

Chapter 1

Unsolved Mystery of Racial Identity:

Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction and (Im)possibilities of Identity Politics

1. Mystery of Mysteries: Race, Love, and Detective Fiction

Love is a mystery – so is race, as Charles Darwin once described his mission to solve the “mystery of mysteries,” the origin of species. Today we know race is not a biological classification, but it does function as a classification of humans at a practical level.¹ We are familiar with race as a concept of human classification, creating borders among us. Passing and miscegenation are two major concepts resulting from this quasi-biological notion of race applied in social, cultural, and often political realms. These two concepts are very important and indeed very “African American” themes in the literature of blacks in the United States. Since slave narratives in the 19th century, readers have been informed of the sexual exploitation of female slaves and of illegitimate white fathers of slave children. After the Reconstruction and during Harlem Renaissance, miscegenation/passing novels reached their height. Contemporary literature also bears the traces of passing and miscegenation through the representation of gradations of skin color and literary trope that shows the legacy of slavery. Miscegenation and passing as literary themes inevitably expose the shameful legacy of the United States: sexual exploitation under slavery and a condition in which skin color signifies one’s social and cultural status.² In this sense, miscegenation and passing are two crucial concepts in which the quasi-biological notion of race converges with the rhetorical use of race in African American literature.

Walter Mosley’s detective novels are some of the most interesting examples of African American literature to delineate rhetorical as well as biological discourses of race in

conjunction with a narrative of love. A great example is *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley's debut novel and the first of his African American private eye detective Easy Rawlins series. The novel dramatizes miscegenation and passing as a central mystery. Because of the novel's mode of narrative and its thematic figuration, *Devil in a Blue Dress* generates significant questions about African American literature and its act of appropriation. *Devil in a Blue Dress* utilizes a literary genre which had (and has) been dominated by white male authors, hardboiled detective fiction, while its ultimate mystery is the most "African American" of themes: passing and miscegenation. Combining a specifically "white and male" literary form with very much "African American" subjects, Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* and the subsequent novels in the series are great examples of literary transgression and a challenge to the literary genre.

Literary transgression and genre blurring are often considered empowering since they require an appropriating strategy, in which the use of the pre-existing literary form and the creation of a new, hybrid narrative opens up a newer critical and artistic framework. *Devil in a Blue Dress*' transgressive potential, nonetheless shows a certain tension and poses difficult questions for African American literary criticism. Is the text authentically transgressive enough to give agency to its black subject? Or, is it just a black-faced version of the masculine, hardboiled detective novel? Most criticisms of the novel tend to lean toward one side or the other, or to highlight the tension itself. It is, however, important to notice how this focus on the "degree of literary transgression" itself suggests what is at stake within *Devil in a Blue Dress* and its surrounding African American and American literary landscape. The novel is discussed and contextualized within "African American literature." As mentioned in the Introduction, an author's racial designation defines the literary genre in the case of African American literature. Though miscegenation and passing are entangled with the

mystery – detection being the act most important to the hardboiled detective genre – the novel has been mainly discussed as a piece of African American literature. In other words, the miscegenation and passing in the novel are evidence of its literary transgression as well as the thematic framework that gives it narrative coherency.

Yet hardboiled detective fiction as a literary genre rejects a simple and coherent narrative conclusion. The first-person narrative voice in hardboiled detective fiction is not omnipotent: the detective (oftentimes himself the narrator) is inevitably involved with the case itself, and, readers are only able to understand the case from the point of view of the detective, who does not overlook the whole situation. These generic features of detective fiction are also applicable to *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Easy's first-person narrative voice does not provide readers with the whole scope of the novel's framework. His point of view is also unreliable, since Easy himself is in the process of creating a coherent narrative by recalling past incidents from a vantage point in the future. *Devil in a Blue Dress* inevitably leaves parts of the narrative unclear because of the constraints of hardboiled detective fiction as a genre. It is possible to read *Devil in a Blue Dress* as completely resolved narrative only if passing and miscegenation become key to our interpretation of the novel. In other words, the mystery is solved when we read the novel as African American literature.

However, the heroine's racial identity, which provides us with a rather simple and reasonable narrative framework, suddenly loses its coherency when we read *Devil in a Blue Dress* with a focus on the hardboiled detection. Thus, there is another possibility in this case: the mystery in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, in the end, is not solved. The novel's use of hardboiled detective style indeed obfuscates its black protagonist Easy Rawlins's actual mission: to find the heroine Daphne, the white girl who turns out to be non-white. There is, however, ambiguity associated with her racial identity on the textual level. In the end, the heroine's

identity is split in half, but she herself never mentions her racial identity. It is for the reader to assume the heroine's racial identity (and passing) through textual details within the narrative framework. While the text invites us to make conclusion with the narrative coherency, we must be careful with how the magical notion of "race" provides us with a framework in which we unconsciously accept racial identity as self-evident. However, the hidden history/mystery of miscegenation and passing is not the only answer to Mosley's protagonist's detection.

This chapter examines how the unreasonable and unexplainable realm of Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* could be read as a narrative of love. Regarding the impossibility of a crime novel attaining the truth, Scott McCracken notes that while the solution to the mystery relies on gathering details from every part of the narrative and creating an overarching coherency, "crime as a metaphor defers a final truth, suggesting a complexity that needs to be constantly reinterpreted" (50). If the process of detection always contains excess or dearth, as McCracken suggests, the heroine Daphne's racial identity also pertains to excess or dearth in the novel. Easy's inability to identify the mystery within the narrative almost always occurs when he is in love with a woman. In other words, the moments of excess or dearth in the text are where the narrative of love intervenes and disrupts the detective plot. Ultimately, Mosley's text offers us not a coherent detective story, but rather an ambiguous and often unfulfilled narrative of love. What is significant in Mosley's work is that the text does not establish black subjectivity by subverting a hardboiled detective novel with its black protagonist. Rather, it challenges our reading which presupposes narrative coherency overarched by the notion of race. *Devil in a Blue Dress* depicts the difficulty of pinning down racial identity along with the (im)possibility of a narrative of love.

2. Detective Fiction and African American Literature: in the Case of Walter Mosley

Investigation of what exactly is in operation through the hardboiled detective fiction of *Devil in a Blue Dress* takes us to a discussion on African American literature and the hardboiled detective novel as a narrative form. Mosley, a contemporary bestselling popular fiction writer, has been less discussed in the realm of “traditional” African American literary criticism. While studies on popular fiction find his body of works worthy of investigation, Mosley’s particular choice of literary form also confuses critical responses to his works. Hardboiled is a subgenre of detective fiction, which is also categorized under the crime novel genre. As mentioned in the introduction, African American literature is a literary genre. The hierarchy of literary genres is historical and often uncritical, as we usually often use terms such as “African American detective fiction,” “African American science fiction,” “African American women’s fiction.” These denominations implicitly suggest that “African American” as a genre precedes the genre grouped by narrative form and style.

The prioritization of racial category in generic classification obfuscates the role of narrative forms in African American literature. Although no small number of African American writers engage in detective fiction, the generic narrative elements of detective fiction receive only little attention from African American literary critics. Some of the reasons for this disregard of the generic elements have been discussed in previous studies. Although a search for truth is a familiar theme in African American literature, detective fiction is assumed to be inappropriate as a black subject matter because of its conventionality. Dennis Porter suggests that detective novels “invariably project the image of a given social order and the implied value system that helps sustain it” (121). Hardboiled as a subgenre of detective fiction is also regarded conservative; even though it often portrays a lone and masculine private eye’s struggle against society, his crusade nonetheless leans toward restoring healthy

order to that very society. Mosley's Easy Rawlins series has been treated within this critical framework. Roger A. Berger explains that Mosley's protagonist, Easy Rawlins, never challenges the law itself, reflecting "traditional hardboiled detective fiction" (282). Because of the genre's lineage – Mosley elsewhere acknowledges being influenced by the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler – the Easy Rawlins's series could be considered to embrace generic convention.³

Given the provocative and problematic issues surrounding the series and its genre, previous studies on the Easy Rawlins series tends to analyze it as a subversion of the hardboiled detective novel in which the black narrator's point of view unveils the mystery while at the same time criticizing racial discrimination in the society. Most of favorable criticisms appraise Mosley's protagonist, Easy Rawlins, as adding a new aspect to hardboiled detective fiction. Helen Lock focuses on how Easy Rawlins is different from white detective heroes, noting that public/private duality in Easy's personality generates more complex layers of identities.⁴ Robert Crooks argues that Mosley's detective fiction shows a different side of Los Angeles than does Raymond Chandler's by turning the racialized view of the protagonist into an advantage by encompassing a specific geographical landscape.⁵ While Berger doubts that Mosley is a successfully transgressive writer, he nonetheless judges the novel as important in terms of provocative questions raised by its attempt to transgress the generic conventions.

In an attempt to clarify recent critical tendencies, Andrew Pepper cautions us as follows;

Crime fiction, like all cultural practice, informs and is informed by its cultural and political contexts; so that just as the idea that 'blackness' or 'whiteness' ever described

natural essences or biologically pure categories has been well and truly dismissed, the idea that the term “black” (or indeed “white”) crime fiction refers, or has ever referred, to a rigidly defined and uniform practice, needs to be resisted. (209)

As Pepper explains, generic elements based on race are fluid. Daylanne English points out how the greater part of criticism of Mosley’s work has been “centered on the degree of difference it attains from white detective fiction and concomitantly on the extent of its formal subversion and social progressiveness” (775). Scholars analyze Mosley’s hardboiled detective texts within a framework of African American literary tradition: racial adjective precedes literary elements and style, and appropriation of narrative form is judged by the degree of transgression. This tacit hierarchy of generic elements is embedded in critical approaches to texts written by racial minority writers. This hierarchy blunts the critical edge to the extent that it treats a certain narrative form as a generic convention to be overcome. Mosley utilizes hardboiled detective fiction, a “white” genre born in and of the 1930s, to tell a story about a black man in postwar 1948 America from a vantage point in the future. The significance of this narrative form could be understood by juxtaposing it with our very act of reading and interpretation.

3. *Devil in a Blue Dress*: Reading Love and Searching For It

Regarding the detective novel’s framework, McCracken again notes that “[d]etective fiction has been compared to the myth of original sin, the first loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden, and the myth of Oedipus, whose discovery of his origins is also a discovery of his crimes”(51). In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the origin to be discovered is the racial identity of the heroine, Daphne Monet. Although there are several sporadic murders in the novel, the

narrative framework sets the central mystery not around actual crime, but around racial identity. *Devil in a Blue Dress* unfolds itself as a story of political conflict between Matthew Teran, a former candidate for mayor, and Todd Carter, a very wealthy man who is the head of a company called Lion Investments. A key figure in this conflict is Daphne, who was blackmailed by Teran. Daphne left her boyfriend, Carter, and is now being pursued by a white man DeWitt Albright and others because she took thirty thousand dollars from Carter. The novel's protagonist and narrator, Easy Rawlins is involved with the search for Daphne Monet. Recently laid off and left with his house's mortgage, Easy makes a deal with Albright, who appears in Joppy Shag's bar, the location of which, the narrator tells us, is in what will become Watts, LA. Easy is introduced to Albright by Joppy, and Albright asks Easy to do some investigative work to find Daphne. The year is 1948 and Albright himself cannot go into the black community to search for the woman. Easy does not have a choice but to take the job as a private eye. In the course of finding Daphne, Easy finds himself in continuous danger, with seeing his acquaintances being killed by someone, since starting the investigative job.

The central mystery of the novel is, as mentioned, Daphne's racial identity. Easy was not initially aware of why all of the male characters wanted to find the heroine Daphne. Toward the end of story, as Easy's ultra-violent friend Mouse casually calls Daphne "Ruby," insinuating her kinship with the black gangster Frank Green, Easy realizes what had been missing in this mystery: Daphne was passing as white. Criticism often takes Mouse's testimony as evidence of Mosley's African American literary heritage, and it is of course a convincing argument. It is, however, important to notice how we construe Daphne's racial identity as black, how our interpretive reading operates. On the story level, Daphne could be a black woman, yet Easy's voice contradicts to this. Textual analysis convinces us that Mouse

is the only person whose comments may connote Daphne's passing. For example, Mouse says that she is a sister of the black gangster Frank. Mouse later mentions that Easy and Daphne are the same because they either look white or think like a white person. While Mouse indicates that Daphne might be black, the narrative voice never confirms her racial identity. In other words, Daphne in the end is not what she was at the beginning, and the narrative form requires us to gather her racial identity from textual clues.

The rhetorical ambiguity of the narrator is crucial since we have to rely on the narrator's point of view to construct the narrative. The novel is, however, even more confusing because of the use of the first-person narrative form of hardboiled detective fiction. Different from classical detective fiction, hardboiled novels usually adopt a first-person narrative voice, which is also the case in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The first-person narrative makes the narrator unreliable in regards to the veracity of the story – Easy Rawlins as the narrator, though speaking from the vantage of the future, is unable to retell the whole story of the case. Slavoj Žižek explains this generic element of hardboiled fiction, the narrator's involvement within the case;

By means of his initial decision to accept a case, the hard-boiled detective gets mixed up in a course of events that he is unable to dominate; all of a sudden it becomes evident that he has been "played for a sucker." What looked at first like an easy job turns into an intricate game of criss-cross, and all his effort is directed toward clarifying the contours on the trap into which he has fallen. The "truth" at which he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reason but concerns him ethically and often painfully.
(62-63)

The “truth” in the novel inevitably forces Easy to face the unreasonable fact that he cannot discern Daphne’s racial identity. The following scene is one of the best examples of how the “truth” at which Easy attempts to arrive challenges his “reason.” If we carefully examine the scene where Easy supposedly discovers that Daphne is not white, we will see how it is impossible for us to identify Daphne’s race: “I had only been in an earthquake once but the feeling was the same: The ground under me seemed to shift. I looked at her to see the truth. But it wasn’t there. Her nose, cheeks, her skin color – they were white. Daphne was a white woman. Even her pubic hair was barely bushy, almost flat” (176). Here, Easy is *not* convinced that Daphne is black. From this point onward, the narrative voice (Easy’s voice) consistently denies Daphne’s blackness. Easy’s subjectivity contradicts the detective’s desire to smoothly conclude the case. In other words, it is only Easy, the narrator, who can bring the mystery to a conclusion for the readers, while his very point of view does not verify Daphne’s racial identity.

In addition to its unreliability, Easy’s point of view also perturbs the timeline of the narrative. He is narrating from sometime in the future, when he is able to recount the history of Watts in LA, and the narrative tone is that of remembering, recounting the incidents that happened in his life in 1948. He is, therefore, framing his story from a vantage point after the year 1948. The following scene refers to historical changes in the notion of race:

Primo was real Mexican, born and bred. That was back in 1948, before Mexican and black people started hating each other. Back then, before ancestry had been discovered, a Mexican and Negro considered themselves the same. That is to say, just another couple of unlucky stiff left holding the short end of the stick. (156)

What Easy as a narrator connotes here is that racial identity is an historical as well as social construct. Liam Kennedy notes, “The shifting ground to which Easy refers underlines the arbitrariness of social indicators of racial difference and identity, particularly as these privilege the visible as the sunset ground of evidence” (236). As a detective, Easy himself thought he would be like a chameleon: “people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me, something that wasn’t real” (135). According to Kennedy, this reversal of inside/outside self-identity is crucial for Easy to realize race as a social and cultural construct. Furthermore, the narrative form juxtaposes the mystery of racial identity with the history of racial identity to point to their connections. Neither mystery nor history can be separated from the act of reading. We have to read our past through fragmented clues, and weave a coherent narrative in order to make history intelligible and meaningful. Yet, in the process of eliminating mysteries, a history organized into a coherent narrative produces residue where we all have to face the painful truth is, the incoherency of our lives.

Therefore, our task falls beyond the conclusion that Daphne is a black woman. Indeed, the only way we can restore the coherency of the narrative is to identify Daphne as black, but, in fact, Mosley leaves us with an alternative solution: not restoring coherency to the novel. Mosley delineates the duality of Daphne’s identity, letting her explain it by herself. “I’m not Daphne, My given name is Ruby Hanks and I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I’m different than you because I’m two people. I’m her *and* I’m me.” (179). She never mentions whether she is hybrid, mixed, or black. This passage suggests more of her duality than her blackness. What is happening here is not the revelation of her blackness and restoration of narrative coherency as in traditional passing novels. Instead of giving us a coherent narrative, the confusing duality of Daphne opens up the mystery of racial identity itself. If one takes Mouse’s statement as evidence, it is, of course, possible to argue that Daphne is black and

Devil in a Blue Dress is a passing story. After the case has been solved, Mouse tells Easy that he is just like Ruby:

“You just like Ruby,” Mouse said.

“What you say?”

“She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin’ her how she light-skinned an beautiful but all the time she knows that she can’t have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“That’s just like you, Easy. You learn study and you be thinkin’ like white men be thinkin’. You be thinkin’ that what’s right fo’ them is right fo’ you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don’t know that you both poor niggers. And a nigger ain’t never gonna be happy ‘less he accept what he is.” (180)

To Mouse’s words, curiously enough, readers do not hear Easy’s response. Kennedy suggests that here, Mosley is making a contrast between an essentialist position on race (Mouse) and Easy’s position which represents the complexity of racial identity that “does not reflect the coherence of racial identification” (236). I would add to Kennedy’s argument that Easy is not simply contrasted with Mouse here; Mosley is depicting Easy’s and ultimately our own desire to read coherency in human subject. The double negative in Mouse’s last sentence is often taken as colloquial speech of blacks, but it also highlights the ambiguity of the contrast that black and white seemingly creates. It is, therefore, even unclear whether Mouse is indicating that whiteness equals happiness or the other way around. The duality in Daphne’s and

Mouse's statements exceeds the history of miscegenation and passing by leaving the mystery of racial thinking at the front. The history allows readers to assume a miscegenatic relationship between Daphne's parents and her passing, while the novel calls attention to the unresolved part of the narrative, especially where Easy's subjective narrative cannot validate what Mouse tells us. The final act of narrative closure is in the hands of readers, who must conclude the case as well as the novel itself. Committing the final solution to how one interprets Daphne, the novel brings our reading of race into the fore.

English argues Mosley's dual use of race as social and literal concepts; "[It] uncomfortably insist[s] on the continuing social reality and power of race – what Houston Baker, following Baraka, has termed 'real-side referentiality' – despite the postmodern fact that race is a fiction." (791). Not the concept of race, but the experience of race is also engraved in the text which we readers inevitably face by interpreting the signs of raciality. Adding to her point, I would argue that Mosley is challenging our specific protocol of reading, which is through the filter of race. What is the mystery Easy ultimately solves? The question is rather difficult to untangle. If we frame the narrative according to a racial reading, it is Daphne's racial identity. This is, however, a pitfall, a very nodal point where we unconsciously mediate our presumption that "racial identity" can be discovered and that the discovery will restore narrative coherency to the novel. As explained, textual details do not necessarily confirm the heroine's blackness, and we need to disentangle our own critical assumptions, which lead us to conclude our reading with her blackness restoring narrative coherency.

The act of detection is the act of revealing a hidden truth. The unreliability of the evidence in *Devil in a Blue Dress* alludes to the way we relay the interpretive paradigm, which is not transparent or neutral. Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" gives us an insight

into this act of investigation, the search for racial identity. Her only short story features two girls, Twyla and Roberta; both de fact orphans with neglectful mothers. Readers are provided with the information that one is black and the other is white, but the narrator never designates which is which. The reader is first confused with the textual details indicating racial codes; tastes in music, foods, colors, political engagements. It is, however, not the act of disentangling the mystery of the characters' racial identities, but the questioning of this act itself that is at stake. Gene Andrew Jarrett explains;

The complexity of "Recitatif" arises if we, as readers, try to determine the racial identity of Twyla or Roberta and then align this identity with the array of contextual information or codes Morrison assign to each protagonist....The overriding theme of 'Recitatif' is that neither Twyla's, Roberta's, nor anyone's skill of racial identification is objective, accurate, or reliable.... At best, Morrison suggests, this process of identification is premature or provisional, at worst inaccurate, since identity is always changing according to one's perspective.[...]Since 'Recitatif' is concerned with theories of interpretation, both at the level of the protagonists and at our level as outside readers, it is a postmodern-cum-hermeneutic short story about race." (384)

Theories of interpretation here connect to the act of detection; we read, interpret the race, and reconstruct the narrative itself. As Juda Bennett argues, "Recitatif" is a passing story as well as "a metafictional tale, a story about the construction of stories, a fiction that turns outward to challenge" (214). If *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a metafictional tale, as is Morrison's "Recitatif," then it is not only we as readers who are reading and interpreting the racial identity of the character. It is also the detective, Easy himself, who is reading and interpreting.

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the impossibility of reading race in Daphne is juxtaposed with the impossibility of attaining her, loving her. Overlapping these two acts – reading and loving – the novel ultimately reveals the impossibility of racial identity as well as an unfulfilled narrative of love.

It is crucial that Easy's feelings toward Daphne are depicted as an unknowable affinity to her from the first time he sees her picture given to him by Albright. Daphne's picture "had been black and white originally but it was touched up for color like the photos of jazz singers that they put out in front of nightclubs" (18). Daphne is first introduced to us with photograph that is already "touched up," colored. Easy finds this "young white woman" attractive and thinks she is "worth looking for" (18). Easy, although he has no legitimate reason for keeping it, cannot even return the picture to Albright: "I don't know why I wanted to keep her picture. It's just that the way she looked out at me made me feel good" (53). This unexplainable feeling toward Daphne continues and grows during the course of the narrative. Easy even admits that he was not in a stable state of mind when he was with Daphne. From some vantage point Easy, as narrator, looks back on the night he made love to her:

When I look back on that night I feel confused. I could say that Daphne was crazy but that would mean that I was sane enough to say, and I wasn't. If she wanted me to hurt, I loved to hurt, and if she wanted me to bleed, I would have been happy to open a vein. Daphne was like a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of a sudden flung open and let me in. My heart and chest opened as wide as the sky for that woman. (161)

If the "mystery's solution supplies a temporary sense of self through which the reader is offered an apparatus for negotiating the boundaries that define identity" (McCraken 50), then

it could be said that Easy here is searching for his “self.” In other words, Easy’s act of reading Daphne converges with his act of reading himself. The way Easy describes how he felt for Daphne is remarkable:

I never felt drawn to a woman the way I was to Daphne Monet. Most beautiful women make me feel like I want to touch them, own them. But Daphne made me look inside myself. She’d whisper a sweet word and I was brought back to the first time I felt love and loss. I was remembering my mother’s death, back when I was only eight, by the time Daphne got to my belly. (159)

Easy’s bewilderment here suggests his relationship with Daphne to be an inmost search of himself. What does he find when Easy looks inside of himself? Here, Easy is remembering his first love and loss, and it might not be about his amorous relationship with his ex-girlfriends, but possibly about his relationship with his mother, who abandoned him when he was little. It is a troubling image that Daphne reaching toward his genitals is collaged with Easy’s mother’s death. This image signifies the very unattainability and impossibility of love that Easy tries to decipher. The irony here is that what changes Daphne is not her decision to change herself in accordance with her men, but the different ways of interpreting her. “Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man” (161). For Easy, Daphne is the woman who embodies the origin of love and its loss.

Thus, his reading of Daphne is never successful, because the act of reading always comes back to Easy himself. Hearing Daphne’s bold talk, Easy thinks, “I never liked it when women talked like that. I felt it was masculine. But, beneath her bold language, Daphne seemed to be asking me for something. And all I wanted was to reach as far down in my soul

as I could to find it” (160). Curiously enough, Easy’s sexual desire is replaced by his emotional desire to fulfill Daphne’s emotional needs. Readers never know what Daphne was asking for – neither does Easy. Easy’s reading of Daphne culminates to a point at which he cannot read her anymore. The point where Daphne is revealed, through circumstantial evidence, to the reader as non-white is simultaneously the point where Easy himself is not convinced because there are no direct evidences that indicate Daphne is actually black. Easy wanders into an interpretive cul-de-sac, where he has to face Daphne herself, not the interpretation of her. When Daphne tells Easy that she has to leave town because she is not the woman he knows anymore, Easy narrates; “I didn’t really want her to stay. Daphne Monet was death herself. I was glad that she was leaving. But I would have taken her in a second if she’d asked me to” (179). Easy’s powerful attraction for Daphne is, figuratively, fatal because it means that he has to stop trying to read her if he accepts her, which is to say that he has to stop detecting – his very means to possessing meaning. What death signifies here is the end of interpretation, the end of words. The “devil” in a blue dress, who can symbolically drive Easy to his death, is, paradoxically, the very embodiment of love itself, a place where he, as a reading subject, has to surrender his autonomy into her loving arms.

4. Being a Writer and Black: Contemporary American Literary Landscape and Race

The act of reading the racial identity of others overlaps with Easy’s inability to love in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Both reading race and reading love are acts of interpreting fellow human beings. Reading race means contextualizing race as a human classification, as explained in the beginning of this chapter. In this sense, it does not provide us with the actual experience of reading of humans. The actual experience of race is much more powerful, enmeshing readers into the chaos of interpretation. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the love that

Easy simultaneously desire and deny is precisely on the border of conceptual, and is therefore both a coherent understanding of race and a confusing experience of race. Reading race relies on “one drop rule,” which refers to a colloquial law that classified any individuals with even the smallest amount of African American ancestry as black to pinpoint a character’s racial identity. Yet if we focus on Easy’s narrative of love in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the novel reveals a narrative of unattainability, the human inability to grasp racial essence, the absurdity of race as a concept, and the inevitability of race as experience.

Examining Mosley’s work with a focus on the detective fiction form shows us how we are entrapped in the contemporary ethnic/racial critical reading. Berger rather negatively criticizes this ambiguity/incoherency: “Ultimately, in his L.A. detective fiction, Mosley addresses, but doesn’t fully answer, larger questions about the uneasy relationship between African-American literature and American literature as a whole” (292). Berger’s and most previous criticism adopt the presupposition of racial appropriation. As explained above, when we are entangled in *Devil in a Blue Dress* on the rhetorical level, the text reveals not the heroine’s racial identity, but rather her ambiguity and unstable sense of self. This reading opens up the possibilities as well as impossibilities of racial identity politics, which were dominant in the last half of the 20th century and now, while deeply indebted, we are trying to find a newer critical framework. Contemporary literary criticism itself needs to be aware of how racial reading (assessment of racial reading) is based on the framework that presumes “race” at the center of the discussion. *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a significant example of where racial reading is both possible and impossible, and we should be aware of the latter alternative when we discuss race in this novel. Mosley’s comment on his Easy Rawlins series, perhaps, tells us what is at stake in the critical act of reading *Devil in a Blue Dress*: “The genre may be mystery, but the underlying questions are moral and ethical, even existential”

(qtd. in Berger 290). By challenging our own epistemological framework, reading *Devil in a Blue Dress* as a narrative of love leads us to the questions of contemporary moral, ethical, and existential condition.

Notes for Chapter 1

¹ For the terminological confusion on the word “race,” see Paul Lawrence Farber, *Mixing Races: From Scicentific Racism to Modern Evolutionary Ideas* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2011), p. 30. Throughout the book Farber delineates how the notions of race and cross-fertilization in biology were incorporated into the social and cultural notion of race and miscegenation, enforcing and promoting racial discrimination.

² For passing narrative, see Juda Bennett, *Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996).

³ Mosley is also compared to Chester Himes, another black writer of detective fiction. For the discussions of differences and similarities between these two writers, see Scott and Crooks.

⁴ Helen Lock, “Invisible Detection: The Case of Walter Mosley.” *MELUS*, Vol.26, No. 1, *Varieties of the Ethnic Experience* (Spring, 2001), pp. 77-89.

⁵ Robert Crooks, “From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley.” *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 3. *Race and Politics: The Experience of African American Literature* (Oct., 1995), pp. 68-90.