

Hard-boiled race: the examination of racialized space and identity within Walter Mosley's

Devil in a Blue Dress

by

Zachary Ty Wiser

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Program of Study Committee:
Margaret A. Graham, Major Professor
Jane Davis
Travis Butler

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Zachary Ty Wiser

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

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HISTORY OF HARD-BOILED

Walter Mosley is primarily known for his Easy Rawlins series, which began with the hard-boiled detective novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*. While Walter Mosley is one of the more popular writers in the hard-boiled genre, he does not always write within that specific genre. Mosley has published science fiction novels and political non-fiction books, all of which have gained critical acclaim. Within all of Mosley's writing, the African American perspective remains as the central focus of his thematic impulse. Mosley says that he writes "about black, male heroes," which implies that he is working toward something much deeper than fulfilling the requirements of a genre (Author Talk). Even though Mosley is indeed working within the hard-boiled genre in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, he expands the level of social commentary possible for a hard-boiled writer by focusing on thematic subjects such as black, male heroes. However, no matter how much Mosley is able to do with the hard-boiled genre, much of his thematic success in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is specifically due to his usage of the conventions of the genre, and therefore the genre itself. In order to begin to unpack the critical relevance of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, then, one must first understand the conventions and critical history of the hard-boiled genre, and, before that, the roots of detective fiction.

It is much argued and widely accepted that it was Edgar Allan Poe who "invented the modern detective story" with the introduction of Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin in the hauntingly intellectual story, *The Murders In The Rue Morgue* (Macdonald 9). With his complete devotion to and reliance upon deductive reasoning and superior intellect, Poe's Dupin ushered into reality a genre that had been flirted with but never before so wholeheartedly tackled by writers. Not only was Poe introducing a new type of character, he was creating a new narrative structure to address the explainable and unexplainable phenomena of

culture and the human condition. While Poe may not have been the first author to tackle the problems and oddities of culture and the human condition through the particular lens of attentive deduction, he was the first to use the specifically logical approach to dictate both the narrative structure of stories as well as the plot. It is within this formulation of narrativity that the birth of the detective story lies.

So aware that he was creating not only a new character type but also a new narrative structure with which to address the inconsistencies and mysteries of the physical world and the human condition, Poe spent the first several pages of *The Murders In The Rue Morgue* introducing the strand of logic necessary to fully comprehend both Dupin and the detective process that would enable the reader to be equipped to divine the type of social criticism Poe was embarking upon with his detective figure. When Poe writes the following passage, he is not simply writing about strategies for chess and draughts. Rather, Poe is revealing the common misconceptions of common sense that ultimately lead the average surveyors of life into missing the truths about the world around them:

The faculty of re-solution is possibly much invigorated by mathematical study and especially by that highest branch of it which, unjustly, and merely on account of its retrograde operations, has been called, as if *par excellence*, analysis. Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyze. A chess-player, for example, does the one without effort at the other. It follows that the game of chess, in its effects upon mental character, is greatly mis-understood. In this latter, where the pieces have different and bizarre motions, with various values, what is only complex is mistaken (a not unusual error) for what is profound. . .In draughts, on the contrary, where the moves are *unique* and have but little variation, the probabilities of inadvertence are diminished, and the mere attention being left comparatively unemployed, what advantages are obtained by either party are obtained by superior *acumen*. (Poe 2-3)

With the preceding passage, the detective psyche, along with the detective story, was born.

While Poe's devotion to the uncovering of the deepest and darkest recesses of the human condition spawned the numerous subgenres of detective fiction, the above passage did

provoke a specific response within detective writers during the early decades of the twentieth century. The writers that developed the style of detective writing that would become known as *hard-boiled* exhibit direct responses to Poe's detective blueprint and his approach to addressing cultural issues. The term *hard-boiled* "developed from an original connotation of petty and mean to hard, shrewd, keen" (Tamony 258).

While the hard-boiled tradition is an unapologetic presentation of corruption and violence, hard-boiled stories also "emphasize character and the problems inherent in human behavior" (Pronzini 3). While the seemingly unconnected dialogue about chess and draughts reveals the analytic mindset of the detective, it also reveals that within detective fiction "Character conflict is essential; the crime or threat of crime with which the story is concerned is of secondary importance" (Pronzini 3). Poe outlines for his readers how, oftentimes, it is within the solving of the crime as opposed to the solution itself that the truth of the injustice of the crime can be found. The same focus on the act of discovering a truth as opposed to the truth itself carries over into the hard-boiled tradition. For example, most often the crime that the hard-boiled detective finally solves has nothing to do with the initial crime that he/she was hired to solve in the first place. Often, the initial conflict of the story is a smoke screen for some much more urgent and socially relevant wrong doing that needs to be revealed by the author and detective alike. Poe was examining the human psyche on both the individual and societal levels for the purpose of revealing the problematic nature of people being unable or unwilling to engage themselves into the darker parts of the human essence fully enough to be able to recognize the strange truths about why people perceive the world the way in which they do. The hard-boiled detective story enlists the same intellectual engagement of the reader that Poe strove for with *The Murders In The Rue Morgue*. Ross Macdonald, hard-

boiled author and critic, points out that “An unstable balance between reason and more primitive human qualities is characteristic of the detective story. For both writer and reader it is an imaginative arena where such conflicts can be worked out safely, under artistic controls” (11).

While the narrative impetus of the hard-boiled genre draws a distinct line back to Poe’s Dupin, many other American cultural influences riddle the complex nature of the hard-boiled detective. Pronzini points out, “Although the hard-boiled story as we know it today was born in the 1920s, hard-boiled writing did not spring fully fledged from that antisocial maelstrom of the years between the two world wars. It was a *mélange* of different styles and different genres, and its heroic figures can be traced back a hundred years earlier, to both the myth and the reality of the western frontier” (5). The drawing upon the rich history of American heroes who were rough around the edges and deterministically frontier loners such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie helps to inform the hard-boiled detective as a literary voice that is uniquely American. The hard-boiled voice, which developed out of this American heritage, is “more than a literary technique: it is an American response to life” (Brucoli ix). Out of this American voice came the dime novels of the late nineteenth century, which were direct precursors to the pulp magazines of the early twentieth century.

Early hard-boiled pioneers such as Dashiell Hammett and Carroll John Daly began publishing stories in the lucrative pulp magazine, *The Black Mask*. While the magazine was highly popular and lucrative, *The Black Mask* changed ownership and had multiple editors throughout its first few years in publication. The original owners, “*litterateur* H.L. Mencken and drama critic George Jean Nathan, despised their brainchild and refused to allow their names to be included on its masthead” (Nolan 19). Mencken and Nathan were the publishers

and editors responsible for *The Smart Set*, in which F. Scott Fitzgerald launched his career, so, unavoidably, the two thought their new enterprise to be below their standard literary quality. However, once the magazine became settled in the right hands, writers such as Hammett and Daly began shaping their specific brand of detective fiction into what would become the hard-boiled genre. In 1923, *The Black Mask* would publish the first Terry Mack story by Daly and the first Continental Op story by Hammett. Nolan notes that “In publishing these stories, *The Black Mask* had made history; a revolution was under way, and the detective genre would never be the same” (22). Out of the *Black Mask* writers would develop the benchmark writer of the hard-boiled tradition: Raymond Chandler.

Where Dashiell Hammett took a direct, simplified linguistic approach to his writing style in his Continental Op stories (which appeared in *The Black Mask*) that much resembled Ernest Hemingway’s early writing such as *In Our Time*, Raymond Chandler developed a style that would become the standard for hard-boiled writers even until the present day. Schwartz points out that “Contemporary crime writers continue to take their essential inspirations from Chandler’s vision of a society corrupted by the actions of large institutions, institutions motivated by the most banal and violent of self-interest” (3). Chandler developed a prose style out of the direct language of Hammett that was a “highly charged blend of laconic wit and imagistic poetry set to breakneck rhythms” (Macdonald 18). While the Chandlerian style is quite recognizable throughout his work and the works of hard-boiled writers such as Ross Macdonald and Robert Parker, what Chandler did was add a flair of high literature into the crime story formula. Writers such as Dashiell Hammett “gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons” and to large success (Chandler 530). Chandler stayed true to this distinguishing characteristic of the hard-boiled tradition;

however, he did so through a self-proclaimed artistic lens. Indeed, it was with Raymond Chandler that the hard-boiled genre became infused with literary allusions to help inform the narrativity of the stories and social commentaries therein. Phillip Marlow, according to Chandler, is the namesake of the author of “*Morte d’ Arthur*, Sir Thomas Mallory” (Schwartz 9). Ross Macdonald’s protagonist, Lew Archer, shares the same last name as Sam Spade’s partner in *The Maltese Falcon*. Also, Robert Parker’s Spenser is named after Renaissance writer and *Faerie Queen* author, Edmund Spenser.

With his mind focused squarely on the stylistics of the hard-boiled tradition, Chandler began writing stories that infused a literary agenda with the hyper-realism of urban crime and decay. Chandler helped to develop the hard-boiled genre into what can be marked by “experience, durability, isolation, a sense of justice, a warrior mentality, a populist individualism, a sense of ironic detachment, and a self-reliance that characterizes a mythic (often white-male) American self” (Berger 282). Hard-boiled detective fiction, through the Chandlerian influence, became more than just showing murder for what it really is, purposeful violence with the murderer often left with few other options than to kill. Indeed, “Crime writing as a form is particularly responsive to contemporary interests and anxieties” (Schwartz 2). Through this high-minded approach to one of the most popular genres of American fiction of the last one-hundred years, hard-boiled detective fiction has developed into a form of literature designed to address the inconsistencies and injustices of the cultural power-structures of American society. By taking on the heads of the dominant culture as being responsible for the majority of the crime and injustice within the particular city setting of which-ever hard-boiled author, the writers of the genre has set lofty aspirations of social commentary and serious considerations of where the root of America’s moralistic problems

lie. Furthermore, in staying true to the realism of the *Black Mask* writers, hard-boiled fiction develops landscapes in which individuals are “characterized by lines of division that invite even as they threaten, and the investigations and crusades that individuals undertake therein rarely lead to final, tidy resolutions” (Schwartz 4).

CRITICAL THEMES IN HARD-BOILED FICTION

Because hard-boiled detective fiction can be appropriately classified as genre fiction, there are certain recurring plot functions and narrative themes within any hard-boiled novel. This being so, the literary criticism that has been written about hard-boiled detective fiction contains several recurring critical themes as well. Literary criticism has treated hard-boiled fiction with rather fickle regard, with critics not having published much more than the occasional review before the mid 1960s. However, with the onset of the push to deconstruct the literary canon, certain types of fiction began to gain notice from the literary world and critical articles either directly addressing or referring to hard-boiled fiction began to appear in scholarly journals in both the United States and Europe. While literary critics during the developmental years of hard-boiled fiction (1920s-1940s) discarded the genre as being formulaic, full of gratuitous violence and thusly nothing more than sensationalism and empty entertainment, contemporary literary critics see, within the somewhat rigid structuring of the genre elements, literary value of the highest accord.

The umbrella theme of criticism that has been written about hard-boiled detective fiction is the idea that hard-boiled writers are commenting on the social and moral condition of their time and place. The concept that a major element of hard-boiled fiction is “social commentary” is most often attributed to the writings of Raymond Chandler (Davis 37). This element of the hard-boiled tradition as connected to the specific setting of the author is not only an important aspect of the narrative structure of the hard-boiled genre, it is also very closely connected to the structuring of the plot within the genre. Jay Hopler points out that hard-boiled fiction, “perhaps more than any other kind of literature, is tied inextricably to a specific time and place and that the cultural and literary contexts of the stories are as

important to an understanding and appreciation of the stories, as any discussion of plot and character” (461). This intimate connection between the conditions of the culture of the author and the development of the stories themselves also creates a very specific and close point of identification for the hard-boiled audience to their favorite hard-boiled stories and writers. The connection between the consumers of hard-boiled fiction and the social issues dealt with within the genre has been well documented in the critical realm, the criticism often commenting upon the level of loyalty shown towards the genre from its readership as being tied to an identification with the injustices and struggles of the detective figure (Smith 11). Jay Hopler suggests that hard-boiled detective fiction “was used by those who read it to (re)negotiate the rapidly changing world in which they found themselves” (461).

So close has the connection between the hard-boiled genre and its socio-historical setting been made that some critics even suggest that “The implication is that the same zeitgeist that motivated federal politicians also inspired these crime writers and that by studying the one we can better comprehend the other” (Bertoloni 188). When viewed within this particular critical light, the genre takes on value not appreciated by editors of the first hard-boiled publication *The Black Mask*. However important this particular thematic lens through which literary critics have viewed hard-boiled detective fiction is, the issue of historical naturalism is a rather broad thematic lens. The way in which most critics have written about hard-boiled detective fiction is to start with the general issue of the historical relevance of and then apply a more specific aspect of a particular social issue within the text as the focus of critical inquiry.

One of the recurring cultural issues within hard-boiled fiction that is discussed by literary critics is the usage of violence within the genre. Bethany Ogden, among many other

literary critics, view the usage of violence within the hard-boiled genre as stemming from the genre's literary ancestry to fiction that focused on the American western frontier. Ogden sees in the presentation of the hard-boiled detective the same type of representation of the wild and loosely moral setting of the modern city as the Western hero was a representation of the wild-west. Furthermore, it is within the presentation of seemingly gratuitous violence within the fiction that hero figure is able to dehumanize and attempt to control the chaos of their surroundings (71, 74). Violence within the hard-boiled genre has also been discussed by literary critics as an expression of the uncertainty and moral ambiguity within the dominant cultural settings of the modern era. The troping of moral ambiguity within society parallels social trends. Thusly, "the prominence of this theme in the modern hard-boiled detective novel sets the stage for ideas of violence and betrayal and invests the fiction with a sense of precariousness" (Moore 67).

Another facet of the hard-boiled genre, one that can be directly connected to the usage of violence as a genre-specific plot function, is the narrative detection of large social issues within the context of the story. The larger issue of what crime is really being detected is one that is a hallmark of the hard-boiled tradition. Hard-boiled authors utilize the specific crimes of specific people of specific places to serve as a window into the aspects of that specific culture that allows for those crimes to be contemplated and inevitably committed. Pronzini and Adrian point out that the root of this convention of the hard-boiled tradition stems from the influence of the crime-ridden roaring twenties on early hard-boiled authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Joseph Shaw (Pronzini 9). The widespread violence that stemmed out of Prohibition became the influence on early *Black Mask* contributors that allowed them to see how specific acts of violence were a direct result of a larger social issue.

The use of violence within the hard-boiled genre also serves as a commentary on the problem of isolation and disconnection from community and identity within the fluid and uncertain modern world. That the hard-boiled detective is both the recipient and enforcer of violent acts as a means through which to negotiate the world suggests that these stories “are essentially about the discovery that the comforting pieties of the past—belief in a benevolent universe, in progress, in romantic love—are illusions and that man is alone in a meaningless universe” (Cawelti 173). American cities during the early decades of the twentieth century were experiencing growth so rapid that city housing and other utility services could not keep up. The result of those conditions resulted in substandard housing; many times entire families had to live in a dilapidated one room apartment, and dangerous working conditions such as the clothing factories of New York City. Without the protection of building codes and labor laws, denizens of many U.S. cities experienced a life that consisted of working twelve to fifteen hour days in poor working conditions just to make enough money to pay rent on a hole in the wall apartment and barely keep their families from starving to death. Years of this type of existence, combined with the morbid understanding of mortality that came along with the absurd amount of lives lost in World War One, resulted in many citizens of U.S. cities during the 1920s and 1930s experiencing a loss of self-identity. Life was so desolate that any connection to a community became seemingly meaningless in the face of the struggles of everyday existence. Claire Gorrara points out that the hard-boiled writers of the time recognized this mass psychology and represented that perception of life through a “bleak tone, alienated characters, and a minimalist style . . . [hard-boiled writers] presented the post-war world as a trap or snare with individuals doomed to failure in their life projects and incapable of ordering events around them” (595). That the isolation of the individual

within the modern city is so intrinsically wrapped up in the presentation of society within the hard-boiled genre leads many literary critics to the conclusion that the hard-boiled story is dealing with the same problems of the modern era that T.S. Elliot and other canonical figures were dealing with (Christianson 137). The issue of isolation is often brought into the critical conversation through the evidence that most hard-boiled detectives are single. LeRoy Lad Panek points out that “With the exception of Nick Charles, almost all hard-boiled heroes of the twenties and thirties are unmarried, just as virtually all hard-boiled heroes of the seventies and eighties, except Spencer, are divorced” (163).

The issue of the familial status of the detective becomes important in the representation of both isolation within the modern city and the violent reality of the socially unjust world in which the hard-boiled detective must attempt (albeit almost always to little or no success) to re-establish order within the dominant social super-structure. As such, that the hard-boiled detective is usually single and that little if any information about the hard-boiled detective’s past is ever divulged to the audience becomes a recurrent focus of critical writing on the genre. Lewis Moore points out, “Except for occasional references to family members, earlier hard-boiled detectives have no distinct pasts, no three-dimensional image of growth and development, of nurturing resulting in who they are as adults. This withheld past, of course, objectifies them in ways that clarify the hard-boiled detective in his early stages, setting him apart from other detectives” (70). That the hard-boiled detective is most often a man of the immediate present within the historical context of the novel reflects the narrative attitude that the hard-boiled genre presents as a social commentary. That the detective is historically a male figure represents a reflection of the social atmosphere of the hard-boiled writer’s generation. A real life woman detective was virtually unheard of in the 1920s and

1930s; therefore, the fiction of the time reflected that in almost always having the detective figure be male. This suggests that “for writers who adopt this narrative mode explicitly set themselves up to expose the violence, disorder, and transgression of the world that they inhabit” (Gorrara 593).

Indeed, much of detective fiction prior to and since the advent of the popularity of hard-boiled detective fiction avoids a direct attempt to reflect the inconsistencies of morality, justice and self-identification within the modern world. The hard-boiled writers carve a distinct niche into the crime fiction genre by presenting “an urban jungle where social, political, and economic interests conspired to defeat the small man, where organized crime was routinely found pulling the strings of elected city officials, and where each murder was the tip of the iceberg, destroying the fragile illusion that the rule of law sustained the social order” (Gorrara 592). This presentation of culture and societal structures has become the foundation upon which most literary critics build their analysis of hard-boiled fiction and the literary relevance hard-boiled fiction has within the modern world, that modern world consisting of a growing attitude of exploitation of the marginalized sections of society for the advancement of large enterprise and obscene company profits. Lee Horsley asserts an interpretation of the literary place of hard-boiled fiction that is echoed throughout critical writings on the genre when he states that hard-boiled detective fiction is “a popular expression of modernist pessimism” (1).

As hard-boiled detective fiction has come to represent a literary reflection of the incongruities and existential questioning of existence within the modern world, it is only fitting that all of the many social issues of the past six decades have been aptly applied to the genre. For instance, gender studies has often been posited within the analysis of hard-boiled

texts. Literary theorists in the field of gender studies have used hard-boiled fiction as a means through which to examine the socio-cultural development of the American patriarchal system of the twentieth century, and how the women's liberation movement reacted to the historical development of the cultural disenfranchisement of the female perspective in American society. Also, as history rolls on, social issues that were once reserved for specific types of canonical literature are now becoming frequently applied interpretations of hard-boiled fiction, as well. An example of this is the social issue of race relations which was at one time critically reserved to certain types of protest literature. Presently, the issue of race is frequently applied to the hard-boiled writers of the present and the past, such as Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series and Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Darling*. While it is true that hard-boiled detective fiction is becoming the breeding ground for explication of developing literary theories and criticisms, it must also be kept in mind that it is a primary tenant of all hard-boiled fiction that the stories deal with the issues contemporary to the time and place of the writer. While many of these developing literary and cultural theories are being applied to the fiction contemporary to the theorists working in their respective fields, many of these new theories have been applied to hard-boiled fiction of the Hammett and Chandler era. The reason for this is that, like Poe before them, the early hard-boiled writers were not only commenting on the phenomena of their contemporary culture, but also how those cultural incongruities reflected the human condition and issues related to human nature that supersede the societal issues of a specific time and place. The literary tradition of addressing the larger, more esoteric aspects of the human condition as manifested in the cultural inconsistencies of a specific time and place continues with the contemporary voices of the hard-boiled genre. That is why contemporary literary critics are able to utilize

contemporary hard-boiled detective fiction to explicate their theories. Therefore, it is not only the literary critics who are opening up the socially interpretative possibilities through hard-boiled fiction, but it is foremost the hard-boiled authors who are taking on these new and developing social issues, as well. One of the most important authors pushing the potential of the genre is Walter Mosley.

INTRODUCTION TO ANALYSIS

It is into the tradition outlined in the previous two sections that Walter Mosley entered with his debut novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* in 1990. Set in 1948 Los Angeles, *Devil in a Blue Dress* follows the journey of a recently fired African American who moved to Los Angeles from Houston after his military service in World War Two. Easy Rawlins, the protagonist and detective figure, has recently been fired from Champion Aircraft, and is in desperate need of work so that he does not default on the mortgage payment of his house. Joppy Shag, a friend from Easy's past, introduces Easy to a dangerous looking white man who offers Easy enough money to cover two months mortgage just for looking for a mysterious white woman. The man, DeWitt Albright, points out to Easy that he cannot go looking for the woman, Daphne Monet, because she frequents illegal black clubs and since Albright is white, he needs someone black to go looking for her. Thus begins Easy Rawlins' transgressive journey through the most dangerous sections of the city, through Easy's own community and also to the office of the richest man in Los Angeles. While Easy searches for the mysterious Daphne Monet, he becomes the primary suspect for several murders he did not commit, and as he unravels the mystery of why so many people are after Daphne Monet and what her real identity is, he begins to unravel the social fabric of his racial identity. Ultimately, Easy escapes prosecution of the two murders and helps Daphne Monet escape death only to discover that the mysterious white woman is in fact a black woman who had been passing for white. The end of the novel finds Daphne being rejected by her lover (the richest man in Los Angeles, who also happened to be running for mayor of Los Angeles) because of her race. Also, the end of the novel leaves Easy with enough money to invest in real estate, and begin his life as a detective.

Mosley, like his hard-boiled precursors, sets his detective within the limits of a major American city. Like Chandler and Macdonald before him, Mosley unfolds his story in Los Angeles. However, Mosley, writing in the late 1980s, sets his story in 1948. This is a departure from other hard-boiled writers in that traditionally, hard-boiled writers set their fiction in their present time as the stories are direct reflections of the society of their specific time and place. Mosley also breaks the most unspoken but rigidly followed tradition of the hard-boiled genre: he makes his detective black. While authors such as Chester Himes (author of *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, 1945 and is widely considered to be the first African American hard-boiled writer) had already posited detective fiction from the African American perspective in the past, Mosley makes a conscious effort throughout the narrative and plot structures of *Devil in a Blue Dress* to ensure that the conflict between his narrative and the traditionally white narrative of hard-boiled fiction is as forefront of the readers' attention.

Because Mosley is writing within a genre that is driven by making commentaries on the social injustices of society and by shining a light on the grim reality of the lives of people within America, *Devil in a Blue Dress* does the same. However, Mosley does much more than simply make the faces of the characters black. By positing the traditional hard-boiled genre within the context of an African American perspective and by having the locus of action within the African American community with the detective being an African American, Mosley is shifting all of the critical applications of the literary genre from that of looking at how white dominant culture affects the members of the lower white class to how the dominant white culture affects the members of the disenfranchised and marginalized black community of America. Essentially, by racializing the context of the application of the

hard-boiled genre, Mosley is able to see into a facet of American culture that is based upon race and social injustices that are based upon racial identity. I argue that this is a realm of cultural critique that the hard-boiled genre had never before been able to penetrate.

By racializing the setting of the novel along with the effects of racial identification within individuals and culture, and through exploring the consequences of how dominant culture's system of racial identification problematizes any opportunities for racial equality, Mosley not only shows that the root of American society's history of injustice is an issue of race relations, he also investigates the impact of this systematic cultural segregation on members of both sides of the racial divide. In essence, Mosley is able to show that the big issue in dominant culture's inconsistencies of morality and justice is based upon racial identity, and in revealing that concept Mosley is thus commenting on the greatest injustice of American culture, which is the goal of the hard-boiled tradition. Therefore, in accomplishing this task of unmasking and investigating the deepest of social facades Mosley is able to fulfill the aim of the hard-boiled genre in a way not previously achieved.

IDENTITY AND SETTING

One very important aspect of Mosley's ability to create such a socially conscious and critical reporting of the state of cultural affairs within American society is his ability to utilize the conventions of the hard-boiled detective tradition to situate his voice and commentary within audiences' expectations. The primary set of expectations Mosley is capitalizing on are those of the detective novel audience. One of the most important conventions of the hard-boiled fiction tradition is the literal and metaphoric impact imposed onto the issue of setting within the novel. Dennis Porter explains the importance of the relationship between the detective story and its setting when he says, "Landscapes appear either as the source and extension of the crimes reported or as their antithesis. The background a writer chooses for his work and his perception of its relationship to the evil events narrated express a socially evaluating vision" (Porter 190). This type of reflective connection between the place and time of Mosley's post World War Two Los Angeles and the crimes being solved by Easy Rawlins plays a major role in the understanding of what is truly being investigated in *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

Indeed, the realism which, as Raymond Chandler points out in *The Simple Art of Murder*, pervades the hard-boiled tradition depends upon the fact that crime is committed in places by people. While this may sound a bit oversimplified, the idea is essential to the hard-boiled writer's ability to get at the root of what causes people to commit murder. It is the hard-boiled writer's recognition of the specificities of a criminal's surroundings, and consequently her/his social structure that enables the writer to illuminate a social commentary through plot structure. It is through this inextricable relationship between the setting of the crime and the crime itself that the hard-boiled writer is able to begin to explain

the criminal and the necessity for the crime to be committed. Indeed, the crimes committed in hard-boiled novels are the crimes that must be committed as they are the last resorts of characters and places that are accurate representations of the author's world. Chandler points out that it is in Hammett that crime stories first take on the role of reporting crime as it happened in the real streets of America's unredeemable cities. Chandler says, "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish" (530). It is through this pursuit of the hard-boiled writer that the setting of a hard-boiled novel becomes a character in itself.

If setting can be viewed as a character within hard-boiled novels, then it is most certainly a central character. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, that character is the Los Angeles of 1948. Furthermore, this city is an extremely complex character that is simultaneously just and unjust. Indeed, Mosley's Los Angeles suffers from a severe case of multiple personalities that are forever at odds with each other. Through the detective figure, Easy Rawlins, the two opposing sides of the Los Angeles character are thoroughly explored and reported on. The dichotomy of Los Angeles is shown to be separated by a racial, and resultantly economic division. More specifically, Mosley shows a Los Angeles that has a black and a white identity. When addressing this issue of a split identity for the city, the initial impulse is to suggest that Mosley is presenting two different cities, such as a white Los Angeles and a black Los Angeles, both of which operate as completely and mutually exclusive of the other. This is a mistake in that if there were two separate cities being addressed in the story, then the major conflict of the story would not be relevant. Rather, through a viewing of Mosley's Los Angeles as a singular character that has two opposing sides one can begin to untangle

exactly what mystery is trying to be solved by both Rawlins and Mosley. Mosley, much like Chandler and MacDonald, uses the problematic nature of a culturally splintered city to address the myriad of ramifications that this type of social structure has upon its inhabitants. However, it is in the specific details of how Mosley sees the segmentation of Los Angeles that sets him apart from his hard-boiled predecessors.

While Chandler and his literary descendants focused on a segmentation of Los Angeles based upon levels of wealth and class, Mosley goes beyond this presentation of the city and adds the dimension of race to the equation. As such, Mosley's Los Angeles becomes a landscape of obvious and subtle landmarks that highlight a socio-economic and racial line of division within the city's streets and neighborhoods. While Chandler's Phillip Marlowe can tell if a suspect is out of place by the way she/he is dressed in relation to the neighborhood, Mosley's Easy Rawlins knows when someone is out of place based upon the color of the person's skin. This may seem but a minor detail in difference between the two interpretations of city and its culture, but the factor of race opens up an entirely new world for social commentary not available to the figureheads of the hard-boiled tradition. Through this lens, the convention of treating setting as a character becomes even more important than it would usually be in a hard-boiled novel. Consequently, the novel's setting reflects how Mosley has raised the bar for critical possibilities in the hard-boiled detective novel.

Right away, Mosley begins acquainting the audience with the character of Los Angeles. The first scene of the book takes place in a location that is very much specific to one side of the racial division of Los Angeles circa 1948. Joppy's bar is not the type of establishment that has a usually multi-racial clientele. The customers of Joppy's are mostly African American and are mostly from the same neighborhood as the bar. Mosley describes

Joppy's bar as "a small bar on the second floor of a butchers' warehouse. His only usual customers were the Negro butchers . . . Joppy's windows were so dingy that you couldn't see out onto 103rd Street . . . Joppy had six tables and seven high stools at his bar. A busy night never saw all his chairs full but I was jealous of his success" (Mosley 3,4,8). By introducing three of the main players in the overall plot of the novel in the specific location of Joppy's Bar, Mosley is very poignantly setting a tone for the rest of the novel. That the introduction to Easy (the detective), Joppy (the traitor) and De Witt Albright (the villain) takes place in a locale that is specific to the African American side of Los Angeles' racial divide shows that the novel is going to go down slightly different mean streets than Mosley's predecessors rarely, if ever, did. Furthermore, this introduction to Los Angeles as a character shows that Mosley's L.A. has the potential to be a much more complex character that it has been allowed to be in past hard-boiled novels.

As setting is an integral part of the hard-boiled tradition, so it is with *Devil in a Blue Dress*; however, the role that setting plays in *Devil* is crucial to the plot in a unique way. The setting of a detective novel is crucial to explaining the novel's primary crime in that the setting reflects the circumstances of the crime. Dennis Porter explains, "In the detective novel, at least, you can judge a place by its relation to crime. In other words, if landscape in the sense I am giving it here is so central to stories involving crimes, it is because a relationship is affirmed between site and event" (190). This relationship certainly holds true for Mosley; however, the uniqueness of the setting in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is that the setting reflects the side of the city that most hard-boiled writers are unable to enter, the African American side. This limitation of setting exploration is mirrored in the very necessity for Easy's services as a detective. DeWitt Albright is unable to track down Daphne Monet

because she is suspected to be visiting the side of town that he is not able to enter into, the African American side. Thus, a new dimension to the character of Los Angeles opens up. If setting is intrinsically intertwined with the crimes of the story, then the opening setting of *Devil In a Blue Dress* reflects a crime of racial transgression. Someone has been crossing that dividing line between the personalities of L.A. and now someone from the other side of the street is needed to go looking for her.

The absolute familiarity of characters with their specific setting is shown throughout the entire novel. The identification of self along with one's surroundings is developed through Mosley's ability to closely connect the action of the plot to race-specific settings, thus creating a narrativity centered on race. An example of this would be John's speakeasy in Watts: "John's place was a speakeasy before they repealed the Prohibition . . . So John kept paying off the police and running an illegal nightclub through the back door of a little market at the corner of Central Avenue and Eighty-ninth Place" (Mosley 24). That Mosley identifies John's as a racially specific establishment is very important to the plot; however, it is how Mosley shows Easy's sense of identification and community with the speakeasy that Mosley is able to truly identify the setting of the bar with the identity of the characters within the bar. Easy notes that

There must've been over two hundred regulars that frequented John's and we all knew each other, so it made a good place for business as well as a good time. Alphonso Jenkins was there in his black silk shirt and his foot-high pompadour hairdo. Jockamo Johanas was there too . . . Skinny Rita Cook was there with five men hanging around her table. I never did understand how an ugly, skinny woman like that attracted so many men. (Mosley 29-30)

In this passage, Easy recognizes that he belongs in John's by identifying with the people who share the same identification with the location as he does. There is some common experience

at work amongst the patrons of John's. While many of the regulars share a history that dates back to their former community in Houston, it is the specific experience of being black and being relegated to the same racially-specific places, no matter where they came from, that unites Easy with the rest of the crowd. While he may not know (or even like) everyone else in John's, he shares the common experience of his race with everyone else; the setting reflects and affirms this experience of identity.

Throughout the novel, Mosley also uses setting to familiarize characters with where they don't belong. Oftentimes Mosley has characters confronted with the reality of their identity as dependent upon their skin color by placing characters in situations where they obviously do not match up with the setting. While identifying characters with setting is very easily achieved by placing them in settings that directly reflect their racialized identity, showing identity through setting is also (if not more) effective when juxtaposing characters with settings that do not reflect their racialized identity. Indeed, the experience of realizing that you are who you are due to the color of your skin is difficult to ignore when your surroundings make it very clear that you are not like the people around you. Mosley utilizes the duality of the racial division of Los Angeles to show how no person within the setting is free from experiencing this identification through skin color in relation to where he/she does not belong.

Mosley uses chapter 8 of *Devil in a Blue Dress* to explicate just how powerful an experience this type of racial self-identification can be. Mosley is trying to remind his readers that there are two specific sides to the city, and that there are rules for anyone who crosses over from their side into the other. Easy explains how this acceptable level of transgression works when he explains, "I was unhappy about going to meet Mr. Albright

because I wasn't used to going into white communities, like Santa Monica, to conduct business. The plant I worked at, Champion Aircraft, was in Santa Monica but I'd drive out there in the daytime, do my work, and go home" (Mosley 51). This very simple statement speaks volumes as to what role African Americans are allowed to play outside of their own side of the racially divided city. Simply put, as long as they are performing some task for and under the watchful eye of white people, blacks are allowed to transgress the racial line. Easy states the absoluteness of this system when he says, "I never loitered anywhere except among my own people, in my own neighborhood" (Mosley 51).

This scene further shows how severe the repercussions of unacceptable transgression can be for those who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The scene deteriorates into a situation where Easy is confronted by several adolescent white males because he was simply being polite and returning conversation (however reluctantly) with a white teenage girl who is with the boys. This scene is an excellent example of how restricting these social customs are. Easy, who is a very proud man, finds himself having to kow-tow to these blatantly racist adolescents because he fears what he is capable of doing to the young boys. Furthermore, Easy is more fearful of the legal repercussions if he were to defend himself against an attack from the white boys. This is a difficult situation for Easy as he knows he is capable of handling the situation with the violence being brought to it by the white males.

I could have broken his neck. I could have put out his eyes or broken all of his fingers. But instead I held my breath. Five of his friends were headed toward us. While they were coming on, not yet organized or together, I could have killed all of them too. What did they know about violence? I could have crushed their windpipes one by one and they couldn't have done a thing to stop me. They couldn't even run fast enough to escape me. I was still a killing machine...By then I knew I had to get out of there before there two or three dead bodies, one of them being mine. (Mosley

53-4)

Easy finds himself in a no-win situation. If he is unable to talk his way out of the situation, in which his only malfeasance is disobeying the social customs of stepping outside of his allowed racial setting, then he knows that he will wind up dead or in jail. The situation is so severe that it is only alleviated by the presence of a powerful white figure to step in and disrupt the young white attackers. Even though Easy is more than capable of handling the situation physically, it takes the entrance of DeWitt Albright to defuse it. Although the adolescent boys respond to Albright's passive aggressive use of violence to resolve the situation, the boys are also responding to a manifestation of racial power structures. That Albright is a white man and that Albright announces that Easy is there with him validate Easy's presence outside of his own racial space as acceptable. However, Albright complicates the situation by pointing a loaded gun at the boys, thus eliciting the possibility of the police being called to the scene.

As Liam Kennedy outlines, this scene is a reversal of the view of blackness in detective fiction as being "Sin, lack of reason, and absence of discipline" which not only confronts "the white detective but are internalized using race as a topos around which images and discourses are organized. In its most simplified form this appears as a juxtaposition of primitive urge and civilizing consciousness, but racial signs are everywhere present" (Kennedy 226). In this traditional look at the way racialization occurs in detective fiction, Easy should be the character in the scene who loses control and uses violence to resolve the situation. As it occurs, it is Albright, the white antagonist, who uses a lack of reason and absence of discipline to handle the situation.

While Easy's reaction could be viewed as a repression of his own "blackness" as

blackness traditionally occurs in detective fiction, Easy's reaction, rather, is entirely dependent upon the fact that he is black and is in a white neighborhood after working hours. It is Easy's understanding of racial and social conventions that allows him to know that he is somewhere he is not supposed to be, thus allowing him the self-control to keep himself from killing the would be attackers. In other words, it is Easy's racial "otherness" and his socialized reaction to being black and in a white neighborhood after safe hours that provides the presence of reason and discipline necessary to remain calm during the situation. While Easy's transgression into the white side of Los Angeles after socially acceptable hours effectively "others" him, the reverse situation of a white person entering the black side of Los Angeles would result in the "othering" of the white character, but not with the same possibly violent consequences. The double standard therein reveals how no matter what the situation may be, members of the dominant culture are always privileged, which is only a small part of the inconsistencies of justice as based upon race within Mosley's Los Angeles. In showing this manifestation of social behavior as per race and place, Mosley is beginning to turn the conventions of the hard-boiled detective upside down.

Consequently, another way which Mosley unravels the conscious racial perspective of the hard-boiled detective novel is through his employing the same technique he uses to locate a black character within her/his own racial identity through setting and applying that situational epiphany to white characters as well. In several instances throughout *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley places white characters in situations where they are the ones crossing the racial divide in a way that is outside of the social custom of 1948 Los Angeles.

There are many instances in which white characters find themselves out of place and transgressing their racial space. The very premise for the necessity to hire Easy as a

detective is evidence to this circumstance within the social strata of Mosley's 1948 Los Angeles; however, Mosley also reveals the advantage of being a member of the ruling racial class of the city in these situations. In every situation where white characters transgress their racial setting, they are at least tolerated. For instance, when Richard McGee (whose murder Easy later finds himself trying to solve his way out of) appears inebriated outside of John's, he is simply ignored and overlooked. If the situation were to be reversed, the consequences would have been much more severe. Easy puts it well when he says, "I knew that a patrol would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered" (Mosley76). That a white person appearing drunk and disorderly on the black side of Los Angeles is something that must be overlooked, but that an African American simply running would be grounds for immediate arrest speaks volumes to the privileges of being part of the ruling class of the city.

By showing how this power dynamic works from the perspective of the black side of the Los Angeles character, Mosley is revealing an important part of the city's social structure that was previously inaccessible to hard-boiled writers. As Kennedy states, "this devaluation is also important as a sign of the white detective's dependency upon racial others. Race functions as a source of psychological and social fantasy for many hard-boiled writers, with blackness often signifying an otherness within the white subject which requires control and mastery" (226). In contrast to this use of race and setting, Mosley is bringing that previously othered subject to the forefront, thusly showing how this historical process of othering affects the black population of Los Angeles. This process of racial identification through setting also works to identify characters upon who are being transgressed. That is, the presence of a white man entering Joppy's bar on the first page of the novel reveals the racial identity of Easy as well as something of the nature of the central crime of the story.

The first sentence of the book makes very clear that the nature of the crime to be investigated will deal with race in relation to setting; “I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy’s bar” (Mosley 1). Easy’s surprise stems from the fact that Joppy’s is an African American run and frequented bar that lies well within the black side of Los Angeles. Therefore, the presence of a white man in this very safe and securely black location reflects not only the racial identity of De Witt Albright, but Easy as well. That Easy immediately identifies Albright as a white man forces the recognition of both Easy and the reader that Easy is an African American. Easy confirms this idea when he narrates, “When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948” (Mosley 1).

This first passage sets up the audience expectations in several ways. First, this immediate situating of the characters in a racially divided world introduces the foreshadowing of a crime based upon racial transgression. The first sentence of the book is a declaration of racial transgression; therefore, it would follow that the central mystery of the book will deal with some aspect of racial transgression. Furthermore, Mosley indicates that he will be approaching the hard-boiled story from the “other” side of the racial divide. That is, by setting the first scene of the novel in the location and first person narrative voice of the African American side of Los Angeles, Mosley is showing that he will be dealing with the traditional hard-boiled story from the perspective of the African American experience.

While this is a departure from the traditional narrative voice of the hard-boiled detective novel, it may seem like a departure no more significant than setting the novel in rural Iowa. However, if the relationship between the setting of a crime and the crime itself is an inherent reflection upon those who occupy the setting, then Mosley is not only taking his

audience down a different mean street than any of his predecessors; he is also straddling the line that divides Chandler's Los Angeles and Easy Rawlins' Los Angeles. By occupying both spaces (the white and the black), Mosley is accomplishing more than simply changing the setting, he is changing the very nature of the crimes being explored and the audience's understanding of the consequences therein.

Early hard-boiled writers broke down the mythology of crime by showing that "Violent acts [were] no longer aberrations or isolated events but, as the frequency of beatings and shoot-outs suggests, endemic" (Porter 197). Therefore, by constantly transgressing the racial division of Los Angeles, Mosley irreversibly connects the crimes committed and the social culpability of both sides of the Los Angeles of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The audience is introduced to the first-hand experience of Mosley's black Los Angeles and also forced to view the endemic nature of the crimes in Easy's half of Los Angeles as being inextricably tangled up with the crimes and social mores of DeWitt Albright's Los Angeles. This coalescing of the city's two sides not only takes readers of the hard-boiled tradition to a setting (both social and personal) never before fully explored by the tradition, it also begins to break down the mythology of African American culture as being the "other" that early writers of the hard-boiled tradition so relied upon.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

In 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois published an essay that introduced his social and literary theory of double consciousness. Du Bois would go on to further explore this theory, its applications and its consequences on African Americans in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Searching to explicate the socio-cultural situatedness of blacks in culturally white dominated America, Du Bois turned to American Transcendentalism and then contemporary psychology to help develop his rhetoric. Bruce Dickson Jr. points out that the Transcendentalist leanings of his theory come from Emerson while the psychology aspects of double consciousness can be found in the work of Du Bois' Harvard mentor, William James (300,303). While Du Bois' conception of double consciousness may not have been an entirely new idea, his application of the term to the spiritual, psychological and social state of African Americans was both unique and groundbreaking.

In addressing the issue of the black existence in turn-of-the-century America, Du Bois first recognized that dominant culture saw his existence as a problem. Du Bois explains this strange experience as being a man who lives in a

world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

This perception of existence through a veil exemplifies the African Americans' necessity to recognize the mores of the dominant culture (white America), and also the African Americans' necessity to recognize that this culture, along with all of the opportunities and privileges of this lifestyle have been inaccessible to them. This raises the question of how

one who is forced to recognize and accept their disenfranchisement can ever develop a fully actualized identity of self. This desire to “make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” is the issue that Du Bois addresses with his concept of double consciousness (3).

To a certain degree, this issue of race is the same question Walter Mosley tackles with his version of the hard-boiled detective; however, whereas Du Bois positioned his theory of double consciousness as a negative and disenfranchising social problem, Mosley is utilizing a similar system of individual duality to express a liberation. By manipulating a duality of self, Easy Rawlins is able to use his race as an advantage.

Easy Rawlins, an African American veteran of World War Two and a part of the black migration from the American south to California and northern states in search of work post-war, exemplifies many of the characteristics that Du Bois claimed to be problematic in African American existence. Therefore, by making Easy the racial “other” of what the role as detective has historically been, Mosley complicates Rawlins’ identification as a hard-boiled detective. The hard-boiled detective has traditionally been a white character with white clients, suspects and criminals. That this formula has traditionally been that of the white man and traditionally Anglo-Christian values poses the problem that “such notions of personal liberty and pursuits of happiness, spawned by that overarching creed, have historically bypassed and marginalized people of color” (Coale 173). The issue of Easy as embodying the historically “othered” racial identity of the hard-boiled detective novel complicates not only the development of Easy as a character, but also the development of the traditional hard-boiled plot of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

The impact of duality of self on the novel is most evident in how it both ties Easy to and separates Easy from the hard-boiled tradition. For instance, the reason for Easy's hiring by DeWitt Albright is for the exact reason that Easy is black. Therefore, the premise for the entire narrative is based upon the assertion that Easy has access to those parts of the city that Albright (being that not only is he white but also that he "wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with . . . bone shoes over flashing white socks" metaphorically suggesting Albright as the epitome of the white ruling class) cannot enter Easy's world (Mosley 1). Furthermore, it is the detective's duty to enter into those places of moral corruption and reveal the immoralities of the powerful and social elite. Larry Landrum states, "hard-boiled detective fiction began to deal with the feelings and reactions of men and women who were surviving without the benefit of inheritance" (11). This aspect of the tradition holds true for *Devil in a Blue Dress* in that Easy is dealing with the feelings of one of the most dispossessed social groups of American history, the African American community. However, *Devil* departs from the Chandlerian tradition in that Easy himself is a member of that marginalized community and it is often his own struggles and feelings that are being dealt with throughout the novel. Phillip Marlowe and his literary children escape marginalization in that they operate as completely autonomous creatures within the corrupted and unbalanced society around them. This departure is important in that it allows an insight into the social mores and the emotional and pragmatic impact that the dominant power structure of the city has on the dispossessed group in a way that was not possible with a Marlowe or Spade.

Easy's identification as a member of the marginalized section of society problematizes the playing out of the traditional hard-boiled plot in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. While it is true that the hard-boiled detective's job is to venture into the corruption and mean

streets of their city, the detective's transgression is usually of a moral nature, such as Phillip Marlowe investigating an illegal casino in *The Big Sleep*, as opposed to a racial transgression. Helen Lock points out that "The detective figure in the hard-boiled story, then, operates in a frequently murky borderland between good and evil, where he can never be sure at any given time which is which. He is thus an essentially liminal figure, with a foot in both camps. . ."

(78). While this description seemingly fits the Du Boisian definition of double consciousness, there are a few key differentiating factors in the context of Easy versus the traditional hard-boiled detective. Easy is in the employ of DeWitt Albright and later on Todd Carter because of his access into the meaner streets of Los Angeles, but he is not as firmly planted in both ends of the social strata as the hard-boiled detective usually is. Whereas Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade are employed as detectives because of their ability to transgress the moral scenery of the city so as to "rejuvenate a transcendent system" of morality, Easy's role as detective has him facing much more severe consequences for his actions than the traditional detective (Wesley 111). For Easy the issue of living by a moral code that supercedes law is not an option. While Easy "would like to be a conventionally moral man, his recognition of the problematic nature of 'law' as it is applied to black citizens separates him from his white counterpart" (Wesley 112). While the Du Boisian version of double consciousness results in African Americans being culturally circumscribed no matter where they may be, Easy is using his mastery of his own duality to elevate himself above the restrictions of either side of his duality.

Herein lies the main point of departure of Easy Rawlins from the traditional hard-boiled detective as a direct result of Easy's duality. The theme of being able to transgress racial lines within the city and social networks but always being alertly aware of his own

situatedness in a situation as an African American comes up multiple times within *Devil In a Blue Dress*. For instance, the Easy's recognition that he is black in a dominantly white culture sometimes flusters him against his will. That he has to view the world through the lens of being African American so deeply affects his ability to immediately assimilate into settings where he is the racial other:

"Excuse me."

The voice made me jump.

"What?" My voice strained and cracked as I turned to see the small man...

"I'm looking for, um. . .ah. . .," I stuttered. I forgot the name. I had to squint so that the room wouldn't start spinning. It was a habit I developed in Texas when I was a boy. Sometimes, when a white man of authority would catch me off guard, I'd empty my head of everything so I was unable to say anything. "The less you know, the less trouble you find," they used to say. I hated myself for it but I also hated white people, and colored people too, for making me that way. . .I would have liked to rip the skin from his face like I'd done once to another white boy. . .I was ready to leave. That little white man had convinced me that I was in the wrong place. I was ready to go back home. I could find my money another way. (Mosley 13-14)

In the previous scene, Easy is exactly where he is supposed to be: meeting Albright at his office after business hours. However, Easy is so conditioned to recognize that he is a black man in a white setting that he is almost talked into believing that he is truly in the wrong place. Where the white hard-boiled detective would employ some guise to trick their way past Easy's situation, Easy's duality directs his behavior. While the white hard-boiled detective is able to become invisible through a vacillation between moral codes and behaviors depending upon the given situation, Easy's invisibility manifests itself in a different way. The complexity of Easy's inescapable realization of his own two-ness forces Easy to

[find] himself haunting an additional borderland, that where the interests of his own community and those of the broader, predominantly white, society uneasily co-exist and frequently collide. Easy Rawlins, is in fact characterized and motivated most centrally by his experience of duality and by a resultant ambiguity of attitude toward

the cases he investigates, often reluctantly. (Lock 78)

Where this collision of the interests of his own community and the interests of his employers (or the powerful within the white power structure) may seemingly place Easy at a disadvantage, it is Easy's duality that not only makes him an effective detective, but that also "facilitates the functional invisibility that he exploits to his advantage, making his detective work possible" (Lock 79). Easy's invisibility, born out of his necessity as a detective to consciously play both sides of the racial divide, thus becomes his vehicle to operate freely within and outside of the racially divided social structure of Los Angeles. Easy's recognition that he is seen as a black man by both the black and white communities allows him to manipulate situations in either setting thus allowing him to operate as a detective in a way that takes advantage of his identity as a black man in either setting. Resultantly, this process allows Easy to live on a level that supercedes his racial identity in that his blackness (or veil) becomes his weapon against the racially segregated power structure of Los Angeles. As Easy becomes more comfortable with his situation, he becomes more adept at wielding his identity in the most extreme of circumstances. Easy is able to talk his way into or out of almost any situation such as when Easy talks his way in to see the wealthiest man in Los Angeles:

"May I ask what is the nature of your request?"

"Sure you can, but I don't think your boss wants me to talk to the help about his business."

"I assure you, sir," she said, barely holding in her anger, "that whatever you have to say to Mr. Baxter is safe with me. Also, he cannot see you and I am the only person with whom you may speak."

"Naw." . . She slammed the pad down hard enough to startle her helper and disappeared through the back door again. . . "Mr. Baxter?" I rose and grabbed his extended hand.

"Not very smart talking about Mr. Carter's business to the front desk," Baxter said the moment we were both seated.

“I don’t wanna hear it, man.” . . . “I said I don’t wanna hear it, Mr. Baxter. It’s just too much goin’ on fo’ me t’be worried ‘bout what you think ain’t right. Ya see, if you’d let that woman out there know that she should let me talk to you, then”. . .

“I don’t know who you think you are, Rawlins. Important men don’t even barge in on Mr. Carter. You’re lucky that I took the time to see you.”

“You mean the poor nigger lucky the foreman take out the time t’curse’im, huh?” (Mosley 110-113)

Easy recognizes that the setting in Carter’s lobby is very racially charged. In post World War Two Los Angeles, black people like Easy did not even attempt to hold meetings with powerful white men like Todd Carter. However, Easy also recognizes the uneasiness of the secretary’s responses to his request to speak with Baxter; therefore, Easy knows that if he pushes her expectations of him to behave like an unruly black man and potentially cause an unwanted scene, the secretary will most likely allow him to see Mr. Baxter so as to avoid the unwanted disturbance. In anticipation of this circumstance, Easy slips into his racially identifiable vernacular so as to coax the situation along. This manipulation of both the secretary and Mr. Baxter exemplifies how Easy is able to assess the situation and take advantage of the situation based upon his duality. That Easy is able to recognize and the fulfill the two white characters’ expectations of him as a black man in order to eventually get exactly what he wants shows how his sense of two-ness is allowing him to operate on a level above and in harmony with his racial identity.

Easy surprises even himself in obtaining an audience with Carter; however, the meeting itself does not progress without Easy recognizing that the impressiveness of the feat is because Carter is rich and white and Easy is black.

Talking with Mr. Todd Carter was a strange experience. I mean, there I was, a Negro in a rich white man’s office, talking to him like we were best friends—even closer. I could tell that he didn’t have the fear of contempt that most white people showed when they dealt with me. . . Mr. Todd Carter was so rich that he didn’t even consider me in human terms. He could tell me anything. I could have been a prized dog that

he knelt to and hugged when he felt low. It was the worst kind of racism. The fact that he didn't even recognize our difference showed that he didn't care one damn about me. (Mosley 119)

That Easy can make this observation coldly and without any harmful emotional reaction suggests that he is unaffected by the othering that Carter is inflicting upon him. In fact, this type of observation becomes more clear and frequent to Easy as he becomes comfortable wielding his two-ness as a tool of detection. This reality of being considered sub-human is something that the white hard-boiled detective does not have to deal with. For example, while Marlowe may be considered by some of his clientele to be low class, he is still considered to be a person. However, if the goal of the white hard-boiled detective is to expose the corruption of “power, and expectations behind social facades,” then the achieved goal reveals corruption in light of the white detective’s moral code (Landrum 11). As the hard-boiled detective novel is a comment on the culture it is investigating through plot, then race, in traditional texts, becomes factored out of the equation. However, in Mosley’s novel Easy’s blackness to Carter, makes him not important enough to even be considered as human. Furthermore, since the traditional hard-boiled detective is of the same racial community as those who do not consider blackness a human quality, then corruption based upon racism is not an issue that is able to be explored by the white detective and author. In this sense, then it is through Easy’s sense of two-ness that both Easy and Mosley are able to elevate the critical commentary on the corruption of the power structure of the novel’s setting.

One of the determining factors of DuBois’ theory of double-consciousness is African American citizens always feel their blackness when in the presence of white people, and also when in the presence of other black people. Thus, it follows that because Easy is able to

manipulate situations in which he is regarded as the racial other, he is also able to manipulate situations in which he is regarded as simply another; that is, another African American amongst African Americans. It is Easy's ability to access the African American section of society that makes him sought after for employment as a detective; that is, it is Easy's ability to use his awareness of his own sense of two-ness that allows him to be an effective detective within his own community. However, Easy utilizes his understanding of his own duality in a way that creates a situation in which he is able to rise above his racial classification by manipulating other's expectations of himself as based upon markers of racial identity. This is opposed to the Du Boisian version of double consciousness in which African Americans are restricted by the very same racializing markers that Easy uses to his advantage. Simply being able to get in the door of places where the wealthy and powerful cannot does not a detective make. Traditional hard-boiled detectives are in as much danger when working the underbelly of a city as they are when working the wealthy and powerful. The same is true for Easy. The major difference between Easy's situation and the situation of the traditional hard-boiled detective, such as Phillip Marlowe casing an illegal casino, is that Easy is known and liked amongst the people he is trying to manipulate. While Marlowe has the luxury of remaining somewhat anonymous in many situations, Easy is trying to infiltrate his own community. This layer to the detective scenario is again directly related to Easy's heightened sense of his own racial identity.

The level of complexity of Easy's professional identity is, as previously mentioned, a distortion of the traditional hard-boiled detective. However, the reason that "Easy Rawlins is successful as a detective is precisely that he is able to exploit the fundamental ambiguities of his universe so that they work to his advantage: they enable him to function invisibly, and

thus undetected” (Lock 82). Easy’s direct connection to and sought after association with the black community does serve as a cover for him when operating within his own community. It is this invisibility, however skewed it may be, that is a trademark characteristic of the traditional hard-boiled detective. Easy admits as much when he reflects on his experience of trying to track down Frank Green: “I felt a secret glee when I went into a bar and ordered a beer with money someone else had paid me. . .Nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible; people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was and illusion of me, something that wasn’t real. . .It was those two days more than any other time that made me a detective” (Mosley 128).

However useful Easy’s ability to create an invisibility around his role as a detective within his own community may be, it does not come naturally to Easy at first. It is quite obvious to several people the night Easy first inquires about Daphne at John’s that Easy is more than just passively curious about the white girl who is “worth lookin’ at” (Mosley 35). Easy is so obvious about his attempt at mingling with the people he knows while trying to get information out of them that Coretta James charges Easy for information about who Daphne is and Junior Fornay eventually calls Easy in the middle of the night a few days later. While Easy’s approach isn’t quite the textbook way to begin his job as a detective, Easy does grow into the role quite quickly. Easy finds his stride when the time comes for him to track down the gangster, Frank Green. Easy’s conversation with Ernest the barber shows that Easy now realizes how to infiltrate the information ring necessary to find Frank: “We shot the breeze while the men threw their bones and Zeppo twisted and jerked in the window. . .I wanted to find out the whereabouts of Frank Green but it had to come up in normal conversation. Most barbers know all the important information in the community. That’s why I was getting my

hair cut” (Mosley 131). Someone outside of the community might make the mistake of inquiring straight out for Frank Green. As a member of black community, Easy knows that that could be a fatal misstep. Easy comments, “During the next day I went to the bars that Frank sold hijack to and to the alley crap games that he frequented. I never brought up Frank’s name though. Frank was skitterish, like all gangsters, and if he felt that people were talking about him he got nervous; if Frank was nervous he might have killed me before I had time to make my pitch” (Mosley 128).

That Easy belongs to the African American community, a community that has preexisting stereotypes imposed upon its denizens, means that Easy’s invisibility as a detective is two fold. Easy is able to manipulate his way past the gatekeepers of the city’s most elite ends of town because in their eyes he can’t be anything more than a harmless animal to be kicked around for the rich white people’s amusement. Furthermore, Easy is able to manipulate his way into vital information about his cases because he’s (at most) just Easy, or at the very least he’s another black man in the black section of town and there’s nothing unusual about that. However, the reality of both situations is that Easy is the most dangerous person to both ends of the social strata in that he has the ability to divine the ugly truths about the injustices of the social structure and how that structure is maintained. More or less, because of Easy’s invisibility, he is a threat to the way of life that perpetuates the cycle of dispossession, disenfranchisement and discrimination based upon capital gain and racial prejudice. Therefore, Easy’s two-ness allows him not only double the access to the society which is being examined by Mosley, but Easy is also in danger of being killed by both ends of the social and racial spectrum in that he poses a threat to both ways of life. This duality creates a unique space in which Easy is able to simultaneously connect and

disconnect from his professional identity and his personal identity while remaining on the job. Easy doesn't just know who these people are by name and face, Easy knows their struggle, their pain, their joys and their histories. Easy knows the stories behind descriptions of the people in his community, such as the story behind Joppy and his overprotective attachment to his marble bar:

Joppy was still at the bar, leaning over his big stomach and buffing the marble. His uncle, a bar owner himself, had died in Houston ten years earlier, just when Joppy decided to give up the ring. Joppy went all the way back home to get that marble bar. The butchers had already agreed to let him open his business upstairs and all he could think of was getting that marble top. Joppy was a superstitious man. He thought that the only way he could be successful was with a piece of his uncle, already a proven success, on the job with him. Every extra moment Joppy had was spent cleaning and buffing his bar top. He didn't allow roughhousing near the bar and if you ever dropped a pitcher or something heavy he'd be there in a second, looking for chips. (Mosley 7)

Because Easy understands the connection that Joppy has to the marble top, he is later able to get vital information about the case from Joppy by threatening to destroy the marble top.

Although Easy's duality allows him access to a more effective and critically relevant level of detection, it comes at a cost. While Easy is able to step into the role of detective and is also able to manipulate situations to his advantage due to his racial identity, all of the negative aspects of Easy's racial identity are still very much in place. To be blunt, Easy is still a black man in a predominantly white social power structure, and all of the aforementioned stereotypes of that racial identity follow Easy in a way that even his detective's invisibility cannot hide him from. The primary motivations for Easy's embracing of the detective role are based entirely on his recognition of his racial identity and the role of that identity in the white power structure. His initial decision to take on the role of detective is so that he may maintain ownership of his home, which makes him feel like an equal with

those within the white power structure. While the ownership of his home does not shelter him from the onslaught of the racialized world in which he lives, it does, however, empower Easy to defy and attempt to overcome those prejudices within the dominant culture whenever he can. Furthermore, once Easy becomes embedded deeply within the investigation, he finds himself excelling at the role of detective so as to avoid being framed by the police for murders he didn't commit. It is easier for the police to blame the crimes on some random black man that no one in the white community will care about than to have no one to charge for the murders.

With Easy's racial identity in the forefront of his conscious decisions at all times, he then is aware of when his two-ness is working for as well as against him. As just mentioned, Easy is very much aware of where he as a black man stands with the police. Unfortunately, being black in 1948 meant that you had little to no legal or judicial rights; it meant that you were something less than a citizen. While Mosley is very adept at showing how someone like Easy can use their two-ness to manipulate situations to his advantage, Mosley also portrays the realities of what that two-ness meant for most black people of Los Angeles circa 1948. This harsh reality of second class citizenship is very powerfully portrayed in Easy's dealings with the police. The traditional hard-boiled detective has a strained relationship with the police due to the police not approving of the detective succeeding where they have failed and the detective's connection with the criminal element of the city. Both of these issues factor into the police's treatment of Easy; however, the resentment the police have for Easy is much more rooted in hatred than in professional rivalry. This hatred, as Mosley so poignantly illustrates, is because of Easy's racial identity and his unwillingness to happily fulfill the police's cultural expectations of that racial identity.

This racialized animosity towards Easy as the detective figure adds yet another layer to the socio-political commentary being outlined by Mosley's sub-plot. That Easy is not even seen by the police as being of the detective status of a Sam Spade or Phillip Marlowe is because the cultural power structure of Mosley's Los Angeles will not allow the police to see Easy as anything but a black man. Easy, as well as most of Mosley's black characters, recognizes this as part of the plight of his race. When Easy says that he has "played the game of 'cops and nigger' before," he is speaking not only for himself but also for the majority of black men he knows (Mosley 69). In discussing his characterization of the black experience in America, Mosley says: "You're born with a love for yourself, but you learn to despise yourself: because people in school think you're stupid, because whenever the police see you they think that you're a criminal to the degree where you finally believe that you're a criminal" (Author Interviews). Oftentimes the hard-boiled detective finds himself in a situation where the solving of a crime is of necessity to the detective so as to stay out of prison. Furthermore, hard-boiled detectives are often forced to apply justice to someone they thought they could trust so as to avoid becoming a patsy for something they didn't do. An example of this is in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* when Sam Spade is sending Brigid O'Shaughnessy to jail so that he stays in the clear with the police. However, the traditional hard-boiled detective is never in the same kind of mortal danger with the police in the way that Easy repeatedly finds himself.

Because Easy and his surroundings all point towards a recognition of his racial identity and the racial identity of those around him, he often finds himself apprehensive of being seen by the police. The recurring aspect of Easy's fear of being "caught" in the wrong place at the wrong time serves as a motif of the story that reflects the prejudiced attitude of

the dominant culture. That Easy has to worry about injustice being inflicted upon him by the very bearers of justice for the city reflects the larger picture of the history of his racial identity. For instance, when Easy is driving Daphne to Richard McGee's house he comments, "The canyon road was narrow and winding but there was no traffic at all. We hadn't even seen a police car on the ride and that was fine with me, because the police have white slavery on the brain when it comes to colored men and white women" (Mosley 91). Wesley points out that racism plays a central role in the duality of Easy's existence as a detective and how the violence inflicted upon Easy is a manifestation of Easy's inability to completely escape the consequences of his racial identity in the dominant cultural power structure. Wesley writes, "For example, when he [Easy] is being brutally questioned by the police, and he understands that racism makes truth irrelevant in their treatment of him, Easy still insists throughout the interview on his right to understanding" (106).

Even before Easy gets to the questioning at the police station, he is being called out by the police on the fact that he is a black man and that his blackness is the only reason needed to elicit brutality towards him:

"Mr. Rawlins!" one of them called from behind. I turned.

"Yeah?" They were approaching fast but cautiously. The fat one had a hand in his pocket...

"We want you to come with us."

"Where?"

"You'll see," fat Mason said as he took me by the arm.

"Are you arresting me?"

"You'll see," Mason said again. He was pulling me toward the gate. "I've got the right to know why you're taking me."

"You got the right to fall down and break your face, nigger. You got a right to die," he said. Then he hit me in the diaphragm. When I doubled over he slipped the handcuffs on behind my back and together they dragged me to the car. They tossed me in the back seat where I lay gagging.

"You vomit on my carpet and I'll feed it to ya," Mason called back. (Mosley 68)

The hard-boiled tradition primarily concerns itself with the identification of the players within the crime being investigated as opposed to developing the history of the detective. Coale points out that in the hard-boiled tradition, the “act of identity formation remains in many ways provisional and arbitrary, except when defined by the color of one’s skin, as Mosley’s America relentlessly defines it” (174). While it is Easy’s racial identity and his understanding of his own two-ness that allows him to operate with the degree of invisibility necessary to be a successful detective, it is also his racial identity that perpetuates his involvement in the case. As the boundaries of acceptable transgression for a black man in the culturally white dominated society of Los Angeles are predicated by the landscape as much as by individual and institutional levels of racism, Easy is thus constantly being reminded by his own sense of two-ness that he is in danger of being caught crossing those boundaries. This conundrum of his two-ness being usable as a weapon of detection for Easy and also perpetuating his involvement in the case by being suited as the police’s fall guy presents a difficult situation for Easy. Easy must decide how far he is willing to transgress the racialized roles and boundaries set up by dominant society in order to save his own self and to uphold his own code of morality.

TRANSGRESSION

While the implication of double consciousness and Mosley's presentation of duality can explain unique complexities in the detective figure of Easy Rawlins and the narrativity of the plot, the consequences of duality as applied to the hard-boiled detective story can be seen in the various points of transgression throughout the text. Mosley accomplishes a racialization of Los Angeles through his use of setting from an African American perspective; however, it is Mosley's pairing of the hard-boiled detective genre and a black detective that necessitates multiple instances and forms of transgression throughout the novel. These points of transgression serve not only as manifestations of Easy's two-ness but also as evidence of how the dominant culture and power structure perpetuates a social system of injustice and discrimination is based upon race. Furthermore, centralizing Easy's detective work within his own African American community causes Easy to commit moral transgressions against his own community. In turn, these transgressions against the African American community create a conflict between Easy's personal identity and his professional identity.

If Easy is "[u]nlike the traditional white hard-boiled detective who seeks to rejuvenate a transcendent system," then Easy "must experience the pain and the possibility of the fundamental disorder that produces new social arrangements" (Wesley 111). The problem inherent within Easy's position as a traditional hard-boiled detective then lies in his situatedness within the system as a member of the African American community. Being a member of the marginalized portion of the culture, Easy takes issue with the system that disenfranchises himself and his community, let alone the reinstallation of balance within that system, as is the goal of the hard-boiled detective. However, Easy, throughout *Devil in a*

Blue Dress is, nonetheless employed by that very system that keeps Easy's home community in a position of marginalization. Whether it be through working for Albright, Todd Carter or simply trying to solve the crime so as to keep the police from arresting him, Easy is working for the enemy.

As discussed previously, in order for Easy to be able to successfully fill the role of detective, he must trespass against his own friends and neighbors. However, in staying true to the hard-boiled detective, Easy operates on a self-developed moral code, which, in Easy's case does not allow him to commit unprovoked acts of violence against his own social group. To Easy, gratuitous violence against other African Americans for the sake of furthering his investigation would make him no better than the police. Even though Easy is "still a killing machine" very much used to and capable of violence because of his experiences as a soldier, he avoids violence whenever possible as he realizes the full consequence of such behavior (Mosley 54). Indeed, Easy's attempts to avoid violence "problematizes violence. . .during the course of his investigations in this novel Easy, although frequently beaten does not strike back" (Wesley 108).

The problem that arises within this conflict of interest between Easy as a member of the black community and Easy as private detective is that Easy must inflict violence upon his own community in order to maintain his status as a detective. To reconcile between what Easy must do to operate as a hard-boiled detective and what he cannot do to still be operating as a hard-boiled detective, Mosley provides his detective with an alter ego: Mouse. Raymond Alexander, or Mouse, is Easy's oldest friend from back in Houston. Mouse is the type of brutal individual who "could put a knife in a man's stomach and ten minutes later sit down to a plate of spaghetti" (Mosley 48). Mouse embodies the ruthless and self-invested

nature of the hard-boiled detective in that even if Easy had “touched his money he’d have killed [Easy] straight away” (Mosley 152). Mouse is always looking out for his own best interest and will willingly maim or murder anyone who interferes with his business. While Mouse is an extreme exemplification of the ruthless side of the hard-boiled detective (more like Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer than Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe), he is not that unlike Marlowe whose literary allusion is that of a knight yet will also slap around young woman to get the information he needs from her. Indeed, Mouse’s “complicated violence represents a potential the detective, himself. . .both accepts and wishes to reject” (Wesley 108).

Thus, Mouse becomes the side of Easy’s identity as a detective that Easy’s racial identity will not allow him to be, which creates yet another layer in the complexity of Easy as a hard-boiled detective. Having Mouse commit the majority of violent acts within the novel makes Easy seemingly more moral and simultaneously morally irresponsible. That Easy will not commit violence against his own community shows that he recognizes an allegiance towards his neighbors; however, that Easy allows Mouse to commit violent acts against his friends (i.e. killing Joppy) shows that Easy is only moral enough to side-step the responsibility of violence. While this complexity of Easy’s situation is important to his development as a hard-boiled detective, it also reveals something of the condition of life for African Americans. Easy realizes that violence is a real part of life within the black community, but he does not commit such violence himself. In this sense, Mosley has “split the hard-boiled detective in two, reflecting or almost parodying Du Bois’s notion of an African American ‘double-consciousness’” (Berger 291). The added dimension to the characteristics of the hard-boiled detective of necessitating a moral “other” in order for the detective to enact all duties necessary for a detective to be successful is a direct result of

Mosley's racialization of the traditional character. The traditional hard-boiled detective does not have to deal with questions of community loyalty in that the issue of community is not nearly as ingrained in the social milieu of middle class white America as it is in lower class black America. Mouse poignantly makes this point to Easy when he says, " 'Nigger cain't pull his way out of the swamp wit'out no help, Easy. . .But, Easy, you gotta have somebody at yo' back, man. That's just a lie them white men give 'bout makin' it on they own. They always got they backs covered'" (Mosley 153). By introducing this aspect of the social stratification of 1948 Los Angeles, Mosley is drawing attention to the social, political and racial fiber of the dominant power structure of that place and time that would not be possible by the hard-boiled genre were it not for the direct identification of the detective and the investigation based upon race. Roger Berger points out that "In Mosley's L.A. novels, Mouse is a kind of amoral double for Rawlins" (291). The splitting of the hard-boiled detective into two parts, as per Easy and Mouse, and the conflict implicit therein exemplifies the intensity of the narrative conflict of being unable to reconcile the role of a black character/writer within the dominantly white literary genre. In other words, the complexity of Mosley's detective figure exemplifies the complexity of the African American existence within the predominantly white American culture. However problematizing Mouse's use of violence may be for the reconciliation of Easy as a hard-boiled detective, Mosley is also utilizing violence to reflect the reality and influence of the violence inflicted upon the African American community by the police and members of that same community.

As stated Earlier, Easy's hard-boiled detective-driven, self-imposed moral code does not allow him to carry out certain acts of violence necessary for him to completely fulfill the hard-boiled detective role. For instance, "it is revealing that Rawlins never kills anyone in

these novels. Indeed, all of the justifiable murders are committed by...Mouse Alexander, who often shoots the discovered murderer just as he is about to kill Rawlins" (Berger 291). An example of where Easy's loyalties to his community and friends, even though those friends have lead Easy into perilous danger, will not allow him to impose the hard-boiled detective's unique brand of justice is the case of Joppy's murder. Joppy, being the friend whose recommendation to DeWitt Albright of Easy as a possible detective, ultimately betrays Easy for nothing more than a favorable gesture of kindness from Daphne Monet. Even in the face of such a betrayal, Easy, while uncertain of what recourse to take, is unwilling to kill Joppy, which would be the deserved retribution for one who back-stabs a detective. However, "Mouse's murder of Joppy serves as a central instance of moral incertitude. As Easy observes it, Mouse's violence solicits a disturbing combination of both rejection and acceptance" (Wesley 109).

Wesley goes on to suggest that while Easy is unable to commit such acts of violence as the murder of Joppy, he is able to reconcile them as necessities of justice as dictated by his personal morality (109). Easy, in the vein of the hard-boiled genre, learns to accept certain acts of violence as a part of his reality and as a part of the reality of life within the moral ambiguities that comprise the mean streets of the detective's home turf. Easy reflects that Mouse's actions are "murder and I had to swallow it" (Mosley 205). Easy's attitude towards violence as a regretful but necessary part of the detective's role is exemplified in Mosley's description of Joppy's murder:

[Mouse] turned casually to his right and shot Joppy in the groin. Joppy's eyes opened wide and he started crying like a seal. He rocked back and forth trying to grab gthe wound but the wires held him to the chair. After a few seconds Mouse leveled to pistol and shot him in the head. One moment Joppy had two bulging eyes, then his left eye was just a bloody, ragged hole. The force of the second shot threw him to the

floor; spasms went through his legs and feet for minutes afterward. I felt cold then. Joppy had been my friend but I'd seen too many men die and I cared for Coretta, too. (Mosley 201)

While Easy is unwilling to commit such acts of violence (necessary or unnecessary as they may be) against his own friends and community, Mouse's violent acts against lifelong friends within the close-knit black community are commonplace. The results of Mouse's violence most often results in a positive outcome for Easy. When Mouse saves Easy from Frank Green and when Mouse kills Albright's lackeys, Easy is able to accomplish what is necessary in the situation: he gets the information he needs from Frank Green and he rescues Daphne from being murdered. Even when Mouse's acts of violence seem ruthless such as his murdering Joppy and Frank Green, the end results are in Easy's favor. While Joppy was Easy's friend, leaving him alive would have necessitated Easy turning him in to the police for Corretta's murder, which would be a betrayal Easy's community could not have forgiven him for. Furthermore, Mouse's logic in killing Frank so that Frank wouldn't come back and kill Easy is cruel but sound in the sense that Frank would have most likely killed Easy. Overall, the acts of violence committed by Mouse are not only what allow Easy to do his job as a hard-boiled detective, but also what keep him alive.

Easy's move towards the detective role serves to remove him from the community in a way that is as invisible as his own detective work within it. Roger Berger highlights this conundrum with the following claim: "At the same time that Rawlins seems acquainted with virtually everyone in the black community, he remains fundamentally isolated, a marginal figure in South Central L.A." (289). However, Mouse is a figure who will without any hesitation inflict the wrath of an entire community's two-century old frustration upon anyone who interferes with his business, yet he still manages to remain not only a feared a but

respected figure within South Central Los Angeles. Easy is unwilling to inflict such violence as Mouse seemingly desires to upon his own racial community because Easy knows that he is ultimately working for the white controlled power structure of the city. Easy feels an obligation not to implicate himself in the further marginalization of his own community and recognizes that because he is being paid by the Todd Carters of the city, any act of violence upon his own community would be implicitly at the hand of the powerful white elite, thus implicating Easy in a continuation of discrimination based upon racial identity. Furthermore, unlike his hard-boiled predecessors, Easy has a desire for a normal life with property, a family and friends. While the traditional hard-boiled detective ignores aspects of life that would include them as a member of society, Easy seeks them out. Any excess of violent acts upon the community to which Easy belongs would eventually sever him from that community; thus, he needs Mouse to fulfill that specific aspect of the transgressions necessary for Easy to operate as a hard-boiled detective.

In order for Easy to successfully utilize his sense of duality within the detective role, one of the main areas of transgressions that will occur within the white community is the breaking or fulfilling of language expectations. Easy understands that there are expectations of how he should talk when mingling with his own community and also within the white community. Easy also realizes that breaking these expectations can lead to either distrust or surprise and acceptance through linguistic transgression. Easy's recognition of this aspect of his two-ness allows him to vacillate between the white and black communities freely, a feat that Phillip Marlowe or Sam Spade would not have been able to accomplish without a certain amount of mythologizing of the black communities as exotic and dangerous. Although Easy is able to surprise many white people by speaking in the "proper" vernacular of the white

community, he does not feel entirely comfortable with that particular linguistic style. Easy notes that he “always tried to speak proper English in my life, the kind of English they taught in school, but I found over the years that I could only truly express myself in the natural ‘uneducated’ dialect of my upbringing” (Mosley 10). As mentioned previously, Easy’s use of “proper” English fails to meet the expectations of Carter’s receptionist; therefore, Easy finds it necessary to revert to a fulfillment of the woman’s racial expectations. Easy recognizes the situation as such and shocks her into a meeting with Mr. Baxter by using his own vernacular.

The ability to recognize and manipulate such instances of transgression, even on the very subtle level of language, shows how “Easy’s manipulation of his identity affords him (and ironically parodies) the agent autonomy and freedom of movement traditionally associated with the white detective” (Kennedy 230). However, no matter how autonomous Easy may seemingly become, his “movements through Los Angeles are constrained by white powers. While his role as a detective broadens possibilities for transgressing established racialized and spatial limits, race nonetheless molds the boundaries of social identity and mobility” (Kennedy 230). Throughout *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy is constantly trying to find some footing of identity on both social and racial levels. What problematizes Easy’s search for some semblance of identity is that he is unwilling to accept the boundaries of possibility in both personal and professional fields as set up for African Americans by the white, dominant power structure. Easy’s use of “proper” English exemplifies this aspect of his unwillingness to accept a racialized justification for his unequal status with the white community. Theodore Mason points out that “Identified with formal education, [grammatical English] can readily be seen as Easy’s entry into a realm previously denied him

and those like him” (179).

Another way in which Easy is trying to gain access to a life previously unavailable to African Americans is in his deep concern for maintaining ownership of his house. This, in many ways, is the most symbolic and motivating site of transgression within the entire novel. Within the context of the genre that Mosley is utilizing to create his narrative, Easy’s insistence on maintaining self-respect based upon ownership of his own house becomes extremely important. If “the formation of moral space in hard-boiled fiction privileges a white subject as autonomous agent while devaluing black subjectivity as extrinsic to rights assertion and agency” then Easy’s attempt to identify himself through the ownership of his house is much like Mosley staking a claim within the hard-boiled genre for agency within the noir world (Kennedy 226). However valid Mosley and Easy’s claim to agency within the noir world may be, Mosley recognizes the problematic nature of attaining this agency. For Easy, ownership of the house is an empowering and equalizing factor in his identity. To Easy the house is a symbol of financial success and racial freedom. Easy explains how his house liberates him from the racial restraints imposed upon him in that “I felt that I was just as good as any white man, but if I didn’t even own my front door then people would look at me like just another poor beggar” (Mosley 9).

Mason states that “In this regard the house works in ways more transgressive than not, for while it remains an emblem of entrance into middle-class life, that zone of safety and stability does not belong to Afro-Americans” (179). The instability of Easy’s claim to racial equality within his self-identification as a black man is reflected in that the main factor behind his becoming involved with DeWitt Albright is so that Easy can maintain ownership of his house, and thus his identity. Therefore, Easy’s struggles throughout the novel with

various societal forces set in place to keep him from attaining any sort of autonomy represents of Easy's struggle to maintain an identity that he can claim as being on equal footing with any other person, white or black. Any sort of transgressive aspect of the *Devil in a Blue Dress* then becomes symbolized through Easy's necessity to maintain possession of the one thing that he truly feels makes him an equal to everyone else, his house.

The transgressive nature of *Devil in a Blue Dress* is not something entirely unique to Mosley's take on the hard-boiled genre. A primary narrative function of the traditional hard-boiled detective is to transgress the moral space of dominant culture in order to unveil the inconsistencies and hypocrisies within the dominant morality. However, when white detectives transgress into the physical space of African American communities, a moral prejudice within the white genre becomes revealed to the racially conscious reader. In the traditional hard-boiled world, "The city streets are the site of degeneracy, disorder, lawlessness, and moral corruption a universalized and fantastical urbanism which elides questions of racial identity" (Kennedy 226). Thus, "this elision facilitates the white subject's colonization of social spaces traditionally associated with blackness in American culture", which "heighten the white detective's transgressions, providing voyeuristic pleasures for white readers" (Kennedy 226). While Mosley works to tear down these characteristic literary injustices within the hard-boiled genre, he also shows how uncertain and fluid the process is. For instance then, "The house as an emblem of transgression works to expand this novel's examination of the nature of cultural knowledge in a scene informed by extreme fluidity, even as that fluidity remains unacknowledged" (Mason 179).

Easy's attempt to equalize himself with the dominant culture in a way that necessitates both a rejection of and reliance upon his racial identity exemplifies the

complexities of trying to advance oneself out of a mere stereotype. Mosley shows how this works within the cultural power structure through Easy's series of complications surrounding his attempts to normalize himself as a hard-boiled detective. The problematic nature of self-identification in a world that does not allow any individual to escape the racial markers made up of the city's landscape and of the physical identifications of the city's inhabitants also manifests itself in the enigmatic nature of Daphne Monet, the novel's femme fatale. Daphne Monet and Ruby Hanks are biologically the same person; however, the cultural mores of Mosley's Los Angeles do not allow her to ever fully be one or the other. Furthermore, it is the constant stratification of racial identity within the dominant culture that does not allow Daphne/Ruby to ever simultaneously exist as the same person. The result of the all powerful racial dichotomy that pervades the culture is the fluidity of Daphne's identity. Daphne is never fully white as her black heritage will eventually come back to haunt her as it did with her involvement with Todd Carter. Furthermore, she can never be just Ruby Hanks because "Her nose, cheeks, her skin color—they were white. Daphne was a white woman. Even her pubic hair was barely bushy, almost flat" (Mosley 200).

By all physical markers, Daphne is a white woman, but even the physical evidence for her insistence on passing cannot change the fact that she is the product of a transgressive relationship. Being of mixed heritage, Daphne is herself a transgressive factor that is in constant flux as her identity changes to meet the needs of her particular situation: "Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man. If he was a mild white man who was afraid to complain to the waiter she'd pull his head to her bosom and pat him. If he was a poor black man who had soaked up pain and rage for a lifetime she washed his wounds with a rough rag and licked the blood till it staunches" (Mosley 183).

Daphne's fluid identity fully represents the inconsistency in a dominant culture's ability to effectively identify people based upon racial barriers. Mason notes that "The shifting ground to which Easy refers indicated the entire set of understandings about 'race' that the novel has sought to problematize and to deconstruct. There is no 'truth' there, at least no truth in the social text that fetishizes the outward signs of difference" (181). The fluidity of Daphne's identity reflects Easy's inability to reconcile himself as being a black man or as being a hard-boiled detective. To Easy, Daphne represents the ultimate taboo and racial transgression, a black man having a sexual relationship with a white woman. However, the reality is that based upon the dominant culture's defining characteristics of racial identity, Daphne is a black woman. Daphne is both white and black based upon these racial markers, and Easy is both a black literary figure and a hard-boiled detective; however, neither Easy nor Daphne is ever able to simultaneously exist as both without the internal conflict of self identification based upon race complicating the situation to a degree of absurd uncertainty. Therefore, "The variable effect is part and parcel of Mosley's larger intention to unpack the categories governing cultural knowledge within the discursive field of *Devil in a Blue Dress* by creating characters who constantly violate the borders of those categories" (Mason 180).

Whereas Mason sees the multiple points of transgression throughout *Devil in a Blue Dress* as evidence to position the novel as an exemplification of the traditional African American literary tradition as opposed to an exemplification of the hard-boiled detective genre, I argue that Mason proves the notion that he is attempting to debunk (181). While the argument that Mosley's use of cultural transgression within the novel can be used to situate *Devil* within the African American literary tradition is quite plausible, I argue that Mosley's

use of cultural transgression is a signification of the hard-boiled tradition, thus suggesting that Mosley is indeed working within the hard-boiled tradition via the trope of signification, which is widely used within the African American literary tradition. Therefore, while Mosley appears to be straddling both the hard-boiled and African American literary traditions, Mosley's specific use of traditional hard-boiled detective themes and plot functions solidly situates *Devil in a Blue Dress* as a hard-boiled detective novel. Furthermore, it is through Mosley's African American literary approach to the hard-boiled genre that he is able to elevate the critical possibilities of the hard-boiled genre.

CONCLUSION

If the goal of hard-boiled detective writers is to address hypocrisies and injustices within the moral make up of their own societies and to thrust their detectives into the urban fire of injustice, then the plot of the detective novel becomes a vehicle for an author's subtextual mystery. That is, there becomes a narrative mystery behind the mystery being attended to by the plot. Ross MacDonald points out that "from Poe to Chandler and beyond, the detective hero has represented his creator and carried his values into action in society" (9). As a hard-boiled detective writer, Mosley is then working towards imposing some aspect of his own interpretation of society onto his 1948 Los Angeles. While this aspect of *Devil in a Blue Dress* is nothing new to the genre— in fact it is one of the key attributes of the novel that establishes its classification as a hard-boiled novel— it is the commentary that Mosley is making about his society that is something unique within the genre.

The uniqueness of Mosley's approach to the genre is quite obvious; his detective is black, however, the unpacking of Mosley's narrative differentiations from the hard-boiled tradition must not stop there. The de-centering of the traditional hard-boiled detective results in a de-centering of the entire narrativity of the traditional hard-boiled story. As shown in the previous chapters, Mosley is able to racialize every aspect of 1948 Los Angeles simply through changing the race of the detective. This effect is an unavoidable by-product of the specific detail of Easy's race; however, that the shifting of narrative attention to a racialized landscape is unavoidable is in itself quite poignant. Why is it that the race of the detective figure, or relocating the central community of characters can so severely affect not only the narrative climate of the novel, but the plot structure as well? This is only one layer of the mystery behind the mystery being engaged by the plot of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The

narrative McGuffin, or initial action which necessitates the detective to become involved in the case, serves as a catalyst for the social commentary Mosley is making with his hard-boiled plot.

From the very first scene of the novel, when Albright is described by Easy as he walks into Joppy's bar, the climate for the novel's plot and narrative becomes racially charged. As I have already argued, so much of what Mosley is working towards unraveling about society is thrown at the reader within the first page. When Easy notes that "When [Albright] looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948," he is immediately revealing that not only is he black, but that the cultural dichotomy of a racial power structure is always present in the minds of the inhabitants of 1948 Los Angeles (Mosley 1). This is the center of Mosley's departure from the hard-boiled tradition. As stated in the second chapter, traditional hard-boiled writers use race as a means of mythologizing and dramatizing the mystique of those darker recesses of a city's culture within the traditional hard-boiled novel: "In its most simplified form [race] appears as a juxtaposition of primitive urge and civilizing consciousness" (Kennedy 226). Instead of utilizing race as a means with which to heighten the audience's sense of anxiety of facing the "other" (as mastered by Poe in *The Murders In The Rue Morgue*), Mosley normalizes the literary "other" as the recipient of the social injustice being explored by the story's narrativity. Instead of the black side of town being the dangerous and amoral place which the detective alone is willing to enter for the purpose of restoring balance to the social order, Mosley posits the black side of town as home for the detective, the base of operations from which the detective must leave in order to apply his transgressive duties that constitute the hard-boiled pattern of behavior.

While the relocating of the narrative setting to the previously marginalized group within the hard-boiled genre is an important aspect of how Mosley uses the genre to extrapolate his social commentary, it is still not the end of what social issue he is exploring within the narrative structure of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The normalizing of the African American community through the function of locating the center of the plot within that community allows an audience to enter into a zone of interpretation where their perspective of the issues addressed within the text are focused on a racial context. Through this narrative sleight of hand, Mosley begins to unfold a series of transgressions that would not be possible had he chosen to make Easy a traditional white detective. Where the white detective “appropriates signs of blackness to signify his liminal isolation and difference,” Easy Rawlins uses cultural signs of blackness to signify his belonging to a community that within the hard-boiled tradition that “is a romantic image, a fantasy sphere in which ideas of justice, morality, and heroism can be tested out while the psychological focus remains securely on the liminal white subject” (Kennedy 226). For Easy, these mean streets are anything but fantasy, they are the very stimuli which inform who he is as both an African American and a detective: they are home.

Whereas Edgar Allen Poe set out to address the psychological “other” as a rational facet of the human experience with his Dupin stories, the hard-boiled tradition sets out to create a metaphorical realm in which the human possibility for corruption and injustice can be addressed in a context that reveals a culture that is in need of re-ordering. By claiming this “otherness” as the locus of the experience of society’s capacity for injustice, Mosley is able to highlight society’s failure to fulfill the right to equality for all people within the social strata. That Easy’s identity is thrown into tumult because of his stepping outside of the

dominant culture's assigned role for his racial identity (at the request of those at the top of the social strata, i.e., Todd Carter and DeWitt Albright) allows Mosley to tap into the historical development of a culture that marginalizes its citizens based upon race. Kennedy points out that "In mapping this failure of promise Mosley blends history and memory to produce a critical perspective on the development of race relations in Los Angeles" (229). If race as exists within the predominantly white hard-boiled tradition serves the purpose of creating a space in which the detective is able to address the injustices of dominant society in a metaphorical context, then the issues of race relations as set up and perpetuated by the dominant and subaltern ends of the culture can never be entirely addressed. This particular issue of racial inequality and the prejudice within racial identification as recognized by the dominant white culture, both societal and literary, is exactly what Mosley is able to explore by simply changing the race of the detective. While South Central Los Angeles, for the traditional hard-boiled writers such as Raymond Chandler, is "merely and exotic location—or, worse, a plot device to begin a novel," for Walter Mosley, South Central Los Angeles is "*the* community where [his] novels are set" (Berger 285). In doing this "Mosley elevates black L.A. in his novels into a significant location" (Berger 285).

Where transgression operates within the hard-boiled tradition as primarily an exploration of where cultural morality fails and individual morality and ideologies of justice become necessary to reestablish the balance of power within society, transgression serves a much more tangible and vital role in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Easy does confront issues of his own sense of morality as opposed to the culturally accepted morality in instances such as his treatment at the hands of the police. In Easy's mind, he is "just as good as any white man" and he therefore despises a legal system that claims to protect and serve but in reality only

protects and serves the white community. Easy recognizes the hypocrisies of this system and even after the police brutalize him for no reason and he wants to get away from the hand of discrimination, he knows that “a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered” (Mosley 76). While the traditional hard-boiled detective transgresses into a realm of moral ambiguity in which what is right is not always in line with what is considered moral by the dominant culture, Easy lives in a very tangible world in which what is wrong is upheld by the dominant culture’s ascribed morality. For Easy, transgression is not an exploration of esoteric possibilities of right and wrong; for Easy, transgression is stepping out of his assigned racial identity and demanding access to all of the rights of dominant culture.

With the major instance of transgression within *Devil in a Blue Dress* hinging on the issue of identity as dictated by spacial and physical markers of race, Mosley is then able to utilize the hard-boiled detective to explore individual aspects of the moral inconsistencies of racial identity within society. That Easy is forced into reconciling and then utilizing his African American inheritance of two-ness in order to be successful as a black hard-boiled detective initiates a “journey into a paranoid world of illusion, fear, and desire where secure referents of meaning and value begin to dissolve and race is revealed as the most disturbing site of mystery and transgression” (Kennedy 231). Indeed, Easy’s agency as a hard-boiled detective is contingent upon his racial identity. That is, Easy is useful to the dominant power structure only because he is African American and thus has access to the African American community in a way that neither Todd Carter nor DeWitt Albright does. The traditional hard-boiled detective is successful only as much as he is able to create an aura of invisibility around himself and his motives as a detective. In Easy’s case, creating this aura of invisibility means fulfilling people’s expectations of his racial identity in every possible

circumstance. For instance, in John's bar, Easy mingles and reminisces about shared memories from Houston's Fifth Ward with old friends while inquiring of the whereabouts of some mysterious white girl. Another example is Easy slipping into the dialect of his childhood vernacular so as to upset the secretary at Todd Carter's office enough to pass him off to Mr. Baxter to deal with. In either circumstance, Easy is only invisible because he is able to live up to the assigned characteristics of his racial identity as his surroundings dictate.

With the conflicting aspects of Easy's identity as an African American, and the absolute conundrum of the necessary conflict of interest between Easy's black identity and his hard-boiled detective identity, it is impossible to ignore that the problematic nature of dominant culture's systematic classification of individuals based upon racial markers is the primary mystery behind the mystery in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. This analysis is only further supported when considering that the central figure within the plot's mystery is a seemingly white woman who is actually half black and passing as a white woman. Furthermore, that every character on both sides of the black/white racial dichotomy mistake Daphne Monet as being white, and that Daphne herself cannot accept that she can neither be white nor black within the culture because multiple aspects of her identity simultaneously confirm and deny her whiteness and blackness only further solidify that Mosley is commenting on the absurdity of dominant culture's practice of racial classification as determining agency within society. For many authors, such an important social commentary as this would be more than enough to tackle within the confines of a novel that adheres to the tenants of a genre and literary tradition, but Mosley also addresses the issue of agency for the black writer and detective within the hard-boiled tradition.

While Mosley effectively shows that "Easy's desire for upward mobility represents

an effort to escape the horrors of the past,” Mosley also reveals that Easy “remains inexorably caught in legacies of racism and violence which have traumatized black male subjectivity” (Kennedy 235). All of these transgressions and complications upon the genre work together to present a narrative commentary which “emphasizes [Mosley’s] protagonist’s urge to self-invention while detailing the powerful racist prohibitions on this process and the dialectics of power, fear, and desire which shape it internally” (Kennedy 237). All of the complicating factors that stem out of Mosley’s choice to change the race of the traditional hard-boiled detective while still remaining true to the conventions of the genre set off an exponential series of events within *Devil in a Blue Dress* that culminate in a narrative mystery that examines the complexities of race relations and racial identification within a hard-boiled context. The result is a narrative commentary that is both societal and literary in its implications. Ultimately, through the use of hard-boiled conventions and story design, Mosley is able to examine the true root of the injustices and underlying sickness of the society that his hard-boiled predecessors always aspired to but could never reach due to their lack of recognition of the complications of racial identity within society. Roger Berger very poignantly points out that “the mean streets a detective must go down are indeed ‘dark with something more than night,’ as Raymond Chandler memorably notes (“Simple” 13). But Chandler, like so many other white writers, didn’t necessarily know what he really meant” (292).

While the truthfulness of the previous statement can be debated, one thing is quite clear: Walter Mosley not only recognizes what Chandler may or may not have meant with his metaphorical claim of moral ambiguity within culture, Mosley also recognizes that the tradition that Chandler helped to build is a very effective literary form in which a writer can

examine and comment upon racial existence as it is in society and do so through the uniquely African American perspective. Walter Mosley accomplishes this with *Devil in a Blue Dress* and continues to do so with the rest of his Easy Rawlins series. Whether it be a commentary on the complications of domestic relationships within the marginalized black community of Los Angeles circa 1956 as in *White Butterfly*, or an extrapolation of the anger and frustration of an entire community that fueled the Watts riots of 1965 and pervaded the atmosphere of an entire city afterward as in *Little Scarlet*, Walter Mosley continues to utilize the hard-boiled tradition to address the social facades and societal injustices as related race and the African American perspective.

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