

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

December 31, 2009

Carlene Hatcher Polite, Novelist, Dies at 77

By [MARGALIT FOX](#)

Carlene Hatcher Polite, an experimental novelist of the 1960s and '70s whose work focused on the uneasy confluence of racism and sexism in the lives of black people, died on Dec. 7 in Cheektowaga, N.Y. She was 77 and lived in Amherst, N.Y.

The cause was cancer, her husband, James Patrick, said. From 1971 until her retirement in 2000, Ms. Polite taught creative writing at the [University at Buffalo](#).

Originally trained as a modern dancer, Ms. Polite wrote just two novels. They were known for their lush, poetic language and extensive use of monologues. Thematically, they anticipated the novels of [Toni Morrison](#) and [Alice Walker](#) in their unflinching examination of violence in the relationships of black men and women.

Ms. Polite's first novel, "The Flagellants," appeared in France in 1966 and in the United States the next year, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. It centers on the turbulent affair between a couple, Ideal and Jimson. Over the course of the book, the two deal each other repeated physical and verbal violence. As the novel makes clear, it is a reflection of the violence that the larger culture does to black people.

In an essay in The New York Times Book Review in 1986, Mel Watkins called "The Flagellants" "a complex, scathing and often brilliant depiction of the disintegration of a black couple's relationship," adding that it "was among the first fictional works by a black woman to focus directly on the theme of the sometimes bitter antagonism between black men and women."

Ms. Polite's second novel, "Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), concerns the investigation into the death of a black nightclub dancer in Paris.

Carlene Hatcher was born in Detroit on Aug. 28, 1932. Her parents, John and Lillian Cook Hatcher, were officials of the [United Auto Workers](#). As a young woman, Carlene Hatcher studied in New York at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance; she later danced professionally in New York and Detroit.

After doing civil rights work with the Detroit Council for Human Rights, the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) and other organizations in the early 1960s, Ms. Polite spent much of the decade living in Paris.

Her first marriage ended in divorce; she adopted the surname Polite from a later relationship. Besides her husband, Mr. Patrick, whom she married in 2003, she is survived by two daughters, Glynda Morton-Bennett and Lila Polite, and a grandchild. Another grandchild died before her.

Though Ms. Polite's novels were often called works of social protest, she resisted such handy pigeonholing.

"I'm of that generation which thought that because we were Negroes we had to write or paint or dance as Negroes," she said in an interview quoted in *The Times Book Review* in 1968. "To be accepted by white publishers or producers we had to be 'Negroes' in quotation marks. But I'd rather divide up my writing to do creative literature and editorial protests at separate times."

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)