

An Email Interview with Monice Mitchell Simms

written by Rachel McLeod Kaminer | August 10, 2017



Rachel McLeod Kaminer: Monice! So there's this movie coming out, *Detroit*, and I'm immediately hearing criticism from my little corner of the internet. I haven't seen it. Neither have you. Moving on! The storyteller I'm interested in is you: You're from Detroit. You tell stories as a filmmaker and a novelist (and a journalist and a playwright and a poet). You're a Black woman. You live in Los Angeles. And you have this amazing project that is continuing to evolve. Would you talk about *House of Corrections*?

Monice Mitchell Simms: Yep, that's me: A Black woman writer born and raised in Detroit, who – to my momma's chagrin and my husband's delight ☺ – has lived and worked in La La land for 20 years now. In 2010, I indie published my debut novel, "Address: House of Corrections," which tells the fictionalized story of my grandmother, an ex con and recovering addict fighting to stay sane, stay straight and make peace with her torrid past. It's a historical narrative, a coming of age story and the first in a trilogy inspired my grandmother, mother, and great-grandmother. Currently, I'm rebirthing it as three bite-size Y.A. novels for teenage girls under the new title, "House of Corrections."

RMK: Full disclosure to the reader: I've gotten to read some of the new book. As I followed the protagonist, Merry, through shifts in time and space, her perspective on the people and events around her is constantly shifting. In some ways the evolution of Merry's voice *is* *House of Corrections*; that can be considered one of the hallmarks of a YA novel, I think. (I did not invent that idea, jaja; I am borrowing it from YA/MG editor/publisher Stephen Roxburgh.) I'll never forget this line in volume three, *Ember*: "The city was burning because of her and there was nothing she could do about it." This image—the city on fire—is emphasized throughout so many visual narratives of Detroit (and Los Angeles, both in 1967 and 1992). How did/do the events in

Detroit in 1967 impact you, your family, your community?

MMS: Honestly, growing up in Detroit, I didn't know or learn much about the 1967 riots. My family and even my parents – who both lived through it – rarely spoke of it and it wasn't taught to me in school. But what I did see every day – in my surrounding neighborhood and as I traveled around the city – was the devastation it left behind, because most of those firebombed buildings were never repaired or torn down. In a lot of ways, it's was like the '67 riots never went away and for a long time, Detroit was stuck there. And following the years after white flight – especially during the 80s when I grew up – the city became a ghost town. Lucky for me, though, I'm not afraid of ghosts. LOL. I had a loving family, a supportive church home and amazing teachers that challenged me, so I never felt afraid or ashamed growing up in Detroit. If anything, the embers of the '67 riots shaped and inspired me to become the sympathetic storyteller that I am today.

RMK: 1967 to 1992 is just 25 years. 1992 and 2017 are also 25 years apart. Does that seem notable to you in any way? Where were you in 1992? Were you impacted by the LA riots/civil unrest/uprising?

MMS: Wow. Interesting that both of those chunks of time are 25 years apart. Is it notable to me? I'm not sure. I never thought about it until now. LOL. In 1992, though, I was a junior at Wayne State University in Detroit as a journalism major. And I remember watching the L.A. riots on T.V., wondering: "Why does this keep happening?" Now, I didn't make a direct comparison to Detroit at the time, but mind you, my college, WSU, was sort of like USC. It was a city campus, located in downtown Detroit in the Cass Corridor – an area hard hit by the '67 riots. It's all been gentrified now. But back then, the area was decimated and as a young woman, you really didn't want to be caught alone down there after dark. So, watching the L.A. uprising in response to police brutality in April of 1992 was really in some ways just a reread of the lingering devastation I still saw in Detroit, just outside my college campus.

RMK: Because of [90x90LA](#), I got to hear director Grace Lee (and her producing partner Jin Yoo-Kim) speak about their short film [K-TOWN'92 Reporters](#) twice in the past week. (It's actually an interactive project as well: <http://ktown92.com>.) K-TOWN'92 explicitly addresses this question, and I'm gonna turn around and pose it to you. Take it anywhere! *Who gets to tell the story?*

MMS: That's both a simple and hard question to answer. No one has the right to tell anyone what story they can and cannot tell. But as a storyteller, I know that the gaze of the storyteller changes the scope of the story. In other words, it's not just about me. Yes, I was born to write. And yes, I've studied and grinded, and get great joy and purpose from writing and telling stories. But with all of that also comes a great responsibility – the responsibility to tell the best story you possibly can in the best way that you possibly can. So, if you know in your gut that there are pieces or perspectives of the story that no amount of research or role playing will enable you to authentically perceive, capture, or convey, then I think it's your duty as a storyteller to step aside.

RMK: We've worked together in writing workshops for girls who, like Merry, are incarcerated as teens. (And again... *Who gets to tell the story?*) You've shared with me some of your hopes for this book, and the impact this story might have. Will you talk about that?

MMS: When I first published "Address: House of Corrections," I was just being obedient to my goal to get the story out, and I was only thinking about Black women like me, who love to read and get lost in a good book. It was such a blessing that my story resonated with them. Then, a funny thing happened: Folks I never was expecting to like my novel – men and people from other cultures and countries – began emailing and telling me how much my story of family, secrets and resilience touched them.

A few years later, I started volunteering with WriteGirl, a wonderful non-profit organization that mentors girls through creative writing and I – along with an amazing crew of women who have become my life-long friends – began mentoring in a girl juvenile camp. For three years, I did this and it was some of the most fulfilling and difficult work I've ever done. Ironically though, it wasn't until I was in my last year of volunteering that I asked if I could read from my novel as part of one of the lessons.

In retrospect, I don't know what I was thinking, because commanding the attention of teenage girls is a feat even Jesus wouldn't take on...LOL...But foolish me, I started to read. And they listened.

You gotta understand...This was a BIG deal, because (1) it takes place from 1940s to 1960s and (2) It's written in Zora Neale Hurston fashion with dialects and lingo. But none of that mattered. These incarcerated girls (aged 13-18 years old) identified with my lead character and her story, because at the heart of it, it was their story, too. That's when it dawned on me that they needed to read my book. The only problem was I knew they never would, because my novel is 424 pages long. So, I set out on a new mission to rebirth "House of Corrections" as three bite-size novels and I launched a Patreon page for ongoing support.

Once I get the books published, I plan to go back into the girl juvenile detention camps and run a creative writing program using "House of Corrections" as the teaching foundation. It's an ambitious goal and is becoming a long journey, but I truly believe that these girls will benefit most from my book and I'm determined to make it happen.

RMK: You are great. Thank you so much. Thank you for telling your story. < 3

MMS: Thanx for the interview!



Links to **Monice Mitchell Simms'** full bio, Patreon, and social media pages are available at her website, www.monicemitchellsimms.com; her novel *Address: House of Corrections* is available on Amazon.