contradicting the abstraction - the "invisibility" - of racial segmentation under "neoliberal multiculturalism and digital post-Fordism" (Bose 423). Whitehead is, for this effect, "seeking literary forbears" that allow him to formalize these determinations through "'authentic' modes of social and historical reference" (Bose 423), which include values that are commonly associated with the creation of a collective identity, such as nationality and culture, meaning that Whitehead is aware of the cultural erasing that "postracial" capitalism tries to enforce on minorities, including African Americans, and through the literary allegories of the novel, tries to find ways of contradicting the proposed "postracial" world. One passage in which this could be seen is when Carney is talking about his wife's job at Black Star, scheduling trips and vacations:

With the summer travel season winding down, Black Star was in the midst of fall and winter travel, booking a lot of conventions. American Association of Negro Funeral Directors, National Association of Negro Dentists. Puerto Rico was big this year, thanks to the few brochures, followed by Miami. Some of the groups they'd handled last year, the Negro Lawyers, the Negro Accountants, had told their friends. . . . There are some new hotels going after the Negro market. (Whitehead 156)

This passage has two aspects to it. First, the recognition that in Harlem's social scale the capitalist economic system was still working in an African American only basis.

Second, the fact that there is a functioning social scale consisting only of African Americans - “Negro” dentists, lawyers and accountants - shows that the community has resisted the racial segmentation that “postraciality” has tried to impose on them and instead the community took over the economic system and established one of their own. Of course, as noted before, Whitehead is critic of the capitalist system in which today’s society is based upon, but still, the fact that those who were/are oppressed by that system are still able to adapt to it and survive its attempts at cultural erasing, is still something worth noticing.

## Conclusion

It is safe to say, then, that there are various layers when analysing Colson Whitehead’s depictions of the American city throughout various time periods of the history of the United States. Being that Whitehead is a contemporary author, there are certain concepts that, even if very recent, are still relevant to a pertinent analysis of the author, as, for example, “postracial” capitalism. This, of course, doesn’t wipe away the need for socio-political and historical context in order to analyse problems intrinsic to the city, especially structural ones, like the deferring of the American Dream for African Americans.

With all this in mind, it becomes clear that Colson Whitehead is one of the most relevant authors of the XXI century and perhaps the main heir to African American literary tradition and thus an analysis of his work becomes very pertinent, particularly in times where the rise of populism and other socially oppressive forces are making themselves noticed.

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