



## The erasure of race in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*

Blake Allmendinger

Department of English, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Chester Himes chose a line from a children's nursery rhyme for the title of his novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). The phrase first appeared in "Eena, meena, mina, mo," a late nineteenth-century Anglo-American rhyme that includes a derogatory term for black people (Opie and Opie 156). Himes never explained why he selected this title for his novel, which chronicles four days in the life of a black man living in Los Angeles during World War II. However, the rhyme suggests that children imbibe racism like mother's milk, indicating how difficult it may be to unlearn prejudice once it has been unconsciously absorbed.

This pessimistic theory reflects the protagonist's experience in the novel. Bob Jones is treated with contempt by white coworkers and his light-skinned girlfriend. In the end, he must decide between going to prison for a crime he did not commit or enlisting in the Army, knowing that he might be killed in battle. "Eena, meena, mina, mo" is a counting rhyme, used in the game of tag to select the child who is "it." But Bob will not be safe, no matter which option he chooses. The novel's ending emphasizes the plight of a black man unable to control his fate in a racist society.

The novel casts doubt on whether racism can be eradicated over the course of time. One attempt to redress past discrimination involves the world's bestselling author, Agatha Christie, and her most popular novel, *And Then There Were None* (1939). Originally published in England as *Ten Little N—s*, it was issued later that year in the United States as *Ten Little Indians*. Although it was eventually renamed *And Then There Were None*, Christie referred to the novel by its original title in her autobiography, published posthumously in 1977 (*An Autobiography* 471). Editions of the novel featuring the original title continued to be published in the United Kingdom until 1980.<sup>1</sup>

Septimus Winner wrote "Ten Little Indians" for an American minstrel show in 1868. The version that inspired Christie's novel was adapted by Frank Green in 1869 (Opie and Opie 156). Both songs follow the same conventions as a counting-down rhyme, used to teach children to count backward from ten to one. In the Christie version, ten black boys die—one by one—due to clumsiness, incompetence, or an inability to perform simple tasks correctly. The first couplet ends "and then there were Nine," with the song concluding "and then there were None." The action parallels the plot of Christie's novel, in which ten strangers are invited to a house on an otherwise deserted island. The guests are murdered one at a time, until all ten people are dead. Each character's murder recalls a couplet from the rhyme. One person is killed while chopping wood, another one drowns, and the last one hangs in an apparent act of suicide. A copy of the rhyme appears in each person's bedroom, and ten black figurines are displayed on the dining room table. Each time someone dies, a figurine disappears (30).

In addition to changing the novel's title to *And Then There Were None*, Christie's publishers revised the text to eradicate any remaining traces of racism. Originally, Christie wrote that the island "had got its name from its resemblance to a man's head—a man with negroid lips." (14) Subsequent editions referred to the guests' destination as Soldier Island, omitting references to its Negroid features (*Christie, And Then* 13).<sup>2</sup> Soldiers also appeared as characters in the song and china figurines. In the revised version, after three guests are killed, Justice Wargrave says that one of the seven surviving characters is a murderer, "a bogus little soldier boy." The servant Rogers locks the dining room door

before going to bed, in order to prevent another figurine from being stolen. “No more china-soldier tricks tonight” (123, 147).

Despite these changes, the specter of race continues to haunt Christie’s novel.<sup>3</sup> Wargrave is a racial snob who distastefully recalls an acquaintance who moved to the Far East and became involved with a Bedouin (6). In addition to being a racist, Wargrave is eventually revealed as the murderer. Before retiring from the bench, the judge had discovered nine killers who had been acquitted by the legal system. Taking the law into his own hands, he executes these individuals, then discloses—in a confession that the police discover after he commits suicide—that the tenth “n—” was a “shady little creature” named Isaac Morris, a man with “thick Semitic lips” (184) whom Wargrave murdered before coming to the island.

Although the offensive racial epithet has been removed from contemporary editions, the white characters still express conflicting attitudes toward blacks in the novel. Captain Philip Lombard admits that he once abandoned twenty-one men in the African bush, stealing their food rations and leaving them to starve. “Not quite the act of a *pukka sahib*, I’m afraid. But self-preservation’s a man’s first duty. And natives don’t mind dying, you know. They don’t feel about it as Europeans do” (44). Vera Claythorne is appalled by Lombard’s inhumanity. Later, however, when Emily Brent recalls Lombard’s ghastly deed, Vera defends the Captain, claiming the black men “were only natives.” Miss Brent retorts: “Black or white, they are our brothers.” Distraught by the murders that have been occurring on the island, Vera thinks to herself: “Our black brothers—our black brothers. Oh, I’m going to laugh. I’m hysterical” (70–71). Christie also causes the reader to question Miss Brent’s assertion, having previously depicted the spinster as a religious fanatic (6). Yet if the author agrees with Miss Brent, why do twenty-one black people need to die in order to place Lombard in the same criminal category as the other characters, each of whom has murdered a single white individual?

Christie’s novels suggest that the author shared the same prejudices as other members of the British upper middle classes who were born during the Victorian era. Christie married archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan in 1930 and often accompanied him to countries in West Asia, where he excavated ancient villages and unearthed valuable artifacts, many of which were later sent to the British Museum. Two of Christie’s works are set in this prehistoric era. The novel *Death Comes as the End* (1944) takes place in Thebes, circa 2000 B.C. Here, Egypt is depicted as a land of culture and sophistication.

Christie’s novels that are set in the present, however, illustrate the decline of West Asian civilizations, as well as the concomitant rise of the British Empire. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), the locals provide manual labor at an archaeological dig. Although one of the white men expresses his admiration for the workers, a nurse compares the men to “scarecrows, all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had toothache...every now and then, as they went to and fro carrying away baskets of earth, they began to sing—at least I suppose it was meant to be singing—a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again” (46).

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), a Nubian servant remains discreetly in the background while Christie focuses on the English travelers who become suspects on the cruise ship after a murder takes place (148). In *Appointment With Death* (1938), two tourists compare notes on Egypt, laughing “at the ridiculous language of the donkey boys and street touts” (15). In *They Came to Baghdad* (1951), the Iraqi people merely provide local color:

Outside in Bank Street it was sunny and full of swirling dust and the noises were terrific and varied. There was the persistent honking of motor horns, the cries of vendors of various wares. There were hot disputes between small groups of people who seemed ready to murder each other but were really fast friends... There was also a perpetual and ever renewed sound of throat clearing and spitting, and above it the thin melancholy wail of men conducting donkeys and horses amongst the stream of motors and pedestrians shouting, “*Balek—Balek!*” (1–2)

In spite of their allegedly explosive temperaments and propensity for violence, indigenous characters never feature prominently in Christie’s murder mysteries. Instead, they symbolize chaos

and the need for colonial rule. In *Come Tell Me How You Live: An Archaeological Memoir* (1946), the author comments on a recurring problem at one of her husband's Syrian excavation sites. The Armenians "always manage to inflame the tempers of the Kurds and Arabs. Quarrelling is, in any case, almost continuous. All our workmen have hot tempers, and all carry with them the means of expressing themselves—large knives, bludgeons, and a kind of mace or knobkerry! Heads are cut open, and furious figures are entangled with each other in fierce struggles and torn asunder, whilst Max loudly proclaims the rules of the dig" (86).

Recent scholars have suggested that Christie challenged contemporary female gender roles by writing about the New Woman, the flapper, and women's suffrage. In addition, the author sympathetically portrayed a variety of women, including lesbians, middle-aged housewives, and elderly spinsters (Makinen 1, 4, 159). But Christie was also a political conservative who supported capital punishment and the British class system and who perpetrated racist stereotypes. She never questioned the notion of a racial hierarchy in her fiction, or the assumption of white authority made possible by British colonial rule.

However, *And Then There Were None* differs from the rest of her work. It is a stand-alone novel without a detective and a cast of suspects, each of whom is innocent, except for the murderer. Like *noir*, *And Then There Were None* reflects a pessimistic view of human nature, demonstrating how every character is guilty of committing the most heinous crimes. More suspenseful than Christie's other novels, *And Then There Were None* creates a feeling of fatalistic despair as the island's inhabitants begin to die, one by one. While traveling on a train to the coast, where Mr. Blore will take a boat to the island, a drunk warns him: "The day of judgment is at hand" (14). Later, Miss Brent quotes from the Bible: "The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made... The wicked shall be turned into hell" (29). The first night, after dinner, a hidden voice accuses each character of being a murderer, like God denouncing a group of sinners (35). But the guests eventually realize that there is no God and that one of them is stalking the group. As a character declares in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist play *No Exit* (1944): "Hell is—other people!" (45).

Himes compared Christie to Fyodor Dostoevsky, noting that each one "[wrote] about crime in their own ways" (Fabre and Skinner 128). However, Raymond Chandler dismissed practitioners of the traditional English murder mystery, claiming that their novels were based on "an arid formula which could not even satisfy its own implications. It was second-grade literature because it was not about the things that could make first-grade literature." Christie's novels were merely entertaining puzzles, unlike the hard-boiled detective fiction written by American authors such as Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Himes. Chandler believed that such fiction ought to analyze the "sociological implication[s]" of crime (12, 2).

In most of Christie's novels, crime is an anomaly. But in *And Then There Were None*, the island becomes an existential prison for representative members of the corrupt human race, a Darwinian environment containing an animalistic predator and its prey. Wargrave has a "tortoise-like neck," a "hunched-up attitude," and "pale, shrewd little eyes" (26). Lombard refers to the murderer as a "playful beast" who likes to stick to "his damned nursery jingle as closely as possible" (129). Vera becomes frightened like a bird, while Blore behaves like "a slow padding animal" (134). He dies after being struck by a block of white marble "shaped like a bear" (24, 163). As the killings continue, Christie describes the island's remaining inhabitants as "enemies linked together by an instinct of self-preservation" (134).

The novel's original title belittled people of color, while comparing them to Christie's white characters, whose deaths are linked with the disappearance of the black figurines. The inhabitants are inferior members of their race, morally damaged beyond repair, and thus disposable, according to Wargrave's theory of capital punishment. The word "soldier," unlike the "n" word, creates a different set of possible meanings. Instead of being brave, the characters are cowardly, mercenary, devious, and doomed to die. Their defeat coincides with the fate of the British Empire, which had begun to decline by the late 1930s, when Christie published *And Then There Were None*.

Appearing on the eve of World War II, the novel presents a society on the verge of collapse. Before committing suicide, Wargrave puts a message in a bottle, taking credit for the killings. This act recalls similar narrative ploys in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Swiss Family Robinson* (1818), novels that the judge read during childhood (180). Whereas those works feature people stranded on a deserted island, who gradually transform their new world into a self-sustaining society, Christie's novel does the opposite, chronicling the extermination of civilization.

Counting-down rhymes, such as the ones that inspired Himes and Christie, were often used by heathens "to decide measures to be taken in battle, to select champions in individual contests, [and] to determine the partition of conquered or colonized lands" (Bolton 26, 32). Christie's Darwinian savages have their fates determined for them by similarly superstitious means—with the added irony that none of them survive to rule over their new domain. In "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944), Chandler pronounced: "It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little, and that his death should be the coin of what we call civilization" (17). When Christie's characters realize that their deaths have been scripted to correspond with a nursery rhyme, Wargrave, playing the role of an innocent guest, grunts: "Remarkably childish" (30). Another rhyme has an equally ironic effect on Himes's protagonist, who enlists in World War II, knowing that he may die defending a nation that treats African Americans as second-class citizens. The rhyme is written partly in gibberish ("Eena, meena, mina, mo"), appealing to the author's existential sense of humor, which he described in his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity* (1972).

After writing several novels based on his experiences as a black man living in Los Angeles during World War II, Himes switched to hard-boiled detective fiction, publishing *The Real Cool Killers* in 1959, the first in a series of novels set in Harlem, featuring a pair of black policemen named Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. Deciding that the public was not interested in reading didactic novels such as *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Himes addressed race relations in a series of pulp novels that targeted a popular audience (Fabre and Skinner 128). However, readers may have been uncomfortable with the author's realistic treatment of race relations in mid-twentieth-century America. Himes eventually moved to France, where he was recognized as a serious artist whose crime novels had the "sociological" merit that Chandler claimed distinguished great writers from purveyors of popular fiction.

It took more than thirty years for readers to embrace a black detective writer who wrote about race in America—as witnessed by Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, which began in 1990 with the publication of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Still, Christie remains the world's most popular mystery writer because readers treat her works as puzzles rather than social problems that cannot easily be solved. In Christie's case, words deceive instead of revealing the truth. Wargrave predicts in revised editions of *And Then There Were None* that "the mystery of Soldier Island will remain unsolved" (289). But in the end, he turns out to be wrong.

## Notes

1. Subsequent references to the 1980 edition appear parenthetically within the text of the essay. The same word appears in an earlier novel, *Poirot Loses a Client* (1937), later published as *Dumb Witness*. Chapter 18, titled "A Nigger in the Woodpile," alludes to a suspect with a hidden motive, which Hercule Poirot has yet to uncover.
2. The copyright page of this edition states that the novel was "previously published as *Ten Little Indians*," adding that *And Then There Were None* was "first published in 1939" (vi).
3. In "Rethinking Agatha Christie," Sudie Hofmann notes that the revised modern edition of the novel still contains derogatory references to Indians, other indigenous natives, and Jews. Craig A. Warren notes, in "Gender and Moral Immaturity in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*," that the revised version still condones "genocide" by focusing on the elimination of "a specific group," whether they be soldiers, people of color, or the criminals who appear in the novel (52).

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