DAVE BURRELL'S *BAGHDAD BLUES*

Fiction, Race, and History in 1950s Iraq

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I.

A significant amount of material from the US embassy in Baghdad concerning the Iraqi coup of July 1958 is held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at its facility in College Park, Maryland. These US Department of State post files recount the details of a complex historical event of more than half a century ago. The boxes contain, among other materials, a couple of hundred cables to the State Department from the embassy (many under the signature of Ambassador Waldemar J. Gallman), some internal reports on events during the coup, memoranda by diplomatic staff regarding meetings and exchanges of various kinds with Iraqis, and a few background pieces on aspects of Iraqi society and politics.[1]The separate US Information Service (USIS) file series also contains some intriguing documents.[2] Both sets of records throw a light not only on the events of the day but also provide a fascinating counterpoint to a work of fiction by an African American author, Samuel E. (Sam) Greenlee, set against that local and historical background. Greenlee's novel, *Baghdad Blues*, recounts the personal and professional struggles of a black USIS officer against the background of Baghdad and Iraq in sudden crisis.

The military coup itself, which carries in modern Iraqi memory the much more assertive title of the "July 14 Revolution," both introduced significant transformations into Iraqi society and marked a distinct point of rupture with the past. The Hashemite monarchy and the old elites associated with them, who had a postcolonial collaborative relationship with the British, never regained power and were either suppressed, went into exile, or into quiescence at home. The basic timeline of events on July 14 has been well documented: the coup occurred when a battalion of the Iraqi armored

corps commanded by Brigadier Al-Karim Qasim, on the way to joint maneuvers in Jordan (the Jordanian Hashemite monarchy was a close relative of the Iraqi royal family), turned its tanks around on the road in the early dawn hours and headed back to Baghdad. Swift communication with like-minded officers led to an uprising of military units in Baghdad and elsewhere throughout Iraq. Although initially a somewhat restricted action, with the army units aiming at neutralizing or capturing crucial locations such as the royal palace and the defense ministry, the news of the coup electrified the Iraqi population and led to large, spontaneous marches and rallies, most of which were peaceful, if rowdy, and a few of which turned violent. In the course of the day, the Royal Palace was taken over by an army unit, and the king and several members of the royal family were crowded into a courtyard and gunned down. In an echo of Confederate president Jefferson Davis's ignominious capture at the end of the American Civil War, the prime minister Nuri Al-Said, a much hated figure among ordinary Iraqis, was later caught on the streets of Baghdad, trying to flee dressed in a woman's shawl (Louis, 56–57). In contrast to Davis's relatively benign fate, however, Al-Said was lynched and dismembered by the crowd.

The British embassy grounds were also invaded that day and the embassy set ablaze. Nevertheless, only one person, an embassy clerk, died during this incident, and it seems likely that the man suffered a heart attack rather than directed violence. Hotels in downtown Baghdad were not attacked, with one exception: in a somewhat anomalous event, a group of foreigners, all male, including three Americans and a couple of Europeans, were pounced on by a crowd in the lobby of a hotel and dragged out into the street, where at some point they were murdered. No evidence available in the files suggests that this was anything but inflamed mob violence—these were not US government officials, and they appear not to have done anything to attract attention at the wrong moment; nor did the crowd appear to be led by organized activists of any stripe. Indeed, although attitudes ran a spectrum from hostility through curiosity to respect, in the Iraq of 1958 the United States was not necessarily regarded with anything like the same dislike and paranoia that were directed at the British, the former colonial authority. Although demonstrations passed the American embassy at several points on the 14th and 15th, there were no violent incidents. The United States Information Bureau (USIB), however, which was housed in an office building in the city of Baghdad a couple of miles from the embassy, was besieged by an angry

crowd on the 14th, and a difficult operation ensued to try to get everyone out safely, especially the Iraqi nationals who worked there. This was done successfully, but the crowd eventually invaded and trashed the building. That was essentially the end of independent USIS activity in Baghdad for well over two years.[3]

The coup, or revolution, which mirrored the 1952 Free Officers takeover of power in Egypt that eventually brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to the presidency, came as a complete and relentlessly unpleasant surprise to the Hashemite royal family, to the Iraqi political establishment, and to Western nations' embassies and intelligence posts in Iraq. Even more confusing—and one can see this in raw form in the US embassy records—was the fact that this uprising seemed to have no connection at all with the activities of the Iraqi communist party. Policymakers in Washington, one might now surmise, were so locked into a Cold War framework for viewing world events that they were severely tested by a major challenge that appeared to fall outside that limited interpretive structure. The inability on the part of Americans to understand a political revolution that had some anti-American elements but was not fueled by communist ideology bordered on the comical. No such category existed. Neither, indeed, had the uprising been organized by the shadowy Iraqi Ba'ath grouping, a small anti-monarchy, quasi-fascist organization based in the military that waited ultimately until 1963 to launch its own, much more ideologically ambitious, coup (which may have had American and British support, but in any case possessed its own obscure elements). One can sense, in any event, from many of the post files in the National Archives, that people on the ground in Baghdad, from the ambassador on down, were confused about how to report and, harder still, explain these events to Washington, to Secretary of State Dulles, and to the president, and were even more sheepish about the fact that nobody had seen it coming. Clearly, everyone wanted not to be the individual who had dropped the ball on this one.

The post files from 1957–1959 also contain a large amount of documentation not directly related to the coup, but, nonetheless, that is clearly the defining event of the period and justifiably takes up a lot of space. In fact, the paths of individuals and events begin to intersect a very short time after one opens the main folder on the July happenings. One of the first items is a detailed timeline for July 14–16, 1958, several pages long, and the name "Greenlee" occurs at log entry #71, 11:50 a.m., July 15, where he and a USIS

colleague report witnessing unusual movements by military vehicles and excited crowds gathering in the city ("Timeline").

II.

As Kenneth Warren remarks rather bluntly in his long essay *What Was African American Literature?*: "In a society that no longer sanctions Jim Crow, there could not be a literature structured by its imperatives" (96). There is something rhetorically provocative about Warren's assertion, as it is not so much a statement of a position as the presentation of the logical consequence of an undeniably arguable premise and, moreover, a logical consequence that demands some recognition of its persuasiveness. The proposition forces to reader to decide quickly if he or she agrees with two separate elements: the disappearance of a social consensus that permitted Jim Crow rules and habits to operate; and the causal effect of the disappearance on American literature. Whether provocative or diplomatic, however, the implications of Warren's comment speak to one particular work of fiction that casts an interesting light on standard assumptions about black-authored narrative at the middle of the twentieth century.

Baghdad Blues (1976) narrates from a first-person perspective the struggles of Dave Burrell, a black US Information Agency officer, during his year-long posting to the American embassy in Iraq in the late 1950s. This story is about, among other things, being alien—a laconic intellectual of color—among white Americans while, at the same time, being unexpectedly at home in a foreign place. At another level, *Baghdad Blues* also reveals how America's status as the decisive superpower—more brittle than often realized, even then—could be shaken by tremors of uncertainty and confusion in a city that Americans, half a century later, would come to know again to both our and the Iraqis' cost.

Despite recent and contemporary history, however, *Baghdad Blues* remains as good as forgotten, although a second edition came out in 1991, in the wake of the first Gulf War. Greenlee's novel seems both a message from a past era and a prescient mapping of a much more contemporary landscape, portraying the US diplomats and consular staff in a way that foreshadows much of the impressive English-language reportage of more recent years on life in the so-called Green Zone in central Baghdad after the 2003 invasion, with its sketches of a massive protected bubble in which Americans lived,

often ignorant (some willingly so, others not) about the actual country of Iraq beyond the security barriers, the residential trailers, and the last on-site branch of a US fast-food franchise.[4]

Dave Burrell is at first and even at subsequent glances the existentially dissatisfied protagonist of canonical African American fiction—he is both angry and yet capable of hiding it from white people, whether in a personal or professional environment. Both his sexually confident personality and his caginess are weapons he deploys against a world that looks at him, he feels, as either someone to be patronized or someone to be feared. It is a posture burnished by both African American experience and, at a higher level of abstraction, its literary tradition, where the protagonist of a fiction has to tell a story that in turn has to instruct the reader how to read that story.

The bureaucratic milieu of the US Information Bureau is the primary setting of Greenlee's novel, with the city of Baghdad as the place where a potential alternative refuge can be found, although it is not romanticized in any way. Failures inside the Iraqi world are also a question posed in *Baghdad Blues*, and they are not portrayed as entirely the fault of the West, despite clear evidence in both the novel and in historical reality of an embarrassingly neocolonial relationship between the Iraqi ruling elite and the United States. Although struggling to not fall into the trap of occidental condescension, the novel's rendering of Iraqi Arab society reveals it to be haunted by multiple frustrations, undermined by its own racial and religious prejudices, and fraught with strange psychological drives and derangements. Despite his instinctive sympathy for Iraqis, Burrell evades becoming the vehicle of a nascent Third World solidarity movement aligned against Western imperialism. Committed to his own future as a writer, he sees complexity where others see only political hierarchies and tribal loyalties—including, of course, those of the tribe that calls itself "the American diplomatic community." *Baghdad Blues* deploys not only the broad historical background of the Iraq crisis in late summer of 1958 but also a web of smaller-scale narratives involving events and interactions beneath the surface and largely hidden from the public eye. The reader's first response is to assume that these, unlike the major historical events, are part of the fictional invention of the novel.

Unexpectedly or not, however, many of these events and interactions can also be encountered as the immediate topics of reports to Washington by American officials stationed in Iraq at the time, up to and including the ambassador himself. The documents in the National Archives offer, without

doubt, alternate readings of the events of the crisis and of the atmosphere in Baghdad to the one embodied in Greenlee's novel, and they in any case present us with a remarkable frame for viewing the imaginative vision of *Baghdad Blues* through the lens of (ostensibly, at least) the detachment and objectivity of senior foreign service personnel doing the thing our tax dollars pay them for doing: representing American interests abroad and supplying the government with accurate and informed analysis of foreign governments and their nations. Occasionally, in fact, the evaluations embodied in the novel and those of American diplomats on the ground converge, suggesting that some conclusions were inescapable, but more often than not they diverge in ways both broad and narrow, and not only because one text is fiction and the other a series of reports, analyses, and transmissions in the State Department archives. Subjectivity is not absent from the official records, of course, but the main reason is that particular assumptions differ often radically between novel and archive: about Iraq and Iraqis, about the motives of American public diplomacy in the Arab world, and about the cheerful resilience of the embassy community. Investigating the differences with regard to those three areas reveals the quality of the dissenting perspective of *Baghdad Blues* and suggests a greater potential value to looking anew at the intersection of fictional creation and documentary history.

Four examples from the novel are echoed in the official record. These are not the only elements that feature in both narratives, but they are in their different ways quite revealing, and occasionally also puzzling.

III.

The least political but in some ways most intriguing example of how *Baghdad Blues* both diverges from and illuminates a different and purportedly more objective record of events is a case involving an anthropologist researcher and his wife, friends of the protagonist back in his college days. At one point in the novel, Dave Burrell leaves Baghdad to spend a few days with an American academic couple, a husband and wife team from the University of Chicago (where Greenlee had studied, too), who are conducting ethnographic research in a small town a few hours' drive from Baghdad. "It was a good weekend," Burrell recounts. "We sat around and sipped the brandy, drank the coffee, and talked old school-tie talk about our days on the campus when I'd been a campus radical and about how surprised everyone had been when I passed the security test" (82).

Even if the narrator did not call the husband Bob (at another point in the novel they are given the last name "Sullivan"), the description of the couple and their work would bring the curious reader eventually to the social anthropologist Robert Fernea and his wife Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. Robert Fernea's research would lead a decade later to his pathbreaking study of the power structures of a small town a few hours south of Baghdad, *Shaykh and Effendi*, which would launch a career that involved, among other things, the founding of the Middle Eastern Studies program at the University of Texas, Austin. Beyond that, the fact that Elizabeth Warnock Fernea had a lot of extra time on her hands and no specific doctoral research to undertake led her, in turn, to do some investigating into precisely the area to which her husband had absolutely no access—the lives of the women of the town they were residing in. Elizabeth Fernea's own book *Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village*, first published in 1965 and reissued twice since then, became a modest popular success and certainly outshone her husband's first publication at least in terms of sales. In *Guests of the Sheik*, Elizabeth Fernea devotes a lot of space to the gender interactions of the village—she is often caught unawares by social rituals among the women that she hasn't observed or interpreted correctly—and in one amusing account describes looking forward to a visit by two American friends, men who are working as technical advisors in the region, so they can all drink scotch and play cards and she and Bob can get some respite from their somewhat inauthentic life in the village. However, shortly after the visitors arrive, her home is invaded by a small group of her women friends who don't want her to be lonely, knowing that she will, of course, be sitting all alone in the kitchen the whole evening while Bob socializes with his male buddies in the living room. Wanting to retain their friendship, she cannot find a way to tell them that it is not like that for her, so she spends the hours she would have otherwise had with the visitors with them, putting up with jokes from Bob in the living room, who realizes what is happening (276–80).

Intriguingly, the US Embassy post files also contain an informal six-page memorandum on a visit to the Ferneas in their town that had been sent to Washington as local background information. As I read this account in the National Archives, the narrative tracked the relevant section of the novel so faithfully that I almost expected to see Greenlee's name on the last page. The memorandum had not been signed by him, however, but rather by the embassy First Secretary Nicholas G. Thacher, whose name occurs quite often in the 1958 cable traffic.[5] The cable gives a very vivid picture of the town and

offers a succinct account of Bob Fernea's analysis of the real political problem in Iraq, the inability of the system to offer any meaningful openings for talented and qualified young people, men in particular (Thacher, March 17). We have, therefore, an odd cluster of texts and perspectives here: a visit to Robert and Elizabeth Fernea in the narrative of Greenlee's novel; a powerful memoir of her life in Iraq by Elizabeth, a woman very sensitive to issues of identity, that never mentions probably the only African American in Baghdad, whom her husband had known in Chicago and who visited them in Iraq; and a vivid account of a visit to them by an American diplomat that sounds rather like a longer account of the visit that Dave Burrell makes in *Baghdad Blues*, except it is not authored by Greenlee. There are, of course, several possible explanations for each item, but the juxtaposition of presence and absence is curious.

IV.

The case of the two kidnapped marines is something quite different. This event features both in the archive and in the novel, and Greenlee gives it a distinctive spin. The basic facts of the case, as far as the record in the post files tells us, were that two Marine Corps sergeants from the embassy guard detail were driving near a part of the city where an oil facility of some kind was located. The facility had caught fire that morning, whether by accident or design, and a crowd captured the two Americans and accused them of trying to sabotage the plant. Either the crowd handed them over to the Iraqi military authorities, or the soldiers just took them into custody. It was probably a lucky break that saved them, as paranoia about foreign and particularly US intervention was running high. They were released a few days later, and Ambassador Gallman reported to Washington that the marines had been interrogated but not abused in any way. They appear to have even handled the situation with some maturity, as Gallman forwards their account of events:

> They were, however, asked at one point whether they had had training in "explosives." One honestly said he had. The other replied, equally honestly, that he had had only training in use of firearms. (Gallman, August 5)

The account of the parallel series of incidents in *Baghdad Blues* is rather different, and begins with the portrayal of a gung-ho marine guard at the embassy who is hopping with excitement at the thought of having to beat back an assault by a mob or even the Iraqi army:

> "Now, don't you worry none about these here people," he said. "We been trained pretty well in riot control. And this embassy, why it's damn near like a fort. You got this deep big garden they got to come through before they can get to the door, and it's even bigger out back. We got those guns on the roof covering the whole thing, and we just got off the range last month, and just between you and me, we didn't do bad." He squinted and took a deep drag on his cigarette. "No, ain't nobody coming into this here embassy we don't want to come in. I just wish they'd try." . . . . Already he was slaughtering cringing, shouting Arabs by the thousand. (141)

The novel then picks up the story of the kidnapping of the marines at a later point, connecting it to Burrell's conversation with the guard:

> At about eleven that morning we got the word that two marines had been picked up in the refinery. They had grabbed a jeep and, in uniform, had gone to see the fire. Everyone around the office felt very sympathetic toward them, and very angry with the Arabs for throwing them in jail. But as it turned out, the Iraqi soldiers who had taken them into custody had probably saved them from getting lynched. . . . Everyone explained to me that they were just innocent country boys, that all country boys rushed after fires. . . . It took a week to get them out of jail, and they returned as heroes. A captain came down from Beirut, supposedly to give them a summary court martial, but he only slapped them on the wrist. They were heroes, and the Arabs were sneaky villains for putting them in jail. One of them was the apple-cheeked lance-corporal at the door of the embassy the day of the coup, itching to be John Wayne and hold off the entirety of the Arabs. He'd been chasing Al's fat little secretary for a year, and she finally awarded his newfound notoriety with some tail. He walked around like a peacock for a week afterward, and before he knew it, he was engaged. (170–71)

In a similar vein, the accounts of the atmosphere in the embassy and the morale of the staff during the crisis days of the coup differ widely, almost comically, between Greenlee's novel and the post files in the National Archives. A further example comes in the shape of Ambassador Gallman's report to Washington on the admirable response of the US mission and its diplomats, other agency officers, and staff to the crisis triggered by the military coup:

> Over the next five to six days they all contributed without thought of personal safety or comfort to meeting the many unexpected problems that we were suddenly confronted with. For days none went home. They were housed in the

> Embassy and in the home of the Deputy Chief of Mission. Others slept on cots in the chancery and in the consulate. (Gallman, August 2)

Again, the narrative of *Baghdad Blues* moves us toward a different perspective:

> The secretaries and officers scurried around the halls, more slowly now, from fatigue, the secretaries' hair-dos a bit looser, their girdles riding a bit higher up their pudgy American asses, new runs in their stockings, their makeup askew. No one had ever told them that they might have to work hard in the foreign service, and until that night, they hadn't. . . . The secretaries were hot, dirty, tired, and scared. They might get killed. The recruiting officer hadn't told them this kind of thing could happen. He hadn't even told them that most of the young officers would be married and that they would be reduced to dating the marines of the embassy marine guard, high-school graduates or dropouts from small towns, just like themselves. (138–39)

It is not a difficult move to judge the ambassador's upbeat account of how the embassy community handled the crisis as simply the required fiction of institutional record, less concerned with truth than with checking the appropriate bureaucratic boxes and getting his ducks in a row for performance appraisals, awards for meritorious conduct (including Sam Greenlee's, of course, who was decorated for his contribution to rescuing the Iraqi staff from the USIB offices), and pacifying querulous voices in Washington who were wondering aloud what the heck the embassy had been doing all this time when they couldn't even see a military coup being organized in front of their noses.[6]

The ambassador's inspirational all-pulling-together-in-a-crisis recollection of life at the embassy during the coup is challenged by the counter-memory of the narrative in *Baghdad Blues*. If, as the narrative theorist James Phelan argues, to engage in reading fiction both liberates our judgment and exposes us to the power of narrative to convince us to reverse—or at least remain neutral toward—evaluations that we might otherwise be more definitive about (for example, that an archive is more accurate than an invented story), then one could assume that many contemporary readers would tend to credit Burrell's account in the novel with more conviction, more insight, than what we find in the official record (160–61). It is not so much that we believe, while reading the cables from Baghdad to Washington, that the ambassador—or whoever drafted the cable for him—is lying in the normal sense

of the word: rather, we have become familiar with the language of bureaucratic, institutional authority in the twentieth century (if not since Charles Dickens's Circumlocution Office) and recognize its aims and its rules; perhaps a significant number of readers use it themselves in their professional lives. Perhaps, too, for many readers (even for those inclined to skepticism about claims for a special status of "the literary"), there is a belief—one might call it a casual vote of aesthetic confidence—that fiction captures a more existential truth than bureaucratic protocol, or, at least, that a free individual author is less likely to have to meet institutional requirements than, say, an American ambassador, when he or she is compiling an account of recent events. And Dave Burrell's status as an African American gives his perspective more heft, more credibility. After all, we may think that, as the black protagonist in the white labyrinth, Burrell sees things others don't or won't see; he lives life closer to the edge, and we make our judgments accordingly. But—that said—is it indisputably the case that Burrell is the clear-eyed narrator of an uncompromising story of black alienation?

Without doubt, Burrell's hair-trigger alertness and his sense that authority is marked by hidden codes even in an ostensibly neutral or meritocratic environment reflects a historical sense of caution, a realistic if sometimes ambivalent desire to be circumspect about the real conditions of existence. As Burrell muses after a friendly drinking session with a USIB colleague:

> I thought, as I rode down in the elevator that perhaps I'd talked too much. Jim was pretty straight, but he was white, and it didn't pay to have the mask slip. Then I felt guilty for thinking that way. And as I walked home in warm autumn evening, I thought that after being around white folks for a while, you wound up not trusting anyone white, that to be a nigger in a white man's world was a constant struggle against paranoia. (46)

And yet Dave Burrell is also a foreign service officer. His daily work takes place at the US Information Bureau offices in Baghdad, and he is thus an active participant in a very particular kind of white man's world—and is sure of his professional contribution. For example, although he is distinctly unimpressed by most of his white co-workers and superiors at the American embassy, when a new USIB director flies in, an aristocratic Southerner, Burrell surprisingly regards him as the best he's seen so far, "a beautiful cat." "How come so many of the few together white folks are reconstructed crackers?" he muses (114).

Admitting that a suave white Southerner is the most enlightened figure on the scene puts a different cast on things, complicating, for example, Burrell's evolving realization that the Arab world—despite Iraqis' sense both of their own victimhood and of their superiority—can be regarded as the "negro" part of town in its relationship to the American diplomatic presence in Baghdad, as Iraq in the wider world is a "colored" and not a white nation. Burrell is in a peculiar position as, racially, he finds himself on one side, but in terms of national identity and professional status, on quite another. Burrell is not free to be a combative outsider, and that lack of space to exercise his frustrations is one of the memorable dimensions of his character, as if he would like sometimes to be a protagonist in another kind of novel but cannot leave his duty station in *Baghdad Blues*.[7]

V.

The fourth example is also a lesson in altered perspectives. In *Baghdad Blues*, Dave Burrell feels an initial optimism with regard to his assignment to Iraq, which he had envisaged as his breakthrough to a more satisfying professional career in a different milieu than the ones he has known in the United States. He soon finds himself, however, to be falling into familiar and disappointingly negative patterns experienced in real life by the few nonwhite State Department and USIA employees in the 1950s, and explored by Michael Krenn in his fascinating study *Black Diplomacy*. By this stage too, as readers, we have come to see Burrell as our aperture of insight into the bleaker reality of Jim Crow (or his middle-class counterpart with a college degree) in the foreign service. Casting a slightly different light on the issue of professional networking, however, is an unexpected document in the USIS files, which are a separate series from the State Department post files for the embassy. These are the files that contain the key information on what happened to the USIS offices and facilities in Baghdad after they had been stormed by the crowd. The most dramatic event by far was the series of trials, mounted by the military government in late 1958, of Iraqi citizens who had been local national employees of USIS, especially in the radio programming section. Fortunately, these trials concluded with either very mild punishments or acquittals, but it was clear that the military government simply did not understand what USIS was, and in that they shared the confusion of most ordinary Iraqis who did not believe that a US Information Service could be anything

except either a cover for espionage or, at best, a malicious propaganda outfit.[8] In any case, this particular document from January 1960 is in a file labeled N. L. Cole and appears to be the official papers compiled by Nathan—known as Nick—Cole, one of the remaining USIS officers in Baghdad who operated out of the embassy. After the crisis of that summer, the USIS operation was stripped down to the barest minimum: local employees were let go, and most Americans were reassigned, Greenlee among them. Filed as if an official document, it appears to be largely a private communication, although typed rather than handwritten. One might call it the Manila Letter, as the author (who signs himself "Dave" with no other identifying details) is stationed in the capital of the Philippines, and after some reminiscing about Baghdad days, it offers the following brief update:

> A recent letter from Sam Greenlea [sic] informs us that he is on his way to Djakarta. The letter was written in Chicago, and states that Sam the man will be on his way in early February, and will stop in Manila for a few days. We will warmly welcome him. Sam saw many of the old hands in Washington and claims Clyde Hess weighs about 300 pounds now ("Dave," January 18).

From this angle of vision, we now catch a glimpse of a Sam Greenlee who appears to be popular with his colleagues at USIS, proceeding cheerfully from duty assignment to duty assignment across the globe, and swapping gossip about the old crowd in Iraq. Reading the Manila Letter, it does not seem to be quite the case that Sam Greenlee morphed easily—or at least not in 1960—into Dave Burrell. A greater effort at translation seems to have been necessary to get us to that character, who perhaps by the early 1970s is the natural retrospective casting for Sam Greenlee the Black Power advocate, the author of a blistering novel of violent resistance in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), and who had long since handed in his ID card and left US government service for good. But still, the diplomatic ambivalence of *Baghdad Blues* is starkly visible when set against the radical scorn for compromise expressed by the more famous *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, and its ending is far more an expression of individual self-realization, of creative artistic desire, than of revolutionary political transformation. Perhaps, indeed, the argument often made by scholars and critics of African American literature, that the bourgeois social framing of ideology that the novel demands by its very form is hostile to the political project of black liberation, has some merit. Burrell's rebellion against the world of white condescension is a personal and not a

political one. And perhaps the other Dave was not being obtuse or especially naive in the Manila Letter: it wasn't that he didn't see the real Sam Greenlee; it's just that the Sam Greenlee who went on to create Dave Burrell had not yet reached the place where his narrator-protagonist would chuck the USIS job after Baghdad, tell the Man to take a hike, and head for Paris to write like Hemingway. The actual Sam Greenlee, a popular colleague, proceeded onward to his next official assignment.

To sum up, loosely: the author Sam Greenlee eventually completed and published the novel that his fictional character wanted to write within the imaginative world of that text. The novel is a flexible form, and Greenlee uses it to define the distance between what Dave Burrell can say and what he'd like to say by way of a great deal of caustic interior monologue. Avoiding anything approaching a tone of preachy indignation, the narrative voice is by turns ironic, dismissive, patient, frustrated, enthusiastic, and often caught between honesty and diplomacy. Positioning the narrative between the literary bildungsroman and the espionage thriller opens up a space to portray a political crisis observed by an artist-diplomat who is both outsider and insider. In fact, the tension between the narrator Dave Burrell and the implied author Sam Greenlee—the authorial presence behind the narrative presence, if you like—is one that shadows that somewhat unpredictable shift in perspective for the duration of the story.

Distinctive angles of reporting and interpretation emerge that can be divided into the fictional or documentary claims of the various types of authorship (at the simplest level, a novel v. a diplomatic cable to Washington). Perhaps these materials also allow themselves to be classified according to other criteria, for example, descriptive v. interpretive or "advocacy" writing, or superficial v. exploratory perspectives, or open v. covert declarations of bias. To put it another way, perhaps there are certain dividing lines that occur inside the different texts and not just between the clearly fictional novel and the undeniably documentary files in the National Archives. It is not only within the borders of the novel that the contours of the tension between desire and diplomacy can be traced.

Visible to the reader in the archives, there are passions, urgencies, and a commitment to accurate reporting—despite the predictable ideological blinders—in the official record of this time and place; particular cables sometimes have the personality and coherence of short stories. Conversely, we realize that there is a great deal of diplomacy in the way author Sam

Greenlee presents his characters and actions in *Baghdad Blues*. This is not a novel without circumspection or evasiveness. For all the half-despairing questions that Dave Burrell asks himself about his level of tolerance for his so-called colleagues as they start to buckle under pressure during the crisis days at the embassy—"I watched their fear and panic and found little joy in the cracking of their bland, Dacron-cotton, Sanforized, wash-and-wear surface. How could these sad-ass people fuck with me so?" (140)—he shies away from confrontation in large part. Indeed, the cool self-control that is part of Burrell's character meshes easily with the professional demands placed on the foreign service officer, and that alone is perhaps one of the unavoidable ironies of *Baghdad Blues*.

My argument in this essay is not that a review of the detailed historical record either justifies or compromises a work of fiction. Rather, it is that any narrative in which historical events play a role will, as Hayden White expressed it, "point[ ] in two directions simultaneously: first, toward the set of events it purports to describe and, second, toward the generic story form to which it tacitly likens the set in order to disclose its formal coherence" (106).[9] Thus, the narrative of crisis and response manifested in the records of the USIS station and the Baghdad embassy for 1958 casts a light on how, in its turn, *Baghdad Blues* as a fictional text both reflects and refracts that account of events as its protagonist seeks to keep his bearings amid the flow of political and personal complication. The novel reflects those energies, as it seeks to give a realistic picture of the social interactions (on the levels of conversation, gesture, feeling, and professional hierarchy) in the American diplomatic community, its chosen setting; it refracts them, as the structure of the fiction, its interplay of action and character, nudges the implications of personality, institution, race, gender, and situation into oblique angles, odd perspectives that defy predetermined attitudes and positions. As the protagonist Dave Burrell is sometimes surprised by what happens and by how the alliances and loyalties line up, so are the readers asked to think about what a novel with a central black male character might be if that character is closer to being "the Man" than many would find comfortable. Constructing a political fiction that both enjoyably indulges in and yet undermines stereotypes, Sam Greenlee's broader achievement in *Baghdad Blues* is to weave together a story that lays bare the clumsy interracial politics of the early Civil Rights era through the experiences of a black foreign service officer against the background of the United States' relationship with Iraq in the Cold War

1950s. In this fiction of personal and international crisis, hidden discourses of diplomacy and desire cross each other's paths.

There is a further document in the files that I copied. It is a plain typed list of the American personnel at the USIS mission at the moment before the coup of July 14, 1958 closed it down, and a handwritten note by each name to say where they had gone for the next assignment ("Names and duty stations"). Sam Greenlee remained with the United States Information Agency until 1965, serving in several other duty stations after Baghdad. Next to Greenlee's name is the city of Dacca, in East Pakistan, now the capital of Bangladesh. It's the kind of list a conscientious administrative assistant or senior secretary would have typed up, knowing that nobody else would do it and that it would be nice to know where everyone ended up without having to go through channels. And, as what I've been doing in this paper is setting the unofficial fiction against the official fiction, so to speak, it seems fitting to note, without wanting to privilege or condemn either text, that yes, there is a thrill, a sense of passion and liberation, at the end of *Baghdad Blues* when Dave Burrell throws off the burden of his identity as a representative of the United States and heads for Paris. But there is also a certain poignancy to that scribbled name Dacca—the place where Samuel E. Greenlee went, travel orders signed and stamped, an American official moving on to the next stage of his public service career.

NOTES

1. National Archives and Records Administration, Records Group 84, Iraq (cited as RG 84), US Embassy Baghdad, General Records 1936–1963, Box 120; also RG 84, Iraq, US Embassy and Legation, Baghdad, Classified General Records, 1936–1961, Box 49.
2. National Archives and Records Administration, Iraq, US Information Service, Baghdad, General Records 1952–1963 (cited as USIS Baghdad).
3. Although the agency itself, made independent of the Department of State in 1953, was called the United States Information Agency (USIA), the network of overseas operations was known as the United States Information Service (USIS). The actual missions or posts in foreign countries were generally referred to as USIB (United States Information Bureau) offices. Thus, as a rule, I refer to the USIA when I mean the Washington headquarters or the overall policies and goals of the US government, and either USIS or USIB when the reference is to the representation on the ground in Iraq.
4. See, for example, George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* (2006); Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (2006); Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of the America's War* (2006). The 2010 movie *Green Zone*, directed by Paul Greengrass, is partly based on Chandrasekaran's book and is one of the most compelling fictional representations of the morbid but heady excitement of the first months after the invasion. George Packer's play *Betrayed* (2008) is also an attempt to

render the first couple of years of the American occupation of Iraq as a tragedy of miscommunication and lost opportunities.

5. Nicholas Thacher, who had a long foreign service career culminating in his appointment as US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, also has an essay in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited* (1991), edited by Fernea and Louis.
6. There is an amusing cable in the files from Ambassador Gallman to Washington, D.C. (August 4, 1958, RG 84, Classified General Records, Box 50) in which he implies that if anyone should be taking the fall for this it should be the military attaché's office, not the regular diplomatic staff in the mission. After all, he argues, *they* had the job of liaising with the Iraqi army command, and they didn't see it coming. And, guess what, they are Pentagon folks and not State, so not our fault. The sense of relief at having found an exit from the burning building is palpable, even reading this document over fifty years later.
7. Burrell's perception of how much extra pressure there is on an African American to control any outburst of anger that, if it came from a white man, would be unremarkable, remains active today in some of the cultural politics surrounding President Barack Obama. Since their television debut in 2012, for example, the comedy duo Key and Peele have presented a series of popular sketches involving Obama's "Anger Translator," an individual called Luther who, always on his feet, expresses in some classic black rhetoric the authentic feelings of the preternaturally calm and unflappable president sitting in a chair in the Oval Office. The sense that any display of heated emotion by a black male will trigger fear among whites is obviously something that Dave Burrell both recognizes and occasionally uses to his own benefit.
8. Although USIS activities were not covert in the normal sense of the term, it is obvious from the archive that both USIB and embassy officials were often uncertain how to deal with aspects of their activities that looked above-board from the American perspective but suspicious from an Iraqi standpoint. The use of non-attributed American material in the USIB's Arab-language radio programs was one problematic issue, and the other was the official sponsorship of the popular English language classes run by the American Institute of Languages in Baghdad. There is an internal memo from John L. Hamilton, the PAO at the embassy, recommending that the ambassador should have word with the newly arrived contract teachers for AIL, as they may not "fully understand why, so far as the Iraqi public is concerned, there is to be little or no evidence of official connection between AIL, the Embassy, and USIS" (Hamilton, July 25).
9. White's work on the relationship between historiography and narrative form was once welcomed more by literary scholars than by fellow historians, but his influence appears to have faded. Sadly, as I think he still has a great deal to offer, and the matter of how, and how strongly, rhetoric shapes reality is hardly a fringe affair in an era where "framing the debate" is often more important than any content.

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