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Descent into the Easy Rawlins mysteries series: Walter Mosley and the return of the Black detective

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DESCENT INTO THE *EASY RAWLINS MYSTERIES SERIES*: WALTER MOSLEY AND THE RETURN OF THE BLACK DETECTIVE

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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To my Grandfather, Wilburn Dexter Fitzpatrick, Sr. Thank you for always being in my corner. Rest in peace.

"I put the tray of enchiladas in the refrigerator to keep until dinnertime. Then I chopped tomatoes, Bermuda onions, and a little green pepper together with ripe avocado to make a light relish-like salad. I laced it with lime and a touch of cayenne (I couldn't make it too hot because then Feather wouldn't be able to eat it). The rice I baked in a tomato sauce mixed with minced garlic and two hot peppers. I sprinkled in a handful of tiny dried shrimps to give my kids a treat."

Walter Mosley
A Little Yellow Dog

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes six novels published by acclaimed detective fiction author Walter Mosley between the years 1990-1997: *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Red Death*, *White Butterfly*, *Black Betty*, *A Little Yellow Dog*, and *Gone Fishin'*. Collectively, these novels comprise what is referred to as the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. This analysis also identifies these six works as the "canonical novels" in the series due to the linear chronological progression of the first five narratives, which take place between the years 1948-1963, and their common Los Angeles setting. Mosley's final novel of the nineteen-nineties, *Gone Fishin'*, is a prequel set in the year 1936, and before the events depicted in *Devil*. The series is currently ongoing. The following prolonged examination of the earliest installments in the series stems from close readings of the novels, related critical secondary sources, and interviews with the author.

I argue that as Mosley's six narratives trace the gradual development of the protagonist, Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, from a World War II military veteran into a skilled private investigator, the author also dwells upon the significance of Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity. During the course of my analysis, I concluded that Mosley's initial introduction of the character to readers in the turbulent and transformative sociopolitical/economic landscape of the nineteen-nineties represents a profound reinterpretation of the Black male protagonist in the detective fiction genre. Easy Rawlins is a radically new iteration of the Black detective. Mosley utilizes his distinctive, and entertaining investigative persona in order to simultaneously return the Black private eye

to a position of prominence within the reading public's collective imagination, and to explore new possibilities for the literary portrayals of heroic Black men.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Walter Mosley's wildly popular detective fiction series, *The Easy Rawlins Mysteries*, began in 1990 with the publication of the celebrated novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*. *Devil* introduced the reading public to a radically new type of Black detective named Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, who was famously portrayed on the silver screen by Denzel Washington in the 1995 Carl Franklin cinematic adaptation of the novel. The success of Mosley's first novel spawned five subsequent installments in the series: *A Red Death*, *White Butterfly*, *Black Betty*, *A Little Yellow Dog*, and *Gone Fishin'*. These narratives, with the exception of the sixth novel, adhere to a relatively strict timeline that extends from the late nineteen-forties to the early nineteen-sixties. *Gone Fishin'*, Mosley's last *Easy Rawlins Mystery* of the nineteen-nineties, takes place in the late nineteen-thirties; long before the events portrayed in the first five novels. It's also worth noting that Mosley continues to publish new works in the series to this very day.

My thesis argues that the appearance of Easy Rawlins on the literary landscape of the early to mid-90's marks Mosley's effort to reintroduce the Black detective to the American popular imagination. Mosley reinterprets the role of the Black male hero in the detective fiction genre. Throughout the pages of the first five books, Easy steadily transforms from an unemployed, World War II veteran into a skilled private investigator and family man. In these novels, Mosley contemplates the meaning and importance of Black male heroism, Black manhood, and Black domesticity.

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PREFACE

Walter Mosley's rise as a celebrated author of detective fiction in the last decade of the twentieth century is directly related to the popularity of his most famous character: Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins. A native of Houston, Texas, and a military veteran, Easy emigrates along with countless other Black folks from the southwest to California during the course of a Post-World War II Great Migration[1]. Introduced in 1990 within the pages of Mosley's first published novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy steadily evolves into a highly skilled private investigator who utilizes a unique combination of intelligence, boldness, and "street smarts" to solve complex crimes committed at all levels of the rigid social caste system that exists in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles. Mosley's famed *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* begins with the publication of *Devil*, and the release of five subsequent narratives: *A Red Death* (1991), *White Butterfly* (1992), *Black Betty* (1994), *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), and *Gone Fishin'* (1997). Collectively, these six publications are referred to as the "canonical novels" in this thesis due to the linear chronological progression of the first five narratives, which take place between the years 1948-1963, and their common Los Angeles setting. Mosley's final novel of the nineteen-nineties, *Gone Fishin'*, is a prequel set in the year 1936, and before the events depicted in *Devil*. The series is currently ongoing.

Between the years 1990-1997, as an overwhelming majority of the nation bids a fond farewell to a relatively brief Bush presidency, and enthusiastically inaugurates a

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[1] "The Great Migration" is typically defined as the movement of African Americans from the south to urban-industrial cities in the north and Midwest; e.g. Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, Detroit, etc. Mosley focuses on a unique branch of this movement that traces the migrations of Black folks from areas such as Texas, to metropolitan areas located on the West Coast of the United States; e.g. Los Angeles.

much longer Clinton[2] administration, Mosley utilizes Easy's distinctive, and entertaining investigative persona in order to simultaneously return the Black private eye to a position of prominence within the reading public's collective imagination[3], and to explore new possibilities for the literary portrayals of heroic Black men. During this pivotal early period in his prolific literary career, the author dwells upon the significance of Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity. Mosley's initial introduction of the character to readers in the turbulent and transformative sociopolitical/economic landscape of the nineteen-nineties represents a profound reinterpretation of the Black male protagonist in the detective fiction genre. Easy Rawlins is a radically new iteration of the Black detective that is well suited to reflect and deconstruct the profoundly complicated issues associated with the high rates of Black male incarceration, Black-on-Black crime, and Black unemployment that characterize the early to mid-nineties. The particular brand of Black manhood that Easy represents, which could be briefly characterized as an endearing Texas bravado, also compliments the adamant calls for Black male unity inherent in such events as the Million Man March (1995). The character's military service, his steadfast commitment to a very local form of community uplift, and the way in which he gradually develops into the guardian of a burgeoning home and family, also provide crucial counterarguments to the negative portrayals of Black men that are widely disseminated

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[2] It's worth noting that Mosley is former President Bill Clinton's favorite author. See *New York Magazine*, "Free Radical" by Logan Hill: "At 53, when other best-selling authors might be content to coast on expectations, Mosley is merrily taking risks. Of those next five books, only one is in the mystery genre that's made him one of the world's most-read authors (and, famously, Bill Clinton's favorite writer)" (1).

[3] Within the rich and lengthy history of African American detective fiction, the author who is most analogous to Mosley is Chester Himes, whose famous Harlem detective novels serve as an essential literary precursor to the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*.

throughout the nation in the aftermath of controversial events such as the Rodney King beating/verdict (1991-1992), the Los Angeles Riots (1992), and the O.J. Simpson trial (1995). The appealing qualities of Mosley's heroic detective also stand in stark contrast to discussions related to the absence of Black fathers in African American households, and the crisis of Black masculinity.

The historical context surrounding the publication of Mosley's novels clarifies the assertion that the skillful development of his protagonist and the hardboiled fictional microcosm that he inhabits is also connected to an implicit contemplation of the complexities of the African American past that also seeks to grapple with the harsh sociopolitical/economic realities confronting Black folks and the nation at the dawn of a new, and immensely transformative decade; the nineteen-nineties. The author's celebration of the black male protagonist within the pages of the canonical *Easy Rawlins Mysteries* narratives and in the midst of the critical historical and cultural milestones alluded to above illuminates significant conclusions concerning the impact of his work on the detective fiction genre, the immense value of his contribution to the canon of African American detective fiction specifically, and the great popularity of his character among those enthusiastic readers who are entertained by Mosley's intriguing, and humorous narratives. His intense focus on the elements of Black male heroism, Black masculinity, and Black domesticity becomes abundantly clear as one delves into the seedy underbelly and the corrupt upper echelons of late nineteen-forties Los Angeles in the pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which depicts Easy's initial foray into the treacherous world of private investigation and his effort to obtain some quick cash to save his beloved home; his own small piece of the "American Dream." As the extended linear chronological progression

of the canonical novels transitions into the nineteen-fifties, and into the pages of *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, readers witness Easy's effort to further hone his investigative skills while also acting as the landlord of several valuable rental properties, becoming a doting husband and father, and taking on the role of adoptive caregiver of two orphaned and abused children named Jesus and Feather.[4] *Black Betty* and *A Little Yellow Dog* portray a much more mature Easy Rawlins struggling to come to terms with the poignant reemergence of a woman from his past- a tragic figure who elicits hazy memories of his days as an orphan roaming the streets of Houston's dangerous and poverty-stricken Fifth Ward- and to cope with the disturbing deaths of his notoriously homicidal friend, fellow Houston émigré, and investigative ally Raymond "Mouse" Alexander and President John F. Kennedy; who are killed on the same fateful day, November 22, 1963. Finally, Mosley's last canonical novel of the nineteen-nineties, the prequel *Gone Fishin'*, seeks to further clarify the mysterious details of Easy's childhood, and to portray a pivotal chapter of his life as a young adult living in Houston's Fifth Ward in the late nineteen-thirties; at the height of the Great Depression, and shortly before the character's entrance into the U.S. military during the World War II era.

Mosley's detective courageously faces the constant threats posed by the racist White men serving as officers in the Los Angeles Police Department, whose law enforcement policies became a key factor in the pivotal historical events that directly affected large segments of L.A.'s Black community in the early nineties,[5] and the

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[4] Jesus, a Mexican boy, is introduced in *Devil in a Blue Dress* as a victim of child abuse; specifically, sexual molestation. Easy adopts Feather- who is biracial- as an infant near the conclusion of *White Butterfly* after she is abandoned due to the murder of her White, biological mother.

[5] Here I refer to the Rodney King beating/verdict, and the L.A. riots.

dangerous figures that populate the city's criminal underworld. These treacherous, and often nearly fatal, interactions between Mosley's protagonist, the guardians of White hegemony, and Los Angeles's criminal element provide insight into the character's heroism. Easy is incarcerated, beaten, and nearly killed on several occasions in each installment in the series, and yet, he never fails to stand in courageous opposition to both Whites and Blacks who continue to revive the legacy of the Jim Crow south(west) on America's west coast. A significant confrontation depicted in the pages of *Black Betty* features Easy calling a White man a "cracker" for the first time in his troubled life. Importantly, he connects the relief he experiences after defiantly enunciating the racial epithet to the early phases of the Civil Rights struggle. He states that, despite his lack of involvement in the key major organizations that characterize the movement- such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference- "…I had to make my little stand for what's right. It was a little piece of history that happened right there in that room and that went unrecorded" (Mosley, 147). Easy's heroism is also directly related to the character's keen intelligence and wit, which he utilizes in order to outwit the agents and institutions of White hegemony as he doggedly pursues his investigative goals.

Easy's military service on the brutal battlefronts of Europe can be most suitably analyzed through the lens of his bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity.. The protagonist's traumatic experiences of witnessing death on a massive scale as a soldier in General George Patton's army, and as a liberator of Jewish prisoners perishing by the millions in the Nazi extermination camps, haunt him throughout the series; particularly in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and to a certain degree in *A Red Death*, *White Butterfly*, and in a key scene near the conclusion of *Gone Fishin'*, which depicts Easy in

post-war Paris.[6] As his protagonist develops into a more sophisticated investigator, Mosley continues to emphasize the value of Easy's veteran status by introducing two key figures: the White ex-con and Iowa native Alamo and a fellow private eye from the south named Saul Lynx; two fellow veterans who gradually earn Easy's trust as he expands the boundaries of his investigations beyond Watts, Los Angeles.[7] Furthermore, the great amount of discipline that informs Easy's rather conservative life as a property owner and family man- even as he engages in a variety of affairs with various women and associates with the more unsavory elements of Los Angeles' diverse local community during the course of his investigations- stems from his time serving in the military. The violent nature of Easy's life in the perilous streets of Los Angeles is analogous to his service as a member of America's "Greatest Generation", and the protagonist navigates the thrilling twists and turns of his investigations with the same amount of skill and caution. As Easy deals with these constant threats to his personal safety, and privacy, he refuses to relinquish his right to define his manhood according to his own terms. Moreover, the informal, and often loose, code of conduct that defines much of Easy's behavior throughout the series also stems from his Houston, Texas roots and from his service in the U.S. military.

Easy's devotion to his home and family highlight the significance of Black domesticity in Mosley's series of novels, and it is this particular element of the narratives that makes them so unique within the canon of African American detective fiction;

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[6] While *Gone Fishin'* depicts Easy's highly significant journey, with "Mouse", from Houston, TX to the relatively small town of Pariah, the final pages of the novel reveal that the narrative is a prolonged flashback that takes place within the character's consciousness as he sits in a hotel room in post-war Paris.

[7] Alamo is a World War I veteran, and Lynx is a fellow World War II veteran from the south.

particularly when Mosley's work is compared to that of an essential forerunner like Chester Himes, whose Harlem detective novels lack such a strong emphasis on the nuances of Black domestic life.[8] While it could be argued that Himes's *Harlem Detective Novels* are the most apt literary precursor to Mosley's *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* due to the intense, and prolonged focus in these works on the depiction of a particular metropolitan locale over an extended chronological period[9], Mosley complicates Easy often problematic machismo by meticulously portraying his effort to become a good husband, and father. Easy requires more than mere physical gratification to feel fulfilled. More than anything, he desires stability- for himself and for those who depend upon his care- and the love of a good woman. Mosley's protagonist acutely sense his need to leave his life in the treacherous Los Angeles streets behind in order to settle into a far more stable, domestic existence. The author best summarizes the desires of his detective near the end of *A Little Yellow Dog*, when Easy is told by a close male associate named John[10] that he requires "…A woman who wants a home an' ain't gonna take no shit" (Mosley, 299). The many poignant scenes depicting Easy's relationship with his wife, Regina, his biological daughter, Edna, and two adopted children, Jesus and Feather, effectively soften the otherwise hardboiled nature of the protagonist's bold masculinity. Despite the increasingly challenging demands placed upon him by his various investigations

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[8] Writing for the *New Yorker* (June, 2001), Hilton Als makes the following comments on Himes's detective fiction and his Black male characters: "Himes produced male characters who really were *noir*—in fact and in sensibility. Unapologetic and testosterone-driven, they weren't hard-done-by; they were in love with having been done wrong. Turned on by their own bravado, they claimed entitlement and viewed sex as a struggle for power—the only form of intimacy that engaged them." See "In Black and White: Chester Himes takes a walk on the noir side."

[9] Mosley's series focuses on Los Angeles. Himes's works concentrate on Harlem.

[10] John is first introduced in *Devil in a Blue Dress* as the proprietor of an illegal, and highly successful, Los Angeles bar and nightclub.

throughout the series, Easy must always find a way to make it home in order to continue caring for his family, and attending to the details of his private life.

These three essential elements of Mosley's detective fiction, which are again, the author's prolonged and intensive examination of the significance of Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity, are consistently highlighted in each installment of the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Mosley's profound reinterpretation of the Black male protagonist in the detective fiction genre clarifies the complexity and significance of his heroic private investigator as a radically new iteration of the Black detective. The appearance of Easy Rawlins on the literary landscape of the early to mid-90's marks Mosley's effort to reintroduce the Black detective to the American popular imagination. His bold and uncompromising sleuth simultaneously represents a much longed-for, though flawed, yet endearing type of Black manhood that also seems to be examined in the romanticized portrayals of strong-willed, eminent Black male figures such as Malcolm X[11] in the early nineteen-nineties. Easy's devotion to the maintenance of his home and the protection of his family also reflects the calls for a greater degree of Black male involvement in African American domestic spaces, and Black male civic leadership and responsibility, originating from such widely disseminated and impactful portrayals and from significant public gatherings of Black men such as the Million Man March. Importantly, this momentous assembly took place a little less than one month after the release of the cinematic adaptation of Mosley's first novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which starred

[11] Actor Denzel Washington famously portrayed both Easy Rawlins and Malcolm X in two film released in 1995 and 1992 respectively. Washington stars in the cinematic adaptation of Mosley's first published novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

celebrated actor Denzel Washington as Easy Rawlins.[12] Washington's stirring performance, and his gift for breathing life into strong and intelligent Black male characters on the silver screen, provides further evidence supporting the three critical elements of Mosley's works.

The seemingly ordinary nature of Mosley's protagonist importantly belies his calculating intelligence. Throughout the series, it is important that others, especially Whites, underestimate Easy. The fact that they do so, more often than not, permits him to further his investigative aims and/or to create innovative solutions of his own to acquire the information that he seeks. Easy's sharp mental faculties underlie all three of the literary elements of Mosley's fiction named above. The long arc of his character development begins as the author portrays him as a primarily self-interested, fairly conservative individual whose sole desire is to obtain sufficient funds to pay the mortgage on his beloved home. Easy utilizes a unique combination of "street smarts", skillful detection and adaptation, and military tactics- acquired from his service in World War II- to survive the various pitfalls that Mosley lays out for him within the successive pages of his thrilling, and intricately woven narratives. His ability and willingness to survive the perilous events depicted in the series also ensures his inevitable arrival at home in the aftermath of these events, during which he is often forced to rest and recuperate after suffering grievous physical and emotional injuries.

Notably, in the series' fourth installment, *Black Betty*, Easy relies on his adopted son Jesus for impromptu medical assistance after suffering a serious stab wound: "…'Is it

[12] The cinematic version of *Devil in a Blue Dress* was released on September 29, 1995. The Million Man March took place the following month on October 16, 1995.

a knife?' I asked him (Jesus). 'It's an ice pick,' he answered in perfect articulate English. 'All right, son,' I said lowering myself down to my knees. 'I want you to put both hands around it and pull it out the same way it went in. It might hurt me enough that I faint for a minute but that's okay. You take a wad of that gauze and press it against the wound until you're sure that it's stopped bleeding. You understand?' 'Yes, Daddy.' And then he did it- all at once and with no hesitation. 'Uhh-ah!' I groaned. There came a bright yellow light, not in my eyes but in the whole upper part of my brain" (Mosley, 141). Mosley also cleverly manages to emphasize the carefully measured balance between Easy's intellect and his "common sense." Easy is a lover of literature and reading, and alludes to the works of Marcus Aurelius, Ian Fleming, and Emile Zola with a relative amount of ease. However, as the character humorously notes, "…I love literature but the phone book was still my favorite reading. It was the ledger of my world" (Mosley, 105). Mosley's skillful combination of his heroic detective's intelligence, bravado, and empathy further emphasize the three essential elements of his fiction.

In conclusion, it is again important to consider that the return of the Black detective to a position of prominence within the minds containing the American reading public's consciousness due to the emergence of Mosley as an acclaimed author of a distinctively new, and entertaining type of detective fiction allows the prolific novelist to explore new possibilities for the literary portrayals of heroic Black men. And once again, it is worth noting that Mosley's clever emphasis on Easy's heroism, his bold masculinity, and his enthusiastic endorsement of domesticity makes the character particularly suitable to inspire an African American male audience seeking to consider and deconstruct complex issues pertaining to Black male leadership, manhood, marriage, fatherhood, and

civic responsibility in the early to mid-nineteen nineties. Mosley's contemplation of these highly significant matters take place within the context of the stifling political and economic social realities associated with the conclusion of the Reagan/Bush era in America, and the dawn of a more optimistic, but equally problematic and morally flawed Clinton administration. His protagonist's desire to secure a firm and stable connection to land and community, which is articulated throughout *The Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, addresses the precarious state of Black manhood during this transformative era; particularly as it pertains to those individuals struggling to survive on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Easy resides, in the first three installments in the series,[13] in a pre-Civil Rights, segregated urban world, but more importantly, he is always-already a native of Houston, Texas.

Easy's Houston roots are also reflected in the three critical elements of Mosley's fiction, and they greatly inform his cunning "street smarts" and folk wisdom. Despite his long period of residency in Los Angeles, he is in many ways a stranger in a strange land seeking to work the system, not work within it, in order to make a profit and gain the advantage; to gain the upper hand over the guardians of the institutions and mechanisms of White hegemony. He is neither a protestor nor a politician, but nonetheless, he is actively and intimately engaged in the inner workings of his mostly Houston émigré community. His struggles are intensely personal, and yet they subtly evoke the many complex geographical migrations and histories of Black folk enthusiastically reading the intriguing narrative in which he is depicted. The concerns weighing on Easy's troubled fictional mind cleverly reflect the very real matters of socioeconomic inequality,

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[13] *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Red Death*, and *White Butterfly*.

disproportionate rates of imprisonment, and joblessness that were particularly burdensome for Black men in the nineteen-nineties. Mosley comments on these harsh realities through his heroic detective as he also dwells on the significance of such concepts as community, uplift, collaboration, and ownership, history, roots, and the past; which is simultaneously haunting and a source of strength for Easy throughout the pages of the series.

The following prolonged examination of the earliest installments in Mosley's *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* stems from close readings of the novels, related critical secondary sources, and interviews with the author. All of the concerns stated above will form the core of this thesis, which argues that as Mosley's six canonical narratives trace Easy's gradual development from a World War II military veteran into a skilled private investigator, the author also dwells upon the significance of Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity. Easy Rawlins is not the first black male private eye to appear in the canon of African American literature, but his initial appearance on the literary landscape of the early nineteen-nineties represents a highly significant reinterpretation of the role of the Black male protagonist in the detective fiction genre. Easy Rawlins is a radically new iteration of the Black detective; one that adamantly and consistently emphasizes the protagonist's fervent devotion to actively exhibiting heroism, an assertive Houston, Texas bravado, and a profound love of his role within his private domestic space.

Chapter One, "DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS, 1990", prioritizes the protagonist's determination to maintain his property and defend the sanctity of his home, which stresses the importance of Black domesticity. Easy's willingness to pursue the funds

needed to secure his domestic existence, his numerous confrontations with the agents and institutions of White hegemony, and his calculating intelligence highlight the significance of Black male heroism. Furthermore, these attributes, along with the character's intimate connection with his southwestern roots, his military service, and his numerous recollections of his traumatic experiences during the war, emphasize the protagonist's bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity. This chapter will also analyze several other aspects of Mosley's first novel that are related to the three essential elements of the narrative named above.

Chapter Two, "DESCENT INTO THE EASY RAWLINS MYSTERIES: A RED DEATH AND WHITE BUTTERFLY, 1991-1992", examines the transition of the series' chronology from the post-WWII period to the Cold War era, and analyzes Easy's evolution into a much more sophisticated private investigator, an ambitious owner of numerous rental properties, and devoted family man. Chapter Three, "THE LAST NOVELS OF THE NINETIES, PART I: BLACK BETTY AND A LITTLE YELLOW DOG, 1994-1996", considers the repercussions of the reemergence of significant figures and elements from Easy's past in Houston, TX, and the protagonist's effort to settle down into a stable domestic existence with his adopted children. Finally, Chapter Four, "THE LAST NOVELS OF THE NINETIES, PART II: GONE FISHIN', 1997", explores the vivid portrayal of Easy's young adult life and childhood in order to identify the origins of the three essential elements of Mosley's fiction that shape the character's development in the five previous installments in the series. Mosley utilizes Easy's distinctive, and entertaining investigative persona in order to simultaneously return the Black private eye to a position of prominence within the American reading public's collective imagination,

and to explore new possibilities for the literary portrayals of heroic Black men in detective fiction. The three essential elements of Mosley's *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* novels identified above underlie the author's depiction of his detective's steadfast commitment to claim and guard his stake in the "American Dream", by any means necessary.

CHAPTER ONE – "*DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS*, 1990"

Walter Mosley's celebrated character Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins is a new type of Black detective who, while he does fall in the tradition of Chester Himes' Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson and thus is imprinted with the narrative legacy that those characters represent, is nonetheless crafted out of the African American literary tradition in order to represent a unique interpretation of the Black male protagonist in detective fiction. Easy is an updated and modified trickster figure[14]; a man who utilizes his wits and his will to outsmart White authority figures in an oppressive world and to make a way for himself, and often, those individuals who inhabit his closely knit community in Watts, Los Angeles. Mosley, in his first novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*, portrays Easy as a seemingly ordinary man down on his luck, having just returned from the uncompromising brutality of World War II, and struggling to readjust to the malaise of civilian life and the various minutia that accompany it.

His primary concern, for instance, is figuring out a means of paying his mortgage, and it is this need to secure financial stability and maintain ownership of his beloved home that frames the narrative of the first entry in the critically acclaimed *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Mary Young, in her insightful article "Walter Mosley, Detective Fiction and Black Culture" makes a significant observation regarding the ways in which Mosley draws from the deep well of African American literary traditions while still managing to honor the writer's task of presenting fresh interpretations of the characters that

[14] Mary Young explains that the "trickster" figure is, " … (a) Black hero (who) is not on a quest. He does not want to rescue a damsel in distress nor does he desire to accomplish a noble deed" (142).

traditionally populate the grim fictional realities of detective novels: "Mosley does more than create protagonists in the hard-boiled tradition. Through exploration of his cultural identity, he has created a unique hero from an African-American perspective. By using aspects of traditional Black culture, Mosley has taken the two heroic characters, the trickster and bad Black man, and updated them while retaining many of their historic attributes of deception, misdirection, and violence" (Young, 150). Indeed, unlike his predecessors, Easy is an amateur who begins his transformation into a seasoned and skilled private investigator by utilizing his intimate knowledge of the Black community and its inhabitants to provide a gateway[15], or a lens, for the broader White world to peer into the inner workings of otherwise impenetrable spaces.

Furthermore, to elaborate on Young's argument, not only does Mosley present African American folkloric character types in new, innovative ways; he also infuses the detective fiction genre with a signature style, a bravado[16], that portrays the Black male protagonist as a cunning hero determined to beat the odds that are always-already stacked against him in order to fulfill his own particular vision of the "American Dream". For Easy, this vision centers squarely on his basic need to be a man of property; a proud, dignified citizen and homeowner in a predominantly Black community. Therefore, as it pertains to *Devil*, this chapter will prioritize the protagonist's determination to maintain his property and defend the sanctity of his home, which stresses the importance of Black

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[15] George English Brooks argues that Easy's ability to negotiate the limitations placed upon him by the broader White society permits him to gain access to the public and private spaces portrayed in Mosley's novels.

[16] Importantly, Ruíz-Velasco asserts that Black masculinity is not a static concept. It is a protean issue: "Mosley does not offer a definitive black masculinity because in the face of white racist patriarchal society such a masculinity proves untenable" (136).

domesticity. Easy's willingness to pursue the funds needed to secure his domestic existence, his numerous confrontations with the agents and institutions of White hegemony, and his calculating intelligence highlight the significance of Black male heroism. Furthermore, these attributes, along with the character's intimate connection with his southwestern roots, his military service, and his numerous recollections of his traumatic experiences during the war, emphasize the protagonist's bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity. This chapter will also analyze several other aspects of Mosley's first novel that are related to the three essential elements of the narrative named above.

The intrigue and peril that characterizes Easy Rawlins's investigations in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries* series is always juxtaposed to the portrait of a complicated man trying to live a simple life; taking care of common place, domestic concerns like paying the mortgage, investing in property and hiring workers to help him manage them, working in the yard, planting a few plants and crops here and there. Mosley's narrative weaves complex webs of intrigue that always, nonetheless, manage to return Easy to the temporary sanctuary of his house, which is also visited and invaded by gangsters, policemen, and Easy's nefarious, infamous childhood friend Raymond "Mouse" Alexander throughout the novel. Easy's narration, which adheres to the matter-of-fact, hardboiled Philip Marlowe male voice of the classic Raymond Chandler novels but also enriches it with unapologetic Black southern vernacular – the "natural, 'uneducated' dialect of (Easy's) upbringing"[17] (Mosley, 54) - first points toward the character's

[17] Daylanne K. English, in her article "The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction", argues that the "…collective, raced, and gendered experience of the Great Migration and

profound attachment to his home in the early portions of the novel. It's worth noting that while the office is usually portrayed as the sanctuary of the embattled and weary White male detective, Easy's home replaces it as the "base of operations" for the determined Black male protagonist struggling to face the antagonism of a racist society head-on. Easy suggests the centrality of his home after his initial meeting with the shady Mr. Albright in Joppy's bar at the beginning of the novel:

> I drove back to my house thinking about money and how much I needed to have some. I loved going home. Maybe it was that I was raised on a sharecropper's farm or that I never owned anything until I bought that house, but I loved my little home. There was an apple tree and an avocado in the front yard, surrounded by thick St. Augustine grass … The house itself was small. Just a living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen. The bathroom didn't even have a shower and the backyard was no larger than a child's rubber pool. But that house meant more to me than any woman I ever knew. I loved her and I was jealous of her and if the bank sent the county marshal to take her from me I might have come at him with a rifle rather than to give her up (Mosley, 56-57).

The struggles of the American homeowner are deeply embedded in the idea of the "American Dream", and Mosley harnesses these universal concerns in order to frame the transformation of his troubled protagonist from jobless veteran to skilled and experienced private eye.

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of segregated wartime service is perhaps best represented by Easy's flexible speech, yet that speech also reflects the contingencies of his experience, intelligence, and personality. In each of the books, he can and does shift smoothly among various forms of black vernacular and to standard English when he needs to" (780).

Another scene also illustrates this tension between middle-class aspirations and quick-witted, blue-collar instincts perfectly. The scene itself is typical of many that appear throughout the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries* series. It's yet another moment in which Easy basks in the transitory peace and quiet of his home; the maintenance of which, in this particular narrative, is intimately connected to notions of Black male heroism and Black masculinity. Easy's bachelor status in *Devil* also clarifies his need to ascribe a gender identity to his home. Mosley's depiction of Easy's attachment to his home prioritizes the issue of Black domesticity in the novel, and firmly ties it to Easy's heroism and masculinity. In a sense, the relationship between Easy and his home can be characterized as a fulfilling "marriage" that serves as the foundation of the protagonist's effort to readjust to civilian life after his harrowing experiences serving in Patton's army in Europe during the dark days of World War II.

The highlight of the scene is a humorous portrayal of Easy reading a letter sent by "Mouse". "Mouse" and the letter bridge Easy's intriguing, sophisticated Los Angeles existence to the sleepy, violent days of his youth in Houston, Texas. Before he reads the letter, Easy observes the mundane details of his home. For instance, he notices the sounds of the electric percolator in his kitchen, and birds chirping in his yard outside. He then looks out of his window to watch a curious jaybird perched on a fence above an agitated mongrel. One of his observations about the bird's curiosity seemingly characterizes his predicament as a Black private detective in post-WWII Watts. He notes: " … He just kept staring down into those deadly jaws, mesmerized by the spectacle there" (Mosley, 91). The depth of his meditation on the simple joys of home ownership, which as he comments include receiving both wanted and unwanted mail on a daily basis, also

reflects Easy's astute observation of the spectacle of human behavior in all of its various manifestations. And, indeed, all kinds of human behavior take place in Easy's home. He rests there, he's arrested (and harassed) there, and nearly murdered there. The most notable intruders on Easy's humble homestead are Albright, and his underlings Manny and Shariff, the Los Angeles Police Detectives Miller and Mason, who represent the violence inflicted upon Black male bodies by oppressive institutions committed to surveilling and incarcerating them, and Frank Green, an infamous criminal who is closely connected to Daphne Monet and the intrigue surrounding her whereabouts.

These are the antagonists that haunt Easy as he attempts to make sense of the murders of Coretta James – the girlfriend of another Houston emigrant Dupree who also attempts to extort Daphne Monet for money after speaking with Easy-, Richard McGee, and Howard Green. Albright and his minions intrude upon Easy's home as they pursue Monet and the money that she stole from her former boyfriend Todd Carter, Miller and Mason relentlessly harass Easy at home in order to verify their unfounded suspicion that he is somehow involved in the murders of James and McGee (a White man), and Frank Green breaks into the house in order to murder Easy once he hears about the amateur detective's interest in his illicit liquor trading activities. These violations of the protagonist's personal space, and his peace of mind, are situated between the relative calm of Easy's first appearance in Joppy's bar and his final conversation with his good friend Odell, a meek older gentleman, in his front yard at the end of the novel. Much of the narrative tension in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and Easy's gradual transformation into a private investigator, is directly related to the intrusion of the figures associated with his investigation into the formerly tranquil, "safe" space of his house. Mosley's emphasis on

the importance of Black domesticity in the novel is the most explicit representation of the protagonist's conception of the "American Dream", and it illuminates Easy's desire for stability and status. Nevertheless, it also signifies the fleeting nature of peace as it relates to Black life in the late forties[18].

The fact that so many nefarious individuals know where Easy lives also makes his need to develop and utilize the skills of deduction all the more urgent. Easy's shifting roles as pursuer and pursued therefore closely correspond to alternating moments of peace and turmoil in his home life, and interestingly, his troubled personal relationships are further explored in the subsequent installments in Mosley's *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Other, more implicit, matters of maintaining his privacy and declaring his right "to be left alone" are also intimately connected to the protagonist's effort to secure his domestic existence. A conversation that he has with Daphne Monet toward the end of the novel, while the two are secluded in a hideaway on land owned by Easy's Mexican friend Primo, highlights the desire of a modest homeowner like Mosley's protagonist to live in peace. Monet speaks of malevolent, unnamed forces that hinder this effort: "Do you feel it? … I mean this house. I mean us here, like we aren't who they want us to be … They don't have names. They're just the ones who won't let us be ourselves. They never want us to feel this good or be close like this. That's why I wanted to get away with you" (Mosley, 230). Such an intimate moment ties the privacy of home-like spaces to the inevitability of racial oppression, and the contrast between private spaces within which characters like Easy and Monet can be themselves and the chaos that accompanies them

[18]See Maggi M. Morehouse's *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II*.

throughout the novel also speaks to Mosley's effort to relate Black domesticity to the need to escape the White gaze[19].

While Easy and Monet, in many ways, both seek to escape into the tranquility of home-like domestic spaces, both also seek money, which is the primary motivation for Easy's gradual transformation into a heroic detective. Ultimately, Easy ends up burying quite a bit of cash in his backyard after receiving various sums from Albright and Carter. It's already been stated that Monet steals money from Carter as well; though, due to the intensity of his infatuation with Monet and his odd perception of her as a type of "mother/protector" figure, Carter does not object. Yet another literary manifestation of the tragic mulatto figure, Monet strides the thin permeable line between blackness and whiteness; a line that Easy also walks along and crosses throughout the narrative. Easy's mastery of the intricate details of his environment and the people that populate it is most closely tied to his deep reservoir of knowledge of both low and high culture. His heroism is primarily defined by his ability to navigate through the heart of L.A.'s Black community and to work various amounts of valuable contacts therein, which also translates into his capacity to rub elbows with, and often outwit, the White gatekeepers that inhabit the bowels of seedy police stations and the manicured environs of society's upper echelons.

He's also keenly aware of the fact that most of the people that he encounters have a complex set of motivations that are not necessarily attuned to his particular

[19] Daylanne K. English ties systems of White surveillance to notions of temporality by using the term "temporal double consciousness" to describe the ways in which " … Easy has been forced to adjust both bodily and temporally as a result of racially marked disciplinary structures" (362).

investigative needs. While he is always wary of the White world and its many trappings, he's also betrayed by black folks at various points in the narrative. As he encounters mortal danger on both sides of the color line, he learns that money is the key to survival, the key to obtaining power and influence, and that trust is not to be given lightly; no matter the color of the individual who seeks it. Joppy and Junior, another Houston émigré who strongly dislikes Easy, ultimately betray the protagonist for money. Easy's interaction with the extremely wealthy Todd Carter, in his lofty office building, also permits him to make some highly significant comments on the strange relationship between wealth and White racism: "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 or contempt that most white people showed when they dealt with me. It was a strange experience but I had seen it before. 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" (Mosley, 166). Both Easy and Monet negotiate complex relationships to other people of color and Whites. However, financial concerns bind them in a ceaseless, often exhausting, and indeed costly, quest to obtain some measure of happiness and security as they seek respite from the White world and its hostile agents. Easy's desire to obtain sufficient funds to maintain his property, and to retire to the tranquility of domesticity, also motivates his courageous exploration of Los Angeles's treacherous environments as his investigation unfolds. His willingness to exit the relative security of his domestic existence, and to directly confront White hegemony, also delineates his heroism in the novel.

In fact, he is approached by the character DeWitt Albright in the novel for that exact reason. Albright, a dubious former lawyer who has been hired by a wealthy White man named Todd Carter to find his missing fiancée – the elusive Daphne Monet- enlists Easy in the difficult effort to ascertain the woman's whereabouts precisely due to the fact that Albright cannot enter the spaces that she is known to frequent; i.e., Black clubs. These nightspots are normally visited by the denizens of Easy's émigré Houston, Texas community; those Black men and women who have forgone the traditional journey from the south to the north, and instead have decided to pursue the ideals articulated in the notion of the "American Dream" out west in California.[20] While many of the folks that inhabit this community have effectively transplanted their Texas roots and replanted them in Watts, Easy simultaneously infuses his home and his small plot of green grass with his southwestern mannerisms and those traumatic wartime experiences that consistently haunt him throughout the novel. Therefore, not only is Easy burdened by the legacy of structural racism that characterized and hindered his existence in Houston, he is also troubled by visions of dead and dying blond, blue-eyed German Nazis, and emaciated Jewish concentration camp prisoners. This extra dimension of Easy's mentality is also associated with his keen ability to analyze and draw extremely precise observations from his surrounding environment and the people that he encounters therein. He has an astonishing ability to notice even the minutest details of a man's clothing, or the way in which a particular room is decorated, for example. He is also capable of gathering and

[20] Stephen F. Soitos contends in his book *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, "…Mosley effectively comments on the flux of black American life without sacrificing important tropes of the detective tradition. His cast of black characters and a growing sophisticated perception of black consciousness cleverly reinterpret double-conscious detective themes" (235).

recalling a great amount of factual information, assessing an individual's character and potential motives, and "code-switching[21]" – speaking both in the familiar slang and broken English that characterizes his Black Texan vernacular and in "proper English", or in the voice of a White man, so as to effectively infiltrate and function in both predominantly Black and White environments.

While White men, occupying various levels of the social strata, do serve as symbolic gatekeepers, hindering Easy at many often critical points in the narrative, Mosley's amateur private eye must also overcome the harsh realities of intraracial conflict; jealousy, betrayal, and mistrust are issues brought to the forefront in Easy's interactions with the Black folks that he seeks out to gain information as he proceeds with his investigation. As Easy confronts antagonistic Whites, he must also carefully negotiate with his fellow Houston, Texas migrants as he pursues the goals outlined in his investigative agenda. Much of the danger and violence that exists in the White world also emanates from Easy's recollections of his youth in Texas. These memories simultaneously soothe and haunt Easy; particularly those related to "Mouse". Junior Fornay, the doorman/bouncer at John's Place – a popular and clandestine nightspot in which many of Easy's friends and associates gather, is a particularly problematic figure in the burgeoning detective's life. Gruff and unkempt, Junior is one of the first individuals that Easy questions with regard to Monet's whereabouts, and he does so while also trying to cautiously approach the dubious gangster Frank Green. While Easy is certainly forced to exercise the tools of double consciousness in his tense, more often

[21]See Charles E. DeBose's "Codeswitching: Black English and Standard English in the African-American Linguistic Repertoire", which was published in the edited book *Readings in African American Language: Aspects, Features, and Perspectives, Volume 2*.

than not, impersonal interactions with Whites, he remains equally guarded with those in his own community whom he does not trust. He seems to have a knack for getting individuals to divulge important details related to his investigation without revealing too much of his agenda. He is capable of gaining access to forbidden, exclusive spaces such as John's due to his standing in the community – another gatekeeper of sorts, Hattie Parsons, recognizes Easy as a regular when he first enters John's – but like any decent detective he knows how to manipulate people's willingness to trust a familiar face. In peeling back the layers of human nature, often during the course of his own inner dialogue, he hones his skills as an investigator and navigates his treacherous environment with intelligence and savvy. Indeed, his sharp mental acuity also relates to Easy's heroism. His intelligence and insight into the complexities of human nature served him well during WWII, and Mosley elaborates on the significance of Black male heroism to infuse Easy's character with a matter-of-fact perspective on the intricacies of life in segregated Los Angeles.

Those heroic traits that allow Easy to adjust to his newfound calling of private investigation can also be described as survival instincts that he developed on the unforgiving battlefields of WWII, upon which the difference between life and death depended on an individual's ability to successfully navigate through enemy territory, and to quickly recognize both allies and potential foes. Mosley clearly describes L.A. as a space that is still plagued by the same racial prejudices that Easy encountered during his youth in Houston. Therefore, it is important to note that Easy's experiences during the war allow him to treat L.A. much like Nazi Germany; as a type of enemy territory that he must skillfully navigate in order to achieve his goal. In the L.A. portrayed in *Devil in a*

Blue Dress, the agents of the Gestapo take the form of L.A.P.D. police officers; high-ranking Nazis and their underlings take the form of rich White men living in lofty office buildings and their thuggish, gangster henchmen. These character types are familiar crime fiction devices. By presenting a Black military veteran who is forced to become a private investigator, Mosley adds a fresh dimension of complexity to the detective genre and returns the heroic Black detective specifically to a position of prominence in the popular imagination.

Mosley has made it clear that Easy represents an amalgam of his father and mother's histories. Born to a Black father and a Jewish mother, Mosley is keen to emphasize the significance of Easy's presence during the liberation of Jewish concentration camp inmates, and notes that he desired to depict a heroic Black man who played a pivotal role in saving his mother's people from annihilation at the hands of the Nazis.[22] Easy's status as a Black military veteran makes him both a unique figure in the history of detective fiction and particularly suited to confront the challenges posed by the various figures that he encounters in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. He recalls serving with and killing White men during the war, and translates these informative and disturbing memories into insights that inform his detective work. These lessons become particularly handy when it comes to Easy's dealings with Albright, who in many ways embodies the dangers and madness associated with the White world, and especially White men, that Easy must enter into in order to seek the information that will lead to the resolution of his search for Monet. The fact that Monet violates the "one drop" rule makes Carter's

[22] See Mosley's conversation with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, "Live from the New York Public Library."

romance with her taboo, and provides Easy with another insight into the hypocrisy of White society.

Mosley's portrayal of a simple man of property doing what is necessary to secure his piece of the "American Dream" by obtaining the funds to pay his mortgage and realize his vision of happiness also reveals the author's contemplation of the protagonist's role in deconstructing issues related to Black masculinity. The bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, the Texas bravado, that Easy evinces in the novel simultaneously stems from his intimate connection to his southwestern roots and from his military service. Easy's home, and his practical need for money, reflect the efforts of a traumatized military veteran to adjust to the malaise of civilian life back in the states. Specifically, Mosley's protagonist struggles to comes to terms with the harsh reality and insistence of a White racist society that refuses to acknowledge and honor his valiant service in one of the most devastating conflicts the nation's military has ever experienced. Easy's constant reflection on his youth in Houston, Texas, and his various flashbacks to scenes of the combat that he witnessed in Europe, certainly suggests the character's unacknowledged effort to cope with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder[23]. Of course, being a southerner at heart, Easy's narration insinuates that he expects Whites to behave in a static manner, and that he is always prepared to defend himself from racist aggressors. However, within this nonchalance regarding the arbitrary disdain of White bigots is embedded a profound complaint regarding Easy's demand for respectability and

[23] The "fight-or-flight" response associated with PTSD can aptly characterize many of the emotions that Easy experiences throughout the novel. According to Valerie Sinason's *Attachment, Trauma, and Multiplicity: Working with Dissociative Identity Disorder*, "PTSD involves the reliving of terrifying experiences with accompanying 'freeze-fight or flight' responses and parallel avoidance behavior, numbing, and dissociation."

peace of mind given his sacrifices during the war. It could be argued that Easy's experiences in WWII, his membership in the "greatest generation", lend his bravado credence.

Other relatively minor characters such as Zeppo and Jackson Blue, who unwittingly assists Easy in his search for the notorious Frank Green, allow Rawlins to continue to exercise his deductive reasoning while also permitting Mosley as author to emphasize the importance of the connection between his detective's masculinity and military service. As Zeppo and Jackson accompany Easy to delve into the details of Frank Green's illicit liquor trade, the three end up in a liquor store owned by two Polish Jews named Abe and Johnny, who survived the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, and emigrated to the U.S. after the camp was liberated by the Russians. Such narrative details again highlight Mosley's interest in melding the histories of his mother and father, emphasize his complex racial lineage, and portray Easy as a heroic figure with first hand experience of the atrocities associated with the Nazi's diabolical experimentation with ethnic cleansing during the war. After Jackson explains Abe and Johnny's proprietorship of the liquor store, Easy recollects his own wartime encounters with the emaciated Jewish victims of the Nazi's war crimes: "Jackson wanted to tell me more stories he'd heard about the camps but I didn't need to hear them. I remembered the Jews. Nothing more than skeletons, bleeding from their rectums and begging for food. I remembered them waving their weak hands in front of themselves, trying to keep modest; then dropping dead right there before my eyes" (Mosley, 184). Easy's presence during these intensely poignant moments of the war certainly support Mosley's interest in portraying heroic Black men performing extraordinary acts. Nevertheless, the protagonist's recollections of

wartime atrocities also clarify the nature of his bold and uncompromising masculinity, which partly stems from his military service. The war's influence on Easy's masculinity greatly impacts his foray into the equally treacherous and morally ambiguous realm of private investigation.

If anything, Easy is a man who has mastered the art of communicating and dealing with people from a wide array of communal and ethnic origins. His ability to enter into conversation with these individuals, as well as his aptitude for remembering, absorbing, and retelling old and new stories, histories, and various other pieces of valuable information, make him a formidable private eye and – more importantly – a fully round and dynamic protagonist. Easy's instincts, his ability to "listen to his gut" and to do what it tells him, stems from the advice offered to him by "the voice" that guides him in moments of danger or uncertainty, which symbolizes the bold bravado that acts as a primary drive for the protagonist. He describes this abstract "voice" during one of his many flashbacks to the war: "The voice first came to me in the army. When I joined up I was proud because I believed what they said in the papers and newsreels. I believed that I was a part of the hope of the world. But then I found that the army was segregated just like the South … I was in a black division but all the superior officers were white. I was trained how to kill men but white men weren't anxious to see a gun in my hands. They didn't want to see me spill white blood" (Mosley, 143). Easy goes on to narrate a traumatic scene in which the voice intervened to save his life:

> It was outside Normandy, near a little farm, when the voice first came to me. I was trapped in the barn. My two buddies, Anthony Yakimoto and Wenton Niles, were dead and a sniper had the place covered. The voice told me to 'get off yo'

> butt when the sun comes down an' kill that motherfucker. Kill him 'an rip off his fuckin' face with yo' bayonet, man. You cain't let him do that to you. Even if he lets you live you be scared the rest' a yo' life. Kill that motherfucker,' he told me. And I did. The voice has no lust. He never told me to rape or steal. He just tells me how it is if I want to survive. Survive like a man. When the voice speaks, I listen (Mosley, 144-145).

As it symbolizes Easy's bravado, this inner "voice" also serves as an explicit elucidation of the character's particular brand of masculinity.

Mosley's depiction of Easy's masculinity is closely tied to the violence that is leveled against the Black male body; much of which Easy experiences while in police custody. In a famous scene related to a late night meeting with Albright to check in on the status of Easy's investigation, Rawlins is approached by a young White girl from the Midwest who is accompanied by a group of belligerent White teenagers who thoughtlessly accuse Easy of attempting to hit on the girl. A confrontation ensues, and Albright eventually intervenes in order to settle the conflict with his weapon. Metaphors of castration, and violation of the Black male body rise to the surface as Albright nearly forces one of the White boys to perform fellatio on Easy, and it is clear that Rawlins is effectively emasculated in the midst of the brief, but intensely disturbing, conflict.

Such a scene is in many ways juxtaposed to Joppy's murder at the hands of Mouse near the end of the narrative. As it turns out, Joppy and Albright are closely connected to the intrigue that surrounds Monet, and more importantly, Joppy betrays Easy; a revelation made more profound by the fact that Joppy sets Easy up with Albright and therefore places him on the path to becoming a detective. Other characters in Easy's

orbit, particularly the meek, churchgoing Odell Jones, Easy's co-worker at Champion Aircraft Dupree, and Dupree's lecherous, unfaithful wife Coretta, further emphasize the strength of Easy's ties to Houston- and thus the roots of his Texas bravado- even as he struggles to survive in Los Angeles. Popular nightspots such as John's simultaneously serve as a mode of catharsis for L.A.'s beleaguered Black citizenry and another means through which southern ties can be reestablished and strengthened. The bond between Easy, Dupree, and Mouse, which is strained by Coretta's murder – which lands Easy in a lot of metaphorical hot water with the notorious LAPD- is a perfect example of the kinship that Mosley manages to highlight through his depiction of the ways in which the lesser known aspects of the Great Migration impacted Black communities living in the west during the post-WWII era. Easy, who also betrays Dupree by sleeping with Coretta, discovers that Dupree's unfaithful wife is closely tied to Monet. In fact, Monet contacts Easy soon after his lovemaking with Coretta concludes.

While Monet, more than any other character, embodies the conflict between the Black and White sides of L.A., Mosley is also quick to point to Easy's affable interactions with the other ethnic communities of the city; especially the Latino community. Primo and Jesus, a young boy that Easy saves from the abusive grip of the child molester and would-be mayor Matthew Teran and who looms large in the succeeding novels in the *Mysteries* series, are two examples of characters that substantiate the ease with which Easy is able to utilize the close ties he has managed to establish to a wide array of individuals in the various populations of color that create a vibrant and ever-shifting kaleidoscope of peoples. Easy makes some rather significant historical observations when he contemplates/explicates his friendship with Primo late in

the novel: "Primo was a real Mexican, born and bred. That was back in 1948, before Mexicans 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 stiffs left holding the short end of the stick" (Mosley, 225). Such descriptive moments in the novel flesh out L.A.'s rich history[24] and also complicate the stark Black/White contrast that characterizes many of Easy's interactions in the narrative.

The cast of ethnic characters that surrounds Easy, who generally represent the diverse strata of L.A. society, also allows Mosley to emphasize his protagonist's bravado. Various setbacks, such as Easy's detainment by the LAPD in the wake of Coretta's murder, threaten to curtail Rawlins's journey toward a satisfactory conclusion to his investigative efforts, but the character is nonetheless able to utilize his wits and draw upon his intense will to survive – and perhaps even his intimate knowledge of the human propensity toward barbaric, violent behavior – to either withstand intense physical punishment at the hands of his White adversaries or moments of profound bewilderment and despair. Easy's various responses to the latter category of moments in the narrative greatly heightens the resilient nature of his masculinity. Mosley's emphasis on his protagonist's endurance and strongly rooted moral compass highlights Easy's particular brand of bold and uncompromising masculinity. Importantly, Easy's "voice" also distinguishes him from Mouse[25], who serves as a foil to Mosley's complex protagonist and is guided by a primal need to achieve instant gratification in nearly every

[24] Such observations are particularly poignant when considered alongside the early nineteen-nineties historical context within which *Devil in a Blue Dress* is first published.
[25] "Mouse" corresponds to the "bad Black Man" heroic archetype that originates in African American folkloric traditions. See Young.

circumstance he finds himself in; especially those in which he feels that he has been slighted. These moments often call for the drawing of weapons and the taking of life, and still disturb Easy as he continues to contemplate the consequences of his traumatic experiences during the war.

Easy's struggle to be a "good man", a settled, law-abiding citizen, relates his investigative adventures to the broader quest of Black folks to achieve the "American Dream", which of course is most explicitly symbolized by Easy's attachment to his property, but also related to Mosley's effort to depict a Black man seeking to improve the quality of his life in the wake of the horrors of World War II. In this sense, Easy's masculinity can also be firmly tied to the ethics of self-improvement. In other installments in the *Series*, Easy's desire to continue his education by taking college classes also reflects his interest in obtaining the respectability and achievement, in addition to the accouterments, associated with middle-class status. Mosley makes it abundantly clear in the narrative that Easy represents a class of Black men who returned from the war expecting to stake a claim for themselves in burgeoning, relatively young, communities of color in the west. It's intriguing to note that other Black characters in the novel do not necessarily approach Easy with the reverence that would normally be associated with the value of his military service. Easy's dialogues with Mouse and Junior provide evidence for this particular assertion. Such interactions further convince Easy that his "voice" is leading him in a direction that differs drastically from those of his acquaintances from Houston, and that it has a unique role in refining his sense of the significance of his masculinity in a hostile, post-World War II environment.

In this sense, the quest to ascertain the whereabouts of the elusive Monet conceals the more profound and significant aim of Mosley's clever protagonist: that is, his effort to come to terms with what it means to be an assertive, uncompromising Black man living in an unrelentingly antagonistic metropolis. Easy's insistence on living and " … (s)urviv(ing) like a man" reflects Mosley's intense focus on the nature of Black masculinity, and on a particular brand of unapologetically Black manhood. Easy is just as interested in women's breasts as he is in maintaining his yard, isn't bashful when expressing his desire for the fairer sex, and as the reader views the world of the novel through his eyes, it is clear that Mosley is adamant with regard to portraying an authentic man fully existing within his own time. Easy is wise enough to recognize the role that sex plays in the American racial hierarchy, and the ways in which he can use it both to further his investigative aims – such as during his all too brief fling with Coretta- and to challenge illusory tenets of White superiority and supreme authority. The issue of sex becomes particularly relevant in his intimate interactions with Monet late in the novel, as he leverages his close ties to Primo to secure a room and lay low with the mysterious woman. Easy mistakes Monet for a White woman due to her light complexion, which adds a layer of erotic tension to their intimate moment together in the rented space provided by Primo. Mosley's interest in erotica[26] rises to the surface in many of the novels comprising the *Mysteries Series*, but it is extremely explicit in Easy's detailed

[26] Referring to his 2007 "sexistential" novel *Killing Johnny Fry*, Mosley states, "I think of this book as being in the tradition of Camus' *The Stranger* … I'm talking about loneliness, the moment when existentialism and mid-life come into contact with each other, the aloneness of people in America, the deep melancholy of America, and the deep feelings of sexuality in all of our lives." See Owen E. Brady's *Conversations with Walter Mosley*, "Hardboiled to Hardcore: Interview with Walter Mosley".

descriptions of Monet's effort to love Easy: "Daphne Monet, a woman who I didn't know at all personally, had me laid back in the deep porcelain tub while she carefully washed between my toes and then up my legs. I had an erection lying flat against my stomach and I was breathing slowly, like a small boy poised to catch a butterfly. Every once in a while she'd say, 'Shh, honey, it's all right.' And for some reason that caused me pain" (Mosley, 228). This type of scene is later replicated in the third installment in the series *White Butterfly*, in which Easy commits adultery with a young prostitute, but here in *Devil*, racial ambiguity, the healing capacity of the female touch, and the necessity of lovemaking – even in the midst of mortal danger – provides additional layers of intrigue to the narrative.

Easy, reflecting on he and Monet's intimacy, comments on the liberation of heterosexual love across color lines in an oppressive White society: "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 for that woman" (Mosley, 230). Monet manages to highlight Easy's vulnerability, which is rather remarkable considering the character's staunch commitment to emphasizing his bravado throughout the narrative. She has her own tragic story to tell, which much like the character Jesus, relates to child abuse at the hands of a malevolent caregiver; in her case, her father. Her estrangement from the wealthy White man Carter also relates to White society's discomfort with racial and sexual taboos, which Easy seems to delight in transgressing when he still thinks that Monet is a White

woman. Yet, it is intriguing to note that physically possessing this "White" woman only causes Easy to become more bewildered; not necessarily satisfied with the act of tasting of the "forbidden fruit" that has cost so many Black men their lives and/or their manhood in the numerous lynchings and castrations that are recorded in the bloodstained annals of American history. Monet's vivid description of being molested by her father during a trip to the zoo, and bizarrely, after father and daughter witness the mating of two zebras, profoundly disturbs Easy. Just before the two are violently confronted by Albright, who has been hunting Monet throughout the novel, he attempts to come to terms with the shocking details of Monet's personal history:

> Daphne and I took the back path, through the bushes to the little house (rented from Primo, Easy's Mexican friend). Everything was fine. I opened the door for her. She hadn't had anything else to say after her story about the zoo. I don't know why but I didn't have anything else to say either. Maybe it was because I didn't believe her. I mean, I believed that she believed the story, or, at least, she wanted to believe it, but there was something wrong with the whole thing … I decided to cut my losses. Daphne was too deep for me. Somehow I'd call Carter and tell him where she was. I'd wash my hands of the whole mess. I'm just in it for the money, I kept thinking (Mosley, 240).

Such observations remind the reader of Easy's practical needs while also stressing his intellectual complexity. Easy is not a particularly emotional character, but it is evident that he becomes a bit more sensitive and vulnerable when in the presence of women who force him to reexamine the nature of heterosexual romance, and the implications of domesticity. These contemplations, in addition to his related thoughts on the nature of

friendship – the most pertinent example of which occurs to Easy during a final conversation with Odell in the final pages of the novel – also lead Rawlins toward achieving a deeper understanding of his own masculinity. As evidenced in the preceding citation from the narrative, Easy strives to be chivalrous and gentle with this emotionally damaged woman, but still feels the need to view his intimate contact with Monet through the lens of hardboiled detection. He is tempted to open himself completely to Monet during the course of their passionate lovemaking, which also represents a rare moment of undisturbed bliss in the novel, but is quickly brought back to reality by the primary agent of White violence, Albright, who kidnaps and tortures Monet along with Joppy and other henchmen. Easy and Mouse dispense brutal forms of retributive justice in response to this wrongdoing, which causes the reader to question the thin line that separates justified violence from more arbitrary forms of barbarity. These essential questions also draw upon Mosley's more subtle contemplation of the relation between American racism and the American racial caste system and the horrors of WWII. Much of Easy's physical suffering at the hands of White men, especially the police, begs the question: What's the difference between the Jewish Holocaust in Europe and the mistreatment of Black men and women by racist Whites in the U.S.? While this question may be controversial, the appearance of this novel in 1990 makes it particularly relevant as the nation witnessed the emergence of a renewed Black militancy in the form of gangster rap, which also emphasizes an extremely brash and irreverent Black masculinity that's most revealed in the character "Mouse", and began to brace itself for moments of radical Black union and fellowship like the Million Man March. The beating of Rodney King and the L.A. riots also become relevant as Mosley portrays the brutal tactics of the LAPD's dogged pursuit

and harassment of Easy once they become convinced that he is responsible for Coretta's murder, and the killings of two White men named Howard Green and Richard McGee. Mosley brilliantly depicts Easy's resilience as he's being brutally interrogated by LAPD officer's Miller and Mason; Miller plays the "good cop", and Mason takes the role of the "bad cop".

Throughout the interrogation, Mason physically punishes Easy, and demeans him by calling him a "nigger". Astonishingly given the circumstances, Easy does resist this punishment as he recounts his experiences killing similarly violent White men in uniform during the war. Mosley seems to subtly allude to the opening scene of Richard Wright's *Native Son*[27], another profoundly complex meditation on the nature of Black masculinity, as he points the reader toward a dead mouse in the corner of the dank and foul-smelling interrogation room. At one point, after Miller refuses to allow Mason to have Easy all to himself in order to inflict more arbitrary physical violence on his Black body, the two corrupt policemen exit, and Easy is left alone to recuperate: " … I followed the ants to the dead mouse again. This time, though, I imagined that I was the convict and that mouse was Officer Mason. I crushed him so that his whole suit was soiled and shapeless in the corner; his eyes came out of his head" (Mosley, 119). Easy is fully confident in his ability to physically counter the violence inflicted upon him by the White cops, and yet he restrains himself when the opportunity presents itself. Mosley also makes it clear that the physical punishment that Easy is subjected to does not penetrate so deep as to affect his mental clarity. The character's remarkable ability to consistently evaluate his circumstances strategically through his keen observations of the fine details of his

[27] The opening scene of Wright's novel depicts Bigger Thomas and his family attempting to brutally exterminate a rat in their cramped Chicago living quarters.

environment, even during the course of this harsh interrogation in the dismal bowels of the police station, highlights Easy's strength and resilience:

> I sat down in the chair and looked up at the leaves coming in through the window. I counted thirty-two bright green oleander leaves. Also coming in through the window was a line of black ants that ran down the side of the wall and around to the other side of the room where the tiny corpse of a mouse was crushed into a corner. I speculated that another prisoner had killed the mouse by stamping it. He probably had tried in the middle of the floor at first but the quick rodent had swerved away two, maybe even three times. But finally the mouse made the deadly mistake of looking for a crevice in the wall and the inmate was able to block off his escape by using both feet. The mouse looked papery and dry so I supposed that the death had occurred at the beginning of the week, about the time I was getting fired (from Champion Aircraft) (Mosley, 116).

Easy's mental endurance and flexibility is a hallmark characteristic of a detective. Along with his tendency to absorb the minute details of his surroundings that otherwise go unnoticed, the sanctity and calm of his inner dialogue allow him to transcend the animalistic behavior of the White cops that thoughtlessly beat him; seeing him as nothing more than another troublesome "nigger" who must be guilty of something despite his claims of innocence.

Dupree is also detained and questioned in the wake of Coretta's murder, and these instances point toward the White society's fear of and compulsive need to restrain and detain the Black male body. Despite the fact that his body is perpetually subject to the threat of (perhaps) indefinite imprisonment, Easy is determined to employ his intelligence

to deconstruct the symbols, mechanisms, and agents that seek to maintain the system devoted to the inevitably flawed and illusory tenets of White supremacy. Monet, as the ultimate counterargument to White authority and surveillance, then provides Easy with a physical manifestation of White supremacy fully deconstructed. As Easy comes closer to discovering the truth of Monet's existence during the course of his quest to penetrate the dense air of mystery surrounding her, he also liberates himself from the bonds of White male oppression and the fear that reinforces White male authority. Of course, it could be argued that Easy's heroism is partly related to the fact that he doesn't so much fear White men as he rationally recognizes their propensity to callously harm Black bodies. Easy's wartime encounters with European White men have hardened him to the deleterious psychological effects of American White racism, and he is thus capable of seeing around and through the obstacles of White police brutality and the ever-present surveillance of the White gaze. Mosley's adamant juxtaposition of Easy's military service and the issue of police brutality also becomes more pertinent if one places these matters alongside the narratives of Black victimization that begin to emerge in the early nineteen nineties. The helplessness of Black folks in the face of White racism and violence, a hallmark of such narratives, becomes questionable when considering Mosley's revival of the strong Black male figure whose membership in the "Greatest Generation" had been persistently denied and effectively erased. Like N.W.A[28]., Easy also embodies the dissident chant "Fuck the police," but unlike much of the strident calls for rebellion expressed in gangster rap's

[28] "Niggaz With Attitude", an American hip-hop group from Los Angeles, California that emerged in the late eighties and early nineties. One of their earliest hit singles, "Fuck Tha Police", was released in 1988; two years prior to *Devil*'s initial publication. See Gerrick D. Kennedy's *Parental Discretion is Advised: The Rise of N.W.A. and the Dawn of Gangsta Rap*.

earliest instances of emergence in the public consciousness at the dawn of the nineties, Mosley's character also represents a call to a return to a long lost brand of civic responsibility; to a mournful reminiscence of the values that were instilled by predominantly Black communities. Mosley's implicit reflection on these issues through the guise of detective fiction can be applied to an examination of the gains and losses of the Civil Rights era and the effort to integrate with a hostile White society.[29]

Easy is, indeed, most at ease among his own people, and his various investigations in the *Mysteries Series* always emanate from the heart of Los Angeles's Black community. Easy's trial by fire in *Devil* actually serves as his introduction to the LAPD as an indispensible asset to their own investigations related to homicides involving Black and White citizens. In that sense, interracial collaboration - reminiscent of the Civil Rights era- becomes a significant theme in Mosley's works. Nonetheless, the argument that he makes for such productive cooperation always derives from Easy's rootedness in the rich folk ways of his own community; the recognition of which, more than anything one can argue, was being increasingly neglected prior to the reemergence of a new type of Afrocentric ideology stemming from a renewed fascination with Malcolm X[30] and the pioneering work of Hip-Hop artists such as Digable Planets, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest.[31] However, it is once again important to note that

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[29] These issues also rose to the surface in the aftermath of the Rodney King beating (1991) and during the L.A. riots (1992). According to the *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature*, "In August 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson finally signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Such anniversaries stand as reminders that the fight for civil rights in this country remains a series of gains and losses extending beyond one short period of 'movement' during the mid-twentieth century."

[30] See director Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992).

[31] New York-based Hip-Hop groups that were a part of the "Native Tongues", a collective of late 1980s and early 1990s artists known for their positive-minded, good-

Mosley's celebration of the Black military veteran places Easy in a unique position in the early nineties; a time during which many Black folks sought to distance themselves from conversations pertaining to the relevance of American citizenship to Black existence in a racist society. Easy is not a romantic patriot, but I would argue that he does in fact recognize the value of his military service; particularly as it relates to his ability to "be his own man", and to defend the integrity of his particular brand of masculinity.

In addition to acquiring his guiding "voice" during the war, he also gains key insights into the flaws of White masculinity as he serves abroad in newly integrated combat units:

> … one day I was in the PX when a load of white soldiers came in, fresh from battle outside Rome. They made a comment about the Negro soldiers. They said that we were cowards and that it was the white boys that were saving Europe. I knew they were jealous because we were behind the lines with good food and conquered women, but it got to me somehow. I hated those white soldiers and my own cowardice. So I volunteered for the invasion of Normandy and then later I signed on with Patton at the Battle of the Bulge. By that time the Allies were so desperate that they didn't have the luxury of segregating the troops. There were blacks, whites, and even a handful of Japanese-Americans in our platoon. And the major thing we had to worry about was killing Germans. There was always trouble between the races, especially when it came to the women, but we learned

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natured, Afrocentric lyrics. See Mickey Hess's *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture*.

> to respect each other out there too. I never minded that those white boys hated me, but if they didn't respect me I was ready to fight (Mosley, 144).

Easy's demand for respect from Whites while serving abroad transmutes into a fervent self-respect when he begins to settle down into his beloved house, which is also violated by White intrusion; specifically, by Albright and his minions. In fact, during this episode, Albright seeks to reinforce the humiliating routines of Black subservience and obedience by ordering Easy to fetch him a glass of liquor. When Easy assertively refuses to bow to White authority in his own home, Albright is simply amused, but the reader can sense that Mosley has infused his protagonist with a nearly imperturbable sense of self that acts as a powerfully fervent mode of resistance to the mechanisms and agents of White oppression. Easy does not have to deal with the social isolation that accompanied experiments with integration. He recognizes that he can confront the hostility of the White world and return to a familiar and supportive community bound by their common geographic origin and racial makeup.

The loyalty that undergirds these ties to community and common origin are most vividly exemplified by the love/hate relationship between Easy and "Mouse". Although, in many ways, he dreads Raymond's insistence on being present in his life, "Mouse" looms large in Easy's consciousness. So much so, that he appears to Easy in a dream that occurs after Rawlins is knocked unconscious by Albright after being discovered with Monet on Primo's land:

> I was on a great battleship in the middle of the largest firefight in the history of war. The cannons were red hot and the crew and I were loading those shells. Airplanes strafed the deck with machine-gun fire that stung my arms and chest

> but I kept on hefting shells to the man in front of me. It was dusk or early dawn and I was exhilarated by the power of war. Then Mouse came up to me and pulled me from the line. He said, 'Easy! We gotta get outta here, man. Ain't no reason t'die in no white man's war!' 'But I'm fighting for freedom!' I yelled back. 'They ain't gonna let you go, Easy. You win this one and they have you back on the plantation 'fore Labor Day.' I believed him in an instant but before I could run a bomb rocked the ship and we started to sink. I was pitched from the deck into the cold cold sea. Water came into my mouth and nose and I tried to scream but I was underwater. Drowning (Mosley, 241).

Here in this vision, it becomes clear that "Mouse" functions in a role that is analogous to that of the mysterious "voice" that originates in Easy's unconscious mind, and informs his bold and uncompromising masculinity. This dream state, one of many that occur during the course of the narrative – usually before major turning points in the plot-, also gives Mosley room to place Easy's subtly conservative values in perspective. Therefore, if "Mouse", in one sense, represents the possibility and eruption of Black violence in the face of White oppression – or any other form of intolerable opposition for that matter – he also serves as yet another reminder that Easy must deal harshly with his foes when it is necessary to do so. In many ways, Easy forgives himself for much of the violence that he perpetrated during the war by reflecting on many of the senseless killings that "Mouse" is so proud to recall. Easy makes it abundantly clear that Raymond is a psychopath; completely numb to the consequences of his violent deeds. Nonetheless, he also acknowledges that Raymond is a useful and often necessary ally that watches his back and stiffens his spine in the face of imminent danger:

> I ran away from Mouse and Texas to go to the army and then later to L.A. I hated myself. I signed up to fight in the war to prove to myself that I was a man. Before we launched the attack on D-Day I was frightened but I fought. I fought despite the fear. The first time I fought a German hand-to-hand I screamed for help the whole time I was killing him. His dead eyes stared at me a full five minutes before I let go of his throat. The only time in my life that I had ever been completely free from fear was when I ran with Mouse. He was so confident that there was no room for fear. Mouse was barely five-foot-six but he'd go up against a man Dupree's size and you know I'd bet on the Mouse to walk away from it. He could put a knife in a man's stomach and ten minutes later sit down to a plate of spaghetti. I didn't want to write Mouse and I didn't want to let it lie. In my mind he had such power that I felt I had to do whatever he wanted. But I had dreams that didn't have me running in the streets anymore; I was a man of property and I wanted to leave my wild days behind (Mosley, 93, 94).

The tense relationship between the two men haunts Easy throughout the various novels that comprise the canonical installments [32]in the *Mysteries Series*, the first six novels in the series. Much of Easy's unease with his ties with Raymond does indeed relate to this desire to settle down and honor his responsibilities as a would-be respectable citizen and property owner. While Raymond's confidence is equally proportional to his awareness of his own capacity for inflicting physical harm on his adversaries – whoever and however large they may be – as Easy makes his way successfully through the trials and

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[32] I argue that Mosley's "canonical novels" are: *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), *A Red Death* (1991), *White Butterfly* (1992), *Black Betty* (1994), *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), and *Gone Fishin'* (1997).

tribulations of *Devil*, he begins to recognize and relish the freedom of "going straight", and being a legitimate entrepreneur; using his powerful deductive skills and business savvy to liberate himself from the White men that hound him throughout the novel.

In contrast to the fear and trepidation that characterizes Easy's reaction to even the thought of Raymond, in the meek and humble Odell Easy sees a model of moral rectitude that he strives to emulate. Odell only appears briefly in the novel; most significantly during Easy's conversations with Junior, Dupree, and Coretta at John's, once again to warn Easy to get out of town as he's pursued by the authorities investigating the various murders taking place due to their lingering suspicion that Rawlins is possibly connected to the killings, and finally in the novel's closing pages in which Easy seeks Odell's counsel on the nature of friendship. In many ways, Odell models the type of settled manhood that Easy strives to achieve as he begins to distance himself from "Mouse" and the blood-soaked days of his youth in Texas and in the war: "(At John's) I found a chair next to my friend Odell Jones. Odell was a quiet man and a religious man. His head was the color and shape of a red pecan. And even though he was a God-fearing man he'd find his way down to John's about three or four times a week. He'd sit there until midnight nursing a bottle of beer, not saying a word unless somebody spoke to him. Odell was soaking up all the excitement so he could carry it around with him on his job as a janitor at the Pleasant Street school[33]. Odell always wore an old gray tweed jacket and threadbare brown woolen pants" (Mosley, 81). The contrast between Odell and Raymond is most notable as it pertains to their appearance. Raymond is an

[33] Easy also serves as a school custodian in *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), the events of which take place nearly two decades after his initial foray into the world of private detection in *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

impeccable dresser; always wearing the finest clothes that money can buy. Yet, Odell's simple appearance seems to suit his humble demeanor and lifestyle. More importantly, as Easy is keen to note, Odell is a good and reliable friend; a consistently stable force that counters Raymond's dangerous spontaneity.

It is Odell that provides Easy with a ride home after his brutal mistreatment by the police, and his profoundly disturbing encounter with the child molester Matthew Teran, who keeps the traumatized Jesus as a type of sex slave. After politely suggesting that Easy leave town, and perhaps head back down to Texas to lay low for awhile, he offers the following invitation; a rare one in this narrative: "I don't know. Maybe you should come on down to church[34] on Sunday. Maybe you could talk to Reverend Towne" (Mosley, 128). Before he stumbles back into the protective space of his beloved home, Easy notes: " … Odell was a good friend; he waited there until I had hobbled to my door and stumbled into the house." The relatively ordinary, and settled existence that Odell embodies later echoes in Easy's development in *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, in which the reader views Rawlins becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea of settling down and being a family man; opening his home to a wife and children (including the adopted Jesus, who Easy rescues from the abusive grip of Teran). More importantly, Odell forces Easy to come to terms with the chaos of Raymond's existence, and the ways in which "Mouse's" propensity for violence diminishes him as a human being who seeks to better himself. If Raymond encourages Easy to stiffen his spine in moments of danger, and to take risks whenever necessary, Odell acts as the moral compass that repositions Mosley's protagonist on the path that leads to righteousness.

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[34] The African American church is a key setting in Mosley's novel *A Red Death*, the second installment in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*.

It has already been stated that much of Easy's effort to lead a stable domestic existence in *Devil in a Blue Dress* foreshadows the development of his character in subsequent installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Much of the married life that Easy attempts to maintain in novels such as *White Butterfly* is premised on his all too brief fling with Daphne Monet in the latter portions of *Devil*. The passage previously cited, in which Monet speaks of those individuals who deny people of color the right to be themselves, is embedded in a momentary lull in the narrative. During this transitory let up of the intrigue that hounds Easy throughout the novel, he and Daphne are permitted to partake of the joys of lust and carnal pleasure. Here in these moments, again, Mosley's flair for writing erotica allows him to imbue these intimate scenes with a sense of realism that deepens the connection between his protagonist and the mysterious woman that he's been pursuing during the circuitous course of his investigation. One such instance occurs when Easy meets Monet at an out-of-the-way motel called the Sunridge, which is run by a Mexican woman – " … a full-blooded Mexican Indian"- and her thuggish sons. The proprietor ironically views Easy with the same disdain and mistrust that he associates with White racists, and in this sense, Mosley offers further commentary on the complexity of the discrimination that is leveled toward Black men in America. Monet is fortunate in that her ambiguous racial makeup allows her to convince the racist Mexican landlord and her sons that she is a well-to-do White woman, a "French girl"; a fact that makes Easy's attempt to see her all the more suspect in their minds. Once he makes his way past yet another gatekeeper, Easy makes a significant observation regarding Monet's appearance, or more precisely, her beauty, her demeanor, and its effect on his emotions: "She had on a gray terrycloth robe and a towel was wrapped into a bouffant on her head.

Her eyes were green right then and when she saw me she smiled. All the trouble she had and all the trouble I might have brought with me and she just smiled like I was a friend who was coming over for a date" (Mosley, 222). Monet's ability to soften Easy's tough exterior in Mosley's first novel sets up the character to step into the role of husband and father later in the series. As his "heart and chest (open) for (Monet)" (Mosley, 230), Easy begins to see a way to transcend the bitterly virulent racism that hinders his personal growth. This transcendence entails investing not only in material gains and allies willing to "have his back"; it also requires him to view domesticity as a buffer against society's oppression.

Odell and Monet seem to be the only characters in *Devil* that penetrate Easy's well-fortified personal defense mechanisms. They both impact his personality in a profoundly meaningful and lasting way. Both Odell and Monet represent the possibility of leading a stable domestic life. However, Monet also lies at the other extreme end of the spectrum; closely associated with the chaos and disorder that follows "Mouse" wherever he goes. Mosley cleverly permits Monet's presence in the narrative to reverberate even after her final exit from the tale of intrigue in a taxicab: " 'I guess things turned out okay, huh, Easy?' 'What?' I turned away from watering my dahlias. Odell was nursing a can of ale" (Mosley, 261). The mention of Easy's "dahlias" recalls his initial efforts to ascertain Monet's whereabouts in John's speakeasy, in which he referred to the elusive beauty as "Delia" and "Dahlia". In his final conversation with Odell just before the novel's conclusion, it's clear nevertheless that Easy has not yet had his fill of the dangerous life: (Easy) " 'I work for myself now, Odell. And I got two jobs.' (Odell) "Yeah?' (Easy) 'I bought me a house, on auction for unpaid taxes, and I been rentin' it and' (Odell) 'Where

you get that kinda money?' (Easy) 'Severance from Champion. And you know them taxes wasn't all that much.' (Odell) 'What's your other job?' (Easy) 'I do it when I need a few dollars. Private investigations'" (Mosley, 261, 262). Therefore, it seems that ultimately, Easy chooses to balance his need to maintain some semblance of domestic bliss with his need to remain intensely engaged in the going's on of his community and the broader White world.

Just as the "voice" inferred during the war in Europe, the only way for Easy to live on his own terms "like a man" is to directly face the inevitability of danger and to gradually overcome the multitude of obstacles designed to keep him in his place. Easy doesn't kill White men in Los Angeles, as he did in Europe, but taking advantage of every opportunity to "tell one off" – to speak his mind unabashedly in the face of White authority figures- provides him with just as much satisfaction. Easy's confrontation with White males such as Albright, and his former boss at Champion aircraft Mr. Giacomo, allow him to vent his pent up rage. However, more importantly, they permit Easy to dismantle the illusion of White superiority in his own mind. As he discards the need to empty his head of any pertinent facts when confronted with the imposing presence of "White folks", a habit that he was taught during his youth in Houston (and one that he hates), he relishes in his talent to acquire and "show off" information for his own purposes. *Devil*'s narrative is bookended by, and for the most part focused on, relationships that force Easy to guard the integrity of his manhood. Joppy's friendship ultimately proves to be false; Monet abandons Easy, like she had all the men in her life who had gotten too close to her; Odell is a steadfast and wise ally, always willing to offer a kind word of advice. "Mouse" still lingers in Easy's thoughts, and he and his former

companion Etta Mae play a much larger role in the subsequent novels, but his absence is a welcome respite from the violence that prevents Easy from investing in security and stability. Mosley's writing, especially in the final chapter, highlights the fact that the core of Easy's existence is simplicity, which explains why Odell plays such a large role in the novel's final moments. Two friends enjoying each other's company over a good meal in the coziness of home; this portrait of domestic bliss effectively stands in stark contrast to the complex themes of discrimination and betrayal associated with Monet and her pursuers.

The lessons in craft that Mosley gained from studying writers like Raymond Chandler are also evident in the closing chapters of the novel. As Easy exits his meeting in City Hall with the assistant to the chief of police and the deputy mayor, Lawrence Wrightsmith, having unraveled the mystery he'd been investigating in the presence of Officers Mason and Miller, Todd Carter, and his lawyer Jerome Duffy, Easy feels rejuvenated and liberated: "It might be that the last moment of my adult life, spent free, was in the walk down the City Hall stairwell. I still remember the stained-glass windows and the soft light" (Mosley, 260). The vivid description of this joyous moment in Easy's otherwise troubled life is similar to two sentences in Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye* that had a profound impact on Mosley's development as a writer: "He was looking at me and neither his eyes nor his gun moved. He was as calm as an adobe wall in the moonlight."[35] Clarifying his thoughts on these powerful sentences in *Conversations with Walter Mosley*, the novelist states: "(Those are) very poetic line(s), but (they're) also very true. It hits you, and it's like something you probably hadn't thought of before, even

[35] "The Two Raymond Chandler Sentences That Changed Walter Mosley's Life", *The Atlantic*, published Jan 15, 2013.

though you've seen it, you know?" (*Conversations*, 60). Mosley's capacity for describing the seemingly ordinary in refreshingly innovative ways is fully on display during Easy's meeting with Albright at the Santa Monica pier: "Albright's white Cadillac was parked in the lot down under the pier. He drove south down along the ocean. There were few electric lights from the coast, and just a sliver of moon, but the sea glittered with a million tiny glints. It looked like every shiny fish in the sea had come to the surface to mimic the stars that flickered in the sky. There was light everywhere and there was darkness everywhere too" (Mosley, 102). An equally poignant descriptive scene in Chapter 24 pairs well with Chandler's portrayal of the disturbing serenity of a cold-blooded killer: "I found myself driving in the L.A. night again. The sky toward the valley was coral with skinny black clouds across it. I didn't know why I was going alone to get the girl in the blue dress. But for the first time in quite a while I was happy and expectant" (Mosley, 220). Even as Mosley riffs off of Chandler's rich descriptions of otherwise mundane people, places, and things, he is adamant in asserting through his work that " … (w)riting about Easy 'is in a way reclaiming experience'. And in recasting the past, Mosley also lends a sense of clarity to the present – and possibly the future" (*Conversations*, 31). The nods to the great works of detective fiction that influenced Mosley that appear throughout *Devil*'s narrative through such moments as those cited above – as well as via Easy's cut-and-dry mode of narration- complement this effort to reclaim Black male experience; to reclaim Black manhood/masculinity from outside forces seeking to define and restrain it. There is no ambiguity in Easy's portrayal. In this sense, Mosley seems to argue that the confusion that hinders Monet as she attempts to escape the trauma of her childhood leaves her vulnerable to misidentifying with a White

world that will never accept her. Mosley's writing stresses that "whiteness" is based solely on perception. Once Easy is able to see through Monet's guise, he also breaks through the illusion that places "whiteness" above all the other shades of black and brown that characterize humanity. As Easy deconstructs the racial caste system, he also realizes the essence of his own American identity.

The fact that Easy's subconscious quest to lead a more settled existence is also echoed in the novel's subtle emphasis on the importance of property has been thoroughly explored through an examination of the character's profound emotional attachment to his home. Easy's identification as a "man of property" becomes more significant in *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, in which he becomes the secret proprietor of several properties that he rents out to members of the surrounding community. This sound investment supplements his investigative activities on behalf of private citizens and the local police department. The origin of this enterprise lies in an observation that Easy makes in Chapter Eight: " … I was dreaming about the day I'd be able to buy more houses, maybe even a duplex. I always wanted to own enough land that it would pay for itself out of the rent it generated" (Mosley, 97). It's been noted that the ebbs and flows of the narrative revolve around the significance of Easy's home as a safe space that is constantly invaded by the various forces of chaos that the burgeoning detective is forced to confront as he makes his way toward solving the mystery of Daphne Monet and her connections to Albright, Carter, and Frank Green. Easy's need to obtain quick cash to pay his mortgage, as it is portrayed in the beginning of the novel as he sits in the gloomy space of Joppy's bar, stands in stark contrast to his feeling of satisfaction and contentment after wrapping up his final conversation with Carter, the officers of the

L.A.P.D. that have been hounding him throughout the narrative, and the deputy mayor near the narrative's conclusion. Having explained to all present at the meeting his findings concerning Monet's ambiguous racial make-up, her relationship with Frank and Howard Green – Matthew Teran's former driver – and the factors that motivated Albright's dogged pursuit of the woman, Easy contemplates the fact that he has money buried in his backyard; enough to hold him over for a substantial period of time and to begin his foray into the world of private detection. His evolution from a disillusioned WWII veteran to a self-employed Black civilian is tethered to his rediscovery of his own unique talents, and of his willingness to do whatever it takes to survive and secure a place for himself in an environment that is just as hostile as any he entered during the war in Europe.

His home is indeed a functional "home base"; one in which he retires in order to rest, strategize, and fortify the strong connections that he has maintained in his tightly knit Black Houston émigré community. The home reassures him that he is in some way actively participating in the broader experiment of American life; that he should indeed take pride in his willingness to stake some claim for himself in a solid aspect of the "American Dream". Investing also extends Easy's sense of masculinity beyond mere bravado. He knows that money talks, and property speaks much louder. His need for a stable domestic life causes him to consider the potential gains of reaping long-term benefits from intelligent business decisions that will reward him, and any potential members of his future family, for many years to come. The challenges posed by Easy's dual existence as a responsible "man of property" who does private detective work on the side will, of course, complicate his vision of domestic bliss. In his mind, certain sacrifices

need to be made in order to protect his anonymity – he hires a man named Mofass to manage his properties in the subsequent novels while he pretends to be the janitor/maintenance man, a fact that perhaps speaks to Mosley's fascination with superhero comics [36]and the occasional "secret identities" adopted by the figures that populate those fictional universes – and his privacy. In any case, Easy recognizes that money only acquires the additional element of power when it is put to work, and he wants it to always work for him. Closely guarding his finances and his investments allows him to assert himself as a man seeking to outwit Whites while taking care of the priorities associated with his own personal business ventures.

Mosley's first novel succeeds in presenting the Black male private eye as a voice that needs to be "reclaimed" and revived in the celebrated genre of detective fiction. As he pays homage to his native Los Angeles in his premiere work, Mosley also reinserts the Black male protagonist into the prominent position of being the outspoken, courageous hero of a narrative fictional universe. The novel's initial publication in the early nineteen nineties seems to support its remarkably warm reception among general readers and critics alike. The radical nature of Mosley's protagonist and his entrance into the genre relates to his unfettered, sincerely Black persona. The author's commitment to bringing the heroic Black protagonist to life in the pages of his novel can always be considered a response to the misrepresentation of Black male characters in other genres of African American literature; though I would argue that Mosley seems to possess a well-informed

[36] "Walter Mosley is a comic book geek. From the time he discovered The Fantastic Four, the groundbreaking 1961 super-hero comic book created for Marvel Comics by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, Mosley has been fascinated by Kirby and Lee's art and storytelling, and how their historic collaboration not only stoked his own young imagination, but transformed the American super-hero comic book" (*Publisher's Weekly*).

understanding of his need to avoid using his protagonist to openly criticize other well-respected writers in the canon. He comments on the significance of his understanding of Black gender issues in *Conversations*: " … But, I'm not criticizing, because there are a lot of really wonderful women writers now, a lot of wonderful books getting deeply into the characters of women, sometimes deeply into the characters of men, and I think it's wonderful that they're doing this writing. And if I'm going to complain, I should just be writing my own book, and trying to deal as well as I can with that issue, you know" (*Conversations*, 63). As Easy becomes more committed to the tenets of stable domesticity, Mosley's sensitivity to portrayals of Black heterosexual romance begins to evolve beyond the straightforwardly erotic realm of lovemaking. Part of Easy's development as a character also relates to his capacity to invite others into the safe space of his home, and to make a life for them that is just as satisfying as that which he hopes to maintain for himself.

Easy's conversations with Monet and Odell, again, encourage him to grow into the new role of man of the house – in addition to man of property – and the guilt that he feels pertaining to his betrayal of Dupree's trust (by cheating with Coretta) also causes him to heed Odell's counsel a bit more seriously by the conclusion of the final chapter of the novel: "Later on that evening Odell and I were having a dinner I threw together. We were sitting out front because it was still hot in L.A. 'Odell?' 'Yeah, Easy.' 'If you know a man is wrong, I mean, if you know he did somethin' bad but you don't turn him in to the law because he's your friend, do you think that's right?' 'All you got is your friends, Easy.' 'But then what if you know somebody else who did something wrong but not so bad as the first man, but you turn this other guy in?' 'I guess you figure that that other

guy got ahold of some bad luck.' We laughed for a long time" (Mosley, 262-263). Easy is referring to Mouse and Junior when he poses these questions to Odell. However, one could also interpret them as signifying his own need to come terms with Coretta's death and the loss of trust between he and Dupree that resulted from her demise. Ironically, Dupree eventually runs away with Easy's future wife Regina in *White Butterfly*, which effectively balances the scales as they pertain to the injustices of adultery and murder. But these intriguing narrative threads provide the reader with both a sufficient amount of entertaining scandal to spice up the plot and with a fully rounded, complex protagonist struggling to atone for his sins while doing his best to make a way for himself and those whom he must care for. Easy's attachment to Jesus, the victim of Matthew Teran's diabolical sexual abuse, becomes more profound in the subsequent installments in the series, and also reflects Mosley's understanding of the deep, strong interracial bonds that have been forged between various communities of color on the West Coast; specifically, he points toward the initial affinity of the Black and Latino communities, which has also been examined as it relates to Easy's communication with his friend Primo, yet another man of color seeking to become a settled "man of property", regarding his effort to secure a home for Jesus (before he takes him in himself permanently) and to find a secure place to hide away with Monet while they're being pursued by Albright. Just as Monet allows Easy to see through and deconstruct the illusion of White supremacy, and begin to relate to women on a deeper emotional level, his interactions with steadfast allies and genuine friends provide him with additional time to contemplate his own morality as he seeks to become a better human being.

The significance of Easy's home, money and financial matters, the relationships that he forges with friends and foes, his military experiences during World War II, and many other significant elements of *Devil in a Blue Dress*'s narrative highlight Mosley's desire to investigate the Black male protagonist's role in deconstructing issues related to the importance of Black domesticity, the significance of Black male heroism, and the implications of a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity. The first installment in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* provides the reader with a rich and complex narrative that is simultaneously entertaining and thought provoking; one that honors the tenets of the detective fiction genre while also returning the Black detective to a position of prominence within it. Mosley recovers the Black male detective and the heroic Black military veteran of WWII during the dawn of a decade plagued by critical issues surrounding the question of Black masculinity in the collective mind of the broader society. Contrasting Easy's heroic exploits with the realities of the expansion of the prison-industrial complex, police brutality, and the rise of gangsta rap makes his appearance on the literary scene all the more poignant and important. Despite comments offered during interviews that would seem to suggest otherwise (*Conversations*, 64, 65), Mosley does manage to present a narrative that balances matters related to effective plot construction and sociological concerns. While doing so, he also places Easy firmly in the tradition of the man seeking to "pull himself up by his own bootstraps" after returning from the horrors of warfare to face the hostility of a White, racist society in the states. Nevertheless, at its core, *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a wildly entertaining story, and one cannot do justice to any analysis of the book without stating the simple fact that fun is embedded into its narrative blueprint. As the time and place portrayed in *Devil* transitions

to the Cold War setting of *A Red Death*, it's worth noting Mosley's comments on what he perceives as his work's primary function: "In mystery, you have to stay with the plot. That's why people are reading the books. And it doesn't matter who they are. It's not like black people read my books because they're interested in a lot of sociology. They're reading it because it's fun … They're reading my books because they want to see what Easy's going to do next. They want to see how he gets out of the troubles. Because the (Black) identity becomes Easy and his moral stance, his issues, so I can do character development on him" (*Conversations*, 64). The Easy Rawlins portrayed in the pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress* finally finds his calling, and desires to utilize his self-employment to attain for himself a piece of the "American Dream".

CHAPTER TWO – "DESCENT INTO THE *EASY RAWLINS MYSTERIES*: *A RED DEATH* AND *WHITE BUTTERFLY*, 1991-1992"

The years 1991-1992 represent the full emergence of Walter Mosley's detective fiction into the critical and popular imagination. The success of Mosley's previous novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, propelled him rather rapidly to the heights of literary fame and allowed for further installments in the adventures of his brash protagonist to be published. The sequels, *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, permit the reader to dive ever deeper into the intrigue surrounding mid-twentieth century Black Los Angeles; a world primarily populated by Black folks who have emigrated from south Texas and Louisiana. As the reader descends further into the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, he finds Ezekiel Rawlins, property owner, attempting to make himself into an honest man while still performing "favors" for friends, and friends of friends on the side to make a little bit of extra money here and there.

Easy's dreams of owning apartment buildings, first espoused in *Devil*, have come to fruition in *Red Death*, a novel that takes place in 1953 at the height of the Cold War; an era generally characterized, at least for the Black characters that populate Mosley's intriguing fictional microcosm, by a shift from a preoccupation with defeating German Nazis (and outrunning/outsmarting White Los Angeles police officers) to a seemingly incessant struggle to guard against the ever-present threat of communist influence. In addition to this shift in historical context, Mosley piles additional layers of complexity onto Easy's heroic conflict with White authority figures. Much larger government institutions, such as the IRS, and other inhabitants of the upper echelons of L.A.'s White society begin to stalk Easy throughout the pages of the second and third novels. *White*

Butterfly, which is set in 1956 near the end of President Eisenhower's last term in office and just before the dawn of the Kennedy "Camelot" years, depicts the inextricable links between the Black and White sides of L.A.'s diverse mixture of ethnic communities. In both novels, Mosley continues to place a great deal of emphasis on the development of his protagonist. Character development issues in the second and third installments range from Easy's transition into the role of a "secret" Landlord – the proprietor of rental properties throughout the mixed ethnic areas of L.A.- his relationships with other characters both old and new, his attempts to utilize his skills as a private investigator to simultaneously assist locals and prevent White institutions from encroaching upon his personal and financial holdings, and perhaps most importantly, the growth of Easy's family; a significant and complicated issue that Mosley consistently highlights throughout the series.

Most remarkable, however, is the continued success of Mosley's detective fiction in the early years of the nineteen nineties. A brilliant storyteller, Mosley continues to weave intriguing tales that are both wildly entertaining and deeply thought provoking. Proving that his initial success was no mere "flash in the pan," the successful introduction of the next two novels in the *Mysteries Series* represents the continuation of Mosley's mission to meditate on the evolution of an intriguing Black hero figure within the genre of detective fiction. These narratives further refine the initial portrayal of Mosley's courageous protagonist. In addition, these installments in the author's series continue to explore the implications of the character's ambivalence toward a typical effort to achieve bourgeois middle-class socioeconomic ascendency, and ties this issue implicitly to the protagonist's close connection to Los Angeles's Black community. Furthermore, Easy's

evolution in *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly* can be analyzed by examining several issues that are related to the three essential elements of Mosley's fiction. These issues include the author's development of the character, the progression of time/shift in chronology in the novels, the transformation of the character into a much more savvy detective, and the expansion of Easy's enterprises; both personal and financial.

Perhaps the most fascinating element of Mosley's storytelling, Easy's gradual character development in these two novels lends itself to an exploration of the complex nature of Black masculine life in the rapidly shifting contours of post-WWII L.A. While it has already been argued that the "secret" nature of Easy's proprietorship of several L.A. rental properties reflects Mosley's interest in classic super hero comic books like Marvel's *Fantastic Four*, it must be stated here that the anonymous aspect of Easy's role as a man of property also represents the necessity for the burgeoning Black middle-class to conceal its success from the rabidly racist gaze of White society. It is also essential to note that, despite any personal or financial stability that he may acquire within the pages of the novels, Easy is always-already a Black southerner attempting to survive in a hostile, and foreign space. For the most part, he dwells within the confines of poor Black, Brown, and Yellow communities that are strictly segregated from both the lower and upper echelons of White L.A. As he continues to settle into his post-War domestic life, Easy's mind is still preoccupied with the relatively simple aspirations of tending to and concealing the source of his burgeoning wealth.

While he does so, he is still nevertheless firmly rooted to his Black Texan "country" origins, which serve as the foundation of his bravado, and his fervent "do it yourself" entrepreneurial style. Rather than hiring others to perform labor in and around

his various properties, and spending unnecessarily for their work, Easy relies on his own set of practical skills to maintain his properties. The confidential nature of his real estate ventures permits him to outwit the institutions that function as the agents of White supremacy and surveillance. As Easy commences to expand the parameters of his ties to the local community, he begins to realize the practical benefits of trusting business partners such as Mofass- a large, chain-smoking gentleman first introduced in *A Red Death*- with the particulars of his entrepreneurial ambitions. Very much in line with his default mode of being a survivor, the continued evolution of his character in these two novels is intimately related to his need to work several jobs, and to juggle multiple priorities at once; in essence, "to do a little bit of this, and a little bit of that". Easy's desire to remain closely connected to the Black community, and to other various communities of color, highlights his ambivalence toward a model of capitalism that only reflects the socioeconomic values of White Americans. As his ties to Los Angeles's ethnic communities enable him to utilize his southwestern roots to maintain and exhibit an uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, these connections also permit him to engage in a unique type of social uplift. Essentially, Easy designs his own model of Black capitalism while reasserting the strength of his bond with people of color. He refuses to become a "sell out" even as he profits from the renters who dwell in his real estate properties.

The progression of time/shift in chronology in the novels also assists Mosley in his effort to further develop his protagonist. Tracing Easy's journey through the turbulent nineteen-fifties, Mosley's second and third installments seek to recover the details and denizens of a forgotten Black America. While Los Angeles was in the throes of

confronting the devastating reality of the L.A. riots, Mosley was meditating on the quiet dignity of Black L.A.'s past: "When Uncle Sam wanted me to put my life on the line, fighting the Germans, I did it. And I knew that I'd go to prison if he told me to do that. In the forties and fifties we obeyed the law, as far as poor people could, because the law kept us safe from the enemy. Back then we thought we knew who the enemy was. He was a white man with a foreign accent and hatred for freedom. In the war it was Hitler and his Nazis; later on, Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese took on an honorary white status. All of them bad men with evil designs on the free world" (Mosley *Red Death*, 24-25).

While Easy's claim that the law "kept us safe" seems incongruous given the constant threat of arrest and imprisonment he faces in these two novels and throughout the series, the reader can detect Mosley's effort to contrast the relative stability and upward mobility of Black L.A.'s past with the chaos and disorder of Black L.A.'s present; that is, the early nineteen-nineties. Such a claim also seems to relate to Easy's progression into mature manhood. The Easy Rawlins depicted in these novels is preparing to settle down; still searching for the simple joys of a primarily domestic existence that is first and foremost concerned with the particulars of family, house, and home. The return of EttaMae, Raymond "Mouse" Alexander's wife, and Jesus, the young Mexican boy that Easy rescued from a life of child prostitution in *Devil*, into the narrative world that Mosley constructs further emphasizes this aspect of Easy's evolution. As the years progress beyond *A Red Death*, and the reader enters the world of *White Butterfly*, he is also introduced to Easy's new wife and daughter, Regina (a nurse) and Edna, who anchor Easy to the domestic life while he still engages in investigative work and his own secret enterprises.

Near the conclusion of this novel, Mosley introduces Feather, the biracial daughter of the White stripper who serves as the subject of *White Butterfly*. Regina eventually leaves Easy, mostly due to his failure to fully disclose the true nature of his work, for his former friend and co-worker at Champion Aircraft, Dupree; taking her baby Edna with her. This traumatic event in Easy's personal life leads him to take on the role of foster parent, and he adds Feather to his adoptive brood as he continues to raise Jesus as his own son. These milestones in Easy's journey toward settled manhood complement his analysis of the shift in chronology. For instance, in the final chapter of *White Butterfly*, Easy ruminates on the failure of his marriage to Regina and the beginning of his new life raising his adopted children Jesus and Feather:

> We moved three months later. I bought a small house in an area near West Los Angeles called View Park. Middle-class black families had started colonizing that neighborhood, and I wanted to get away from people who knew me and Regina. Jesus liked his new school, and all the work of moving got my mind off the trouble in my life. Regina still lived in my dreams. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night in despair. But when I'd wake up, little Feather needed her bottle and change of diapers. She wasn't my little Edna but she was beautiful and happy almost all of the time. I'd lost Regina and Gabby Lee[37], but Jackson Blue[38]

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[37] In relation to Mosley's portrait of single Black fatherhood, Roberta L. Coles in her book *The Best Kept Secret: Single Black Fathers* states the following, "...conscientious black fathers have been erased, treated as nonexistent or as if their existence might endanger the monolithic picture of the irresponsible black father" (3).

[38]The narrative's emphasis on Black male collaboration contradicts James W. Coleman's argument in *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban*, which "…casts doubt on the efficacy of black male community" and asserts that "…black male community does not seem to be a source of liberating voice, truth, and knowledge or of saving, supportive fraternity" (115).

> would baby-sit at least once a week and I didn't mind caring for her. Jesus never got tired of playing with Feather. He'd take her everywhere once she started to walk. And I decided to let Dupree and Regina leave for good. Mouse found out where they had gone. He offered to go down to kill Dupree, and Regina, and bring Edna back. But I told him to give me the address and let it lie. Enough people had died. I would have been happy if not one more person in the world ever had to face that fate" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 271-272).

These stoic observations of an aging Easy Rawlins offer a significant glimpse into Mosley's endeavor to portray a fully rounded Black male hero figure.

An analysis of Easy's transition into a much more savvy detective must take into account his already keen sense of observation, particularly his knack for peering through the illusory barriers that separate Black from White, rich from poor, etc., and his ability to take advantage of an intricate and complex web of personal relationships that serve simultaneously to keep him safe and to provide him with useful skills and information. Easy's reputation, and the best kind of publicity – word of mouth – also aid in the character's transformation into a mature private eye with several years of hard-earned experience under his belt. The word of mouth aspect of his reputation again reflects his southern roots, and also illustrates the significance of the oral tradition in the African American community; even when that community has been transplanted to another, far less rural, part of the country. In fact, Easy relies on his "country" ways to do business in L.A.'s primarily urban environment; in some cases, these mannerisms also assist him as he attempts to survive in the less cultivated and far less tamed regions of California, such

as the desert.[39] This connection to his southern roots also grants Easy a great deal of insight into the complicated subject of human nature, which gives him a slight advantage when he is forced to venture beyond the boundaries of Watts, Compton, and the surrounding Black neighborhoods on the outskirts of downtown L.A. Mosley's follow-ups to *Devil* depict a man who is no longer a naïve, WWII veteran. The character is less haunted by his days in the war, and perhaps more troubled by the distant days of his youth in Houston, Texas. He is also still wary of Whites and the trouble that inevitably accompanies their presence – in all of the novels in the series – but he also gradually begins to realize that a majority of the factors that contribute to his oppression, and that of his community, are indeed economic in nature; that rich White men will go to as much trouble to keep the poor White man down as they would in keeping the poor Black man "in his place". This facet of Easy's evolution as a detective becomes particularly relevant when considering the fact that much of the investigative work that Easy performs for powerful Whites in the novels is accompanied by a large amount of monetary compensation. This emphasis on Easy's ability to keep a fair amount of cash in his pocket, and to steadily make his way up the financial ladder adds a new dimension to the depiction of the heroic Black detective in African American literature. Unlike Chester Himes's "Gravedigger Jones" and "Coffin Ed Johnson"[40], Easy is self-employed and thus free to conduct his investigations in any manner he sees fit, and he rarely violates his own sense of morality or decency to achieve any of his investigative ends. The independent nature of Easy's investigative work also liberates him, for the most part, from the

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[39] See the significant desert scenes in Mosley's fourth installment in the series, *Black Betty*. Particularly those portraying Easy's search for Betty's missing brother Marlon.
[40] Chester Himes's famous Black detectives work for the New York City Police Department.

intrusive surveillance of the White gaze. He does not work for White men, but of course, he is almost always in the custody of an L.A. precinct. He is in and out of jail in every canonical[41] novel of the series. Easy's propensity for quickly drawing conclusions based on the appearance of people and things in his environment plays a key role in his confrontation with the IRS, and "Mr. Tax Man" himself Agent Lawrence, in *Red Death*:

> It was my habit to size up people quickly. I liked to think I had an advantage on them if I had an insight into their private lives. In the tax man's case I figured that there was probably something wrong at home. Maybe his wife was fooling around, or one of his kids had been sick the night before. I dropped my speculations after a few moments, though. I had never met a government man who admitted to having a private life (Mosley *Red Death*, 42).

Mosley's emphasis on placing Easy on a level intellectual playing field with his White adversaries is another one of his unique contributions to the Black detective fiction genre, and stresses the distinct nature of his protagonist's heroism.

Easy's transition to a more stable, domestic life in the two novels also marks him as a unique addition to the Black detective fiction genre. Indeed, his life swings, often precariously, between the extremes of street life and home life. Much of this transition is triggered in *Red Death* by the reemergence of a character from Easy's Texan past, EttaMae; a woman who seems to exude all of the values that Easy seeks in a life partner.

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[41]Becky Pettit examines the connection between surveillance and the mass incarceration of Black men in her book *Invisible Men: Mass Incarceration and the Myth of Black Progress*.

In fact, he is quite in love with her – they have a history[42]- and this emotional connection is only complicated by the unhinged madness of his dear friend Raymond "Mouse" Alexander. Upon her appearance in Easy's beloved home in *Red Death*, Mosley's protagonist notes: " … Etta held her arms out and I walked into her embrace as if I had never heard of her husband, my best friend, Mouse. I buried my face in her neck and breathed in her natural, flat scent; like the smell of fresh-ground flour. I put my arms around EttaMae Harris and relaxed for the first time since I had last held her- fifteen years before" (Mosley *Red Death*, 28). The tenderness of such a scene is also reflected in Easy's initial interactions with his wife Regina[43] in *White Butterfly*:

> … it was always hard for me to think when looking at Regina. Her skin was the color of waxed ebony and her large almond-shaped eyes were a half an inch too far apart. She was tall and slender but, for all that she was beautiful, it was something else that got to me. Her face had no imperfection that I could see. No blemish or wrinkle. Never a pimple or mole or some stray hair that might have grown out of the side of her jaw. Her eyes would close now and then but never blink as normal people do. Regina was perfect in every way. She knew how to walk and how to sit down. But she was never flustered by a lewd comment or shocked by poverty. I fell in love with Regina Riles each time I looked at her. I fell in love with her before we ever exchanged words" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 31).

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[42] The backstory concerning Easy and EttaMae is further revealed near the conclusion of the last novel of Mosley's canonical series, *Gone Fishin'*.

[43] Jennifer Larson's *Understanding Walter Mosley* analyzes the consequences of Easy's relationship with Regina: "…Regina, however, worries about Easy's emotional distance and her place in his life. Their relationship deteriorates irrevocably after a sexual encounter that the two of them interpret very differently."

While EttaMae is not the first woman[44] to beguile the brash Easy Rawlins, she in many ways prepares him for the role of being a father to his biological daughter Edna, and a father figure to his adoptive children Jesus and Feather. Easy's relationship with his adopted son Jesus, which takes a great deal of time to develop into a comfortable father/son bond[45], reflects the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual aspects of the world that Mosley presents in these novels. Jesus is reintroduced into Mosley's narrative in the latter half of *Red Death*.[46] His relationship with Easy continues to evolve in *White Butterfly*, and in the subsequent installments in the series:

> Silent and shy, the little child jumped up, running the obstacle course of children, dogs, and furniture for the kitchen in back. Jesus Peña. Most of the Peña children were light-colored, honey, like their father, with big moonlike eyes. But Jesus was a duller hue with more Asiatic eyes. He wasn't their natural child. He was a boy I found eating raw flour from a five-pound bag. He'd been abused by an evil white man; a white man who had paid for his evil with a bullet in his heart. I brought Jesus to Primo and Flower[47]. They kept him as long as I promised to take him back if anything ever happened to them. We'd drawn up the papers and Jesus was my godchild. I was proud of him, because he was smart and strong and he loved animals. The only thing wrong about Jesus was that he wouldn't talk. I never

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[44]Larson also notes that "In his first two novels, Easy sleeps with multiple women but has no lasting emotional connections."

[45]See Coles' *The Best Kept Secret: Single Black Fathers*.

[46]Josh Kun and Laura Pulido clarify the intimate connection between the Black and Latino communities in Los Angeles in their edited book *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*.

[47] Primo's Black Panamanian wife. Regarding the close bond shared by Easy and L.A.'s Latino community, Kun and Pulido assert that "…The history of Brown and Black Los Angeles is not only the story of the two groups intersecting but also the story of many groups connecting and diverging within the context of a larger regional history…" (9).

> knew if he remembered anything about his past, because I couldn't get him to talk, and whenever I asked him about it he hugged me and kissed me, then he ran away (Mosley *Red Death*, 240).

Contrast this scene with another in *White Butterfly* that portrays the gradual development of the father/son relationship between Easy and Jesus:

> Jesus and I went to Pecos Bob's Barbecue Heaven for dinner. He had two servings of ribs. Then we went to the penny arcade at the Santa Monica pier.[48] He played the little coin games and rode the merry-go-round. It was great fun. I bought a beer but didn't drink it. Jesus had cotton candy and caramel corn, but that was okay, he needed to feel good. We went home feeling dizzy from the red flashing lights and bells. He was kind of slow in the morning but at least he slept in his own bed. I watched him trail off toward school. He met up with two little girls from across the street. I never even knew that Jesus had friends he walked to school with (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 246).

As the reader examines Easy's gradual transformation into a father figure for Jesus, it also important to note the absence of Easy's biological father in his boyhood years in Texas.[49] The lack of a proper father and mother[50] in Easy's early years explains his fervent need to provide Jesus, and indeed all of his children, with a proper home. Easy's

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[48] Note the significance of this location and its connection to *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Near the end of *White Butterfly*, Easy encounters a fellow prisoner named Alamo, a WWI veteran from Iowa. Easy encounters a young girl, also from Iowa, at the Santa Monica Pier in *Devil*.

[49] See *Gone Fishin'*.

[50] The latter novels of the series explain Easy's complicated relationship to his biological mother and father. He eventually explains that he first arrived in Houston on a train as an orphan. The issue of Easy's experiences as an orphan also tie him more closely to Jesus.

willingness to take in two adopted children stems from his close connections with the multitude of ethnic individuals that populate Mosley's fictional world as well. Easy forms bonds that extend well beyond the tightly knit Black émigré community featured in *Devil*. The most affable bond, as illustrated above, is indeed with Primo and Flower, who demonstrate the merits of domestic life and familial affection that Easy seeks to provide for his own burgeoning brood. More importantly, however, Mosley provides a portrait of people of color willing to support one another in the domestic sphere and across "racial" lines in order to oppose the discrimination, social, and economic hardships leveled upon them by the agents and institutions of White supremacy.

The bond between Easy and Regina is the "opposite side of the coin"- so to speak- of Easy's relationship with EttaMae. Easy's relationship with his first wife is complicated by his need to keep the true nature of his life confidential. Like much of Easy's tenets in his various properties, Regina believes that Easy is a simple maintenance man working for Mofass, and she is suspicious of how he is able to acquire the seemingly vast amounts of funds that he uses to support his family. The lack of openness and exchange of information in their relationship drives her into the arms of Dupree, a somewhat fitting consequence of Easy's affair with Dupree's wife Coretta in *Devil*, in the closing pages of *White Butterfly*. Nonetheless, the relationship at least represents Easy's first true attempt to live the life of an honest, family man; it is his first step into mature manhood and true domesticity. Interestingly, Regina is wary of Easy's bond with Jesus due to the controversial nature of the boy's past. She fears that the boy's presence may somehow endanger her infant daughter Edna. This issue also adds tension between husband and wife, but drives Easy closer to Jesus:

> (Regina) 'Listen, Easy. Jesus don't know how to think about what's right for Edna. You got to do that for him.' (Easy) 'He knows more than you think, baby. He's been around little children more than most women have. And he understands even if he doesn't talk.' Regina shook her head. 'He got problems, Easy. You sayin' that he's okay don't make it so.' Jesus climbed down out of the tree[51] and went to the side of the house to get into his room. 'I don't know what you mean, honey,' I said. 'Everybody got problems. How you handle your problems means what kinda man you gonna be.' (Regina) 'He ain't no man. Jesus is just a little boy. I don't what kind of trouble he's had but I do know that it's too much for him, that's why he can't talk.' I let it drop there. I could never bring myself to tell her the real story. About how I rescued the boy from a missing woman's house after he had been bought and abused by an evil man. How could I explain that the man who mistreated Jesus had been murdered and I knew who'd done it, but kept quiet? (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 32).

This brief exchange concerning Jesus's past, in addition to others concerning the matter of Easy's finances, are the primary sources of the discord that exists in Easy's marriage. It is quite clear to the reader that Regina's presence in his life serves to test Easy's ability to trust; to invite someone he loves dearly into the danger and intrigue that he must confront as a Black private eye and property owner. Easy is capable of trusting a business partner like Mofass[52], it seems, primarily due to the practical nature of their partnership. He makes it clear, in *Red Death*, that they are not friends, but Mofass is a good person to

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[51] In *White Butterfly*, Jesus has a habit of climbing up into an avocado tree in Easy's front yard.

[52] The business partnership is tested by an act of betrayal on Mofass's part in *Red Death*. In that sense, he is comparable to Joppy Shag in *Devil*.

talk to about business matters. With Regina, Easy is tempted to become far more vulnerable, which is dangerous for a man who is attempting to simultaneously walk the razor's edge and guard a growing family from the harm that results from living such a hazardous life. Many of the women that win Easy's affection are strong, caring women who arise from troubled origins. They are also capable of seeing through Easy's attempts to shield them from the trouble that pursues him on his myriad adventures in and around L.A. Easy explains his reluctance to reveal all of the intimate details of his occupation to his wife early on in *White Butterfly*: "I had lived a life of hiding before I met Regina. Nobody knew about me. They didn't know about my property. They didn't know about my relationship to the police. I felt safe in my secrets. I kept telling myself that Regina was my wife, my partner in life. I planned to tell her about what I'd done over the years. I planned to tell her that Mofass really worked for me and that I had plenty of money in bank accounts around town. But I had to get at it slowly, in my own time"[53] (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 35). Regina's futile attempts to gain access to every aspect of Easy's life, and the test of his ability to become vulnerable with a woman within the confines of marriage, serve to further propel Mosley's protagonist on the path toward achieving a mature state of Black manhood.

Easy's attempts to conceal the secrets related to his investigative work and property ownership are also further complicated by his continued collaboration with the local police in these novels. Along with the shift in chronology that accompanies the

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[53] Easy's habit of hiding money, which originates in the pages of the first novel in the series, may stem from his experiences after he accompanies "Mouse" to Pariah, Texas to kill the latter's stepfather daddyReese so that "Mouse" can claim his inheritance. "Mouse" splits the money with Easy after the murder, and Easy spends the funds recklessly. See *Gone Fishin'*.

subsequent narratives in the series, a more diverse cast of police officers begin to approach Easy for assistance when major cases need to be solved. Quinten Naylor is the first such character introduced in *White Butterfly*: "Every once in a while the law sent over one of their few black representatives to ask me to go into the places where they could never go. I was worth a precinct full of detectives when the cops needed the word in the ghetto" (Mosley, *White Butterfly* 10). Naylor invites Easy to investigate a string of killings of women with questionable reputations, mostly "dancers". Though he is Black, Easy is still wary of the policeman, and in fact notes: "Quinten had the weight of the whole community on his shoulders. The black people didn't like him because he talked like a white man and he had a white man's job. The other policemen kept at a distance too. Some maniac was killing Negro women and Quinten was all alone. Nobody wanted to help him and the women continued to die" (Mosley, *White Butterfly* 20). These savvy remarks again reflect Mosley's attempt to portray the upward mobility of Black folks in the fictional L.A. of the nineteen fifties. More liberal than many areas of the South, the Los Angeles that Mosley depicts is still tightly cordoned off by the strictures of racial segregation, and thus as Easy notes quite astutely, only a chosen few are able to break the barriers erected by White institutions and their agents to keep Black folks "in their place". The price of doing so, of course, is a strained relationship with others of one's kind, which makes Easy's collaboration with the infamous L.A.P.D. all the more complex. The realities of the tension between the Black community and the L.A.P.D. in the early nineties definitely informs much of Mosley's creative decisions in depicting Easy's collaboration with the police within the world of his novels. He makes this clear in an illuminating 1993 interview with Thulani Davis:

> … Black people are not going to talk to a police detective even if he's black. He's still a policeman, which means he's an enemy … The way police treat black people in the community is not like, 'I need your help.' They're like, 'C'mere nigger, I want to know something.' We instantly don't want to respond to that. And as Easy says, the people they want to talk to are 'the element'. They don't want to know about the churchgoers, they want to know about the people who are out there in the street, who know what's going on, who might be doing something. These people don't talk to the police. But they do talk to Easy, because Easy's okay (*Conversations*, 6).

Regarding Mosley's comment concerning "the element" that attracts the attention of law enforcement, Easy makes an insightful observation about Naylor's initial frustration with Easy's less than eager willingness to assist in the growing investigation related to the deaths of the dancing women in the Black portion of L.A.: "He was lost. He wanted me to tell him what to do because the police didn't know how to catch some murderer who didn't make sense to them. They knew what to do when a man killed his wife or when a loan shark took out a bad debt. They knew how to question witnesses, white witnesses. Even though Quinten Naylor was black he didn't have sympathy among the rough crowd in the Watts community; a crowd commonly called *the element*" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 19). Easy's intimate connection to the underworld in his own community is always a valuable asset in his dealings with the police. However, as he uses these connections as leverage in his business dealings with law enforcement, he also seeks to distance himself

from the street life in order to achieve more stability for himself and his growing family.[54]

While Easy forges new alliances with certain elements of local law enforcement, the expansion of Easy's entrepreneurial enterprises inevitably attract the unwanted attention of the federal government; specifically, as has already been stated, the Internal Revenue Service. Easy's passion for property acquisition provides him not only with a sense of personal satisfaction, but also with a far more solid foundation upon which to begin rebuilding his life after the war. His dream of becoming a bona fide "man of property", as articulated in the first novel in the series, finally begins to come into fruition in the second and third installments, and this fact is extremely gratifying to Mosley's gradually maturing protagonist. The properties that he owns represent additional income and allow him to earn a living with his hands and with his mind; a poor Black man's best assets. This proprietorship is an extension of Easy's desire to be self-employed, and of his bravado. He relishes the fact that he is able to act as an uncompromising entrepreneur as well; at least, secretly.

As he manages his properties he expands the boundaries of his tight knit community by getting acquainted with his tenets[55] and spending a vast amount of time

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[54] See Coles. Easy makes it clear in subsequent novels, most notably in *A Little Yellow Dog*, that he wants nothing to do with the street life.

[55] Elisabeth V. Ford, in her article "Miscounts, Loopholes, and Flashbacks: Strategic Evasion in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction", states the following regarding Easy's favorite Latino tenant: "The narrative's refusal of race as a marker of character takes on ironic importance in the instance of Mrs. Trajillo, a minor character in *A Red Death* who lives on the first floor of an apartment building in which a murder takes place, and who constantly sits in her window and watches what goes on outside the building" (1080).

lingering in and around the buildings acting as a janitor[56] and maintenance man. He sweeps the floors of the hallways with the same amount of care and pride that he employs to tend to the particulars of his own home, and of the garden in his front lawn: "Each floor of the Magnolia Street building had a short hallway with two apartments on either side. At the far end was a large window that let in the morning sun. That's why I fell in love with the place. The morning sun shone in, warming up the cold concrete floors and brightening the first part of your day. Sometimes I'd go there even when there was no work to be done … I'd go upstairs and stand in the window, looking down into the street. Sometimes I'd stand there for an hour and more, watching the cars and clouds making their ways. There was a peaceful feeling about the streets of Los Angeles in those days. Everybody on the second floor had a job, so I could sit around the halls all morning and nobody would bother me" (Mosley *Red Death*, 14).

The confidence that accompanies ownership is clear in Easy's carefree attitude toward dawdling in his own buildings. Nevertheless, it seems odd to the attentive mind that Easy would be so willing to deny the fact of his ownership, and trust his business partner Mofass with such crucial financial tasks as collecting rents and managing the books. Easy justifies his relationship with Mofass by explaining, "Mofass didn't trust his own mother; that's what made him such a good real estate agent. Another thing I liked about Mofass was that he was from New Orleans and, though he talked like me, he wasn't intimate with my friends from around Houston, Galveston, and Lake Charles, Louisiana.[57] I was safe from idle gossip about my secret financial life … (However,) I

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[56] Easy also works as a janitor in *A Little Yellow Dog*.
[57] Note that Mosley has ancestral ties to Louisiana and Texas. See Owen E. Brady's *Conversations with Walter Mosley*. Daphne Monet (*Devil in a Blue Dress*) also hails

was nervous about discussing my private affairs with Mofass. He collected the rent for me. I gave him nine percent and fifteen dollars for each eviction, but we weren't friends. Still, Mofass was the only man I could discuss my business with" (Mosley *Red Death*, 19). After an act of betrayal on Mofass's part, which of course strains the business partnership between he and Easy, the final pages of the novel seem to represent a kind of reconciliation between the two characters, and Mofass looms large in subsequent installments in the series as well. The scene also features Jesus, whom Easy acquires from Primo and Flower as they depart for an extended journey out of town. The boy's presence signifies the ultimate melding of Easy's private and business lives; an inevitable collision that continues to reverberate throughout the pages of *White Butterfly*:

> Jesus,' I said, I fished a quarter out of my shirt pocket and flipped it to him. 'Go get us some candy at the store we saw.' He gave me a mute grin and ran for the door. I waited for the sound of his steps down the stairs to fade before talking (to Mofass) again. ' … Mofass, I shoulda let Raymond waste your ass. I should have but I couldn't, 'cause you my own personal hell. But it don't matter. You see, I lost sumpin' since that day we talked about that letter. I lost a lot. I got a friend (Odell) who hates me now 'cause he think I got his minister killed. An' I cain't go to him 'cause it was my fault, really. An' I lost my woman because I wasn't good enough. There's a lotta people dead 'cause'a me. And I turnt Poinsettia[58] out. You told me to do it, but it's on my head … (Mofass) 'What do you want from me Mr.

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from Lake Charles, LA. Eventually in the series, Easy reveals that he was born in Louisiana before riding the rails as an orphan and arriving in Houston, TX.

[58] Poinsettia is one of Easy's tenets.

> Rawlins?' (Easy) 'I ain't got no friends, man. All I got is Jackson Blue[59], who'd give me up fo'a bottle 'a wine, and Mouse; you know him. And a Mexican boy who cain't speak Englis hardly an' if he did he cain't talk no ways … I want you to keep on workin' fo' me, William (Mofass). I want you to be my friend.' Mofass put the cigar between his fat lips and puffed smoke. I don't think he knew how big his eyes were. 'Sure,' he said. 'You my best customer, Mr. Rawlins.' (Easy) 'Yeah, man. Yeah.' We sat there staring at each other until Jesus came back. He brought three tubes of chocolate disks, Flicks they were called. The three of us ate the chocolate in silence. Jesus was the only one smiling' (Mosley *Red Death*, 283-284).

Easy's longing for true friendship, loyalty, and trust – even as he seeks to become an increasingly more savvy, and at times ruthless,[60] businessman- complements his desire to conduct his financial affairs with his own characteristic bold and uncompromising South Texas masculine way of living and dealing.

The disruptive intrusion of White authority figures and institutions into the novels does not manage to rob Easy of his precious independence. It has already been argued that Easy Rawlins represents a unique addition to the genre of Black detective fiction in part due to his freedom from being beholden to Whites for employment or approval. Nonetheless, it is dangerous for a Black man to be so insistent on being fully independent; on being his own man. Easy recognizes this fact and attempts to compensate for it by being extremely guarded in his personal and financial affairs. Easy's continuing

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[59] Jackson Blue is a small time crook and friend of Easy's first introduced in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. See Coleman's *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban*.
[60] See *Black Betty*.

effort to subvert primarily male White authority figures, even in the most routine ways, reflects his own quiet, courageous march toward equality and justice. Before the arrival of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party in the historical and sociopolitical context surrounding Mosley's detective fiction, Easy exudes all of the virtues of liberated, heroic Black manhood that would later be championed by these significant figures of the Civil Rights struggle.

The White institutions that pursue Easy throughout the pages of Mosley's narratives, the police, of course, the IRS, the FBI, etc., all fail to stifle the strength of Mosley's audacious character despite their dogged efforts to detain him on various occasions. As he becomes increasingly more mature and comfortable in his own skin, so to speak, Easy draws from the trauma of Black southern life to gain further critical insight into the madness of White racism; regarding how it directly and indirectly impacts him and his community, as well as how he can utilize his understanding of human nature to manipulate White bias to gain the advantage in dealing with broad institutions of power and surveillance. Although he is often called upon by these authority figures to infiltrate predominantly Black spaces, he is not viewed by his own community as an informant, or worse, as a "snitch". Unlike Naylor, Easy leverages his reputation in the Black community to cross the color line without tripping over it, or being trapped on one side of it. In fact, he is one of the few characters in Mosley's novels that is capable of doing so while also gaining sufficient knowledge that leads to the acquisition of a certain amount of wisdom regarding the insidious nature of American racial discrimination.[61] Easy's uneasy alliance with the officials of local law enforcement also saves him from certain

[61] See Easy's conversation with Alamo in *Black Betty*.

doom in many instances, and he's eventually able to strike deals with the agents of the IRS and the FBI after concluding his investigative work in *Red Death*.

These deals allow him to settle his tax debts while maintaining ownership of his beloved properties: "Craxton[62] was true to his word and I took two years to pay off the money that the IRS said I owed. He also took the heat off of Shirley Wenzler[63] and gave me his private number where I could get him anytime … The FBI man wanted smooth sailing over a sea of death and silence. Everything was fine" (Mosley *Red Death*, 280). As is suggested by this extract from *Red Death*, Easy's courageous interactions with agents and institutions of White supremacy nearly always permit him to expand his financial and intellectual horizons. Mosley allows his character to grow beyond the context of his oppression in order to mature into a fully developed, and somewhat more open-minded, human being.

In a 2004 interview with Craig McDonald, Mosley makes an insightful comment regarding the potential for Easy's willingness to infiltrate Black spaces on behalf of oppressive White institutions of power to become problematic given the details of the fictional world that the author has constructed for the character: "Racial issues in America intersect with class issues. There still is racism in America, and in the rest of the world in general. There is still the possibility of any black male being rousted because of profiling, or whatever. But it is most common among poor black people. If you are a poor black person, and you look like a poor black person, and the policemen believe you're a

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[62] Special Agent Darryl T. Craxton of the FBI.

[63] The daughter of Chaim Wenzler, a Jewish communist organizer. Note the continued appearance of prominent Jewish characters in Mosley's narratives, and their close relations with the Black community, as it relates to Mosley's biography and his fascination with the WWII era.

poor black person, they will abuse your rights a little bit more than if you have the telephone number of a good lawyer[64] in your pocket. (McDonald) "The LAPD has its well deserved reputation." (Mosley) "It's true everywhere. Chicago. Detroit. New York. I was talking to a policeman who was being very friendly to me who said to me, 'Well, you know, I don't profile. It's just that most of your criminals are either brown or black.' He just says it to me. Even if most of the people he arrested for crimes were 'brown or black', that doesn't mean that most people who are 'brown or black' are criminals. But that's where he carries it to, because that is what he believes" (*Conversations*, 129-130). Mosley's sentiments are reflected in Easy's narration early on in *Red Death* as well:

> On top of real estate I was in the business of favors. I'd do something for somebody, like find a missing husband or figure out who's been breaking into so-and-so's store, and then maybe they could do me a good turn one day. It was a real country way of doing business. At that time almost everybody in my neighborhood had come from the country around southern Texas and Louisiana. People would come to me if they had serious trouble but couldn't go to the police. Maybe somebody stole their money or their illegally registered car. Maybe they worried about their daughter's company or wayward son. I settled disputes that would have otherwise come to bloodshed. I had a reputation for fairness and the strength of my convictions among the poor. Ninety-nine out of a hundred black folk were poor back then, so my reputation went quite a way. I wasn't on

[64] Easy acquires a good attorney after the events of *White Butterfly*. She becomes an essential element of the plot of *Black Betty*. Specifically, she plays a role in bailing Mouse out of jail and saving Easy from being killed by corrupt Beverly Hills police officers.

anybody's payroll, and even though the rent was never steady, I still had enough money for food and liquor (Mosley *Red Death*, 15).

The strong bonds that Easy forges with the Black poor allow him to "play both ends" so to speak; at least, when it comes to allowing White law enforcement to gain access to the Black community in order to punish those who are committing what Easy considers to be unforgivable crimes within it. Importantly, in both *Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, the wrongdoers are ultimately revealed to be the same powerful Whites that Easy interacts with in the initial stages of his investigations.[65] Easy's ability to audaciously work on both sides of the color line, and still maintain his street credibility among the poor folks from south Texas and Louisiana, allows him to utilize oppressive White institutions of power as a means to achieve Black upward mobility. To be sure, Black and Brown lives are destroyed and lost throughout the narratives that Mosley constructs in both novels. However, this tragic loss of life and/or freedom is balanced by Easy's inevitable survival to tell the tale. His wit, his connections, and his personal relationships shield him from experiencing too much of the brutality that terminates most of the Black and Brown lives that appear and disappear abruptly in the novels, and despite whatever physical or physic injuries he may sustain, Easy consistently learns from and grows as a result of his harrowing experiences working cases for his own ends, and on behalf of the agents of White supremacy.

An examination of the evolution of Easy's narrative voice, which also signifies his masculinity, aligns well with this observation of the character's continued growth in

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[65] Agent Lawrence (in *Red Death*) and Vernor Garnett (in *White Butterfly*) – the father of the dead White stripper Sylvia Bride a.k.a. Phyllis Weinstein- are both deeply involved in the crimes that Easy investigates in the two novels.

spite of the trauma inflicted upon his body and mind throughout the narratives. Unlike the first installment in the *Mysteries Series*, in the subsequent novels Easy relies less on his inner "voice" for guidance in times of trouble. Much of his narration in these novels reflects the thoughts and observations of a more mature man struggling to come to terms with the idiosyncrasies of the people that populate the chaotic and uncertain world that Mosley builds for his protagonist. Easy's tendency to conceal his high-level intelligence and astute powers of observation from friends and foes alike also aligns well with his surreptitious financial habits. This talent proves especially useful when he needs to outwit White authority figures. In this sense at least, he continues to hone his talents as a type of trickster figure. The large reservoir of seemingly unassailable self-confidence that underlies this skill keeps the character relatively stable even when he experiences great distress. Importantly, as Easy's life becomes increasingly complex due to the multitude of personal events within it, the reader gains more access to various levels of his mind; those that differ drastically from the pure survival instinct upon which he relies so heavily in the first novel in the series. These other levels of the character's consciousness are briefly glimpsed in portions of that narrative, but Easy's complicated relationships to the women that populate the worlds of *Red Death* and *White Butterfly* reveal them more fully as the protagonist delves into his emotions:

> I got home at about five. Regina's car wasn't parked out front yet. Gabby Lee[66] and Edna weren't to be seen. Jesus' scooter lay on its side near the garden. Everything looked very good. I had owned that house for more than ten years, but since Regina had moved in, it was more like a home than ever. I still remember

[66] Gabby Lee is the babysitter for Easy's biological daughter Edna in *White Butterfly*.

> the day I met her. It was at a club in Compton. I was following a man named Addison Prine for his fiancée's father. The old man, Tony Spigs, was sure that Addison had a girlfriend and he wanted me to find her name. Spigs was a jealous old man and he wanted to keep his only daughter at home as long as he could. Spigs was also Mofass' preferred carpenter and I thought I could get a good carpentry job out of him for a hefty favor. Addison was at a small table with another man and a woman. Near to them a woman sat alone. She was wearing a simple brown dress. She had the dregs of a bright red drink with a straw in it before her. 'Can I sit here?' I asked her in a businesslike manner. She looked up at me and her eyes laughed. That's when I fell in love. Her eyes laughed without a smile crossing her lips. Then she looked around the room. There were quite a few empty tables around, because it was late afternoon and the Toucan was still waiting for its crowd (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 213).

Easy's recollection of his first encounter with his future wife occurs shortly before she leaves him with his former co-worker Dupree: "There was a folded piece of paper on the TV. Under the note lay the nine hundred dollars I'd given her. When I saw the money I knew I was lost. 'Dear Easy: It is hard for me to say honey but I found a man that I love. And I am going away with him. You know I have tried but I cannot stay. You are wonderful Easy but I need something that we don't have. I love you. I do love you but I have to go. Don't hate me for taking Edna. She needs her mother. Goodbye.' The dictionary was on the coffee table. She'd looked up the words she couldn't spell. The tears came and my knees buckled. After a long while I looked up and saw Jesus sitting on his haunches. He was sitting watch over me" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 216). In allowing

his protagonist to open himself to the joys and pains of romantic love, a process that began with Easy's brief fling with Daphne Monet[67] in the first novel, Mosley offers the reader some significant insight on the inner workings of a man who is still struggling to come to terms with what it means to be a fully domesticated adult; not just Black, not just poor, not just a man seeking to merely survive in a hostile, strange environment.

Much of this vulnerability is also reflected in Easy's relationship with his biological daughter Edna. The tenderness that he displays toward his child indeed stands in stark contrast to the uncompromising, and bold investigator portrayed in the previous novels in the series: "I went to the kitchen to put Edna's formula on the stove. Then I got a diaper from the package that Jesus brought home every other day from LuEllen Stone. Edna was crying in the corner of the living room where we'd set up her crib. I turned on the small lamp and loomed over her. That silenced the cries for a moment. Then I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. That got a smile and a coo. I carried her back to the kitchen, where I laid her on a sheet rolled out over the kitchen table. I filled a red rubber tub with tepid water and undid the safety pin of her diapers. She was crying again but not angrily. She was just telling me that she felt bad. I could have joined her. I washed her with a soft chamois towel, saying little nonsense things and kissing her now and again. By the time she was clean all the tears were gone. The bottle was ready and I changed her fast. I held her to my chest again and gave her the bottle. She suckled and cooed and clawed at my nose. I turned toward the door to see Regina there staring at us" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 39-40). The revelation of Easy's sensitive side in *White Butterfly*, particularly as the author portrays the growth of his family, provides the reader with a

[67] See *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

rather convincing argument for the character's maturity. In providing these intensely poignant glimpses into Easy's domestic life, Mosley also allows the reader – whether he be Black or White- to relate to his protagonist on a much deeper level.

As Easy's complex relationships with women continue to develop, revealing his emotional vulnerabilities, his views of Whites also steadily begin to change as well. The most significant interaction that Easy has in this regard is with the character Alamo in *White Butterfly*. Easy encounters the character during yet another brief stint in prison near the conclusion of the narrative: "Alamo and I shared a few cigarettes that he got and sat up all that night. He was a career criminal. He'd done everything, if you were to believe him, from petty larceny to first-degree murder[68]. He'd been born in a small town in Iowa and hit the road after he was let loose from the army after World War I. 'It just wasn't never right after that. All them dead boys,' Alamo told me. He shook his head in real remorse. 'And all them people, never felt it, act like they know life. Damn. I could take their money or their life. They wouldn't even know it was gone.' He was kind of crazy but I was comforted by him. After all, it was sane men who had put me in jail" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 257).

Alamo's central role in this particular narrative is to remind Easy of the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the racial oppression of Black folks. It is, of course, also significant that both he and Easy are war veterans; another fact that connects them beyond the issue of race. Many of Easy's other interactions with Whites remain hostile. Nonetheless, as it has already been stated, as the character becomes more mature,

[68] Easy's relationship with Alamo continues to evolve in *Black Betty*. Alamo assists Easy with a burglary that leads to essential information concerning his investigation.

he begins to deconstruct the illusion of White supremacy with his intellect and his keen powers of perception. Perhaps the most jarring moment in *White Butterfly* is the final confrontation between Easy and Vernor Garnett, the father of the slain White stripper Sylvia Bride a.k.a. Phyllis Weinstein. Garnett's racism is eventually revealed as the primary motive in the crime that Easy investigates throughout the novel, and Easy eventually adopts the woman's abandoned biracial baby daughter Feather. Easy is greatly disturbed by Garnett's transgression, and his engagement with the character marks a turning point in his view of racial politics:

> Sylvia was dead. He'd laid her out on the floor of the closet and closed the door. But she was already starting to smell. Her temple was caved in. The room was a shambles. Clothes and bags of food were thrown around. A newspaper spread on the bed was open to the travel section. Three special fares to Mexico were circled. I turned out the light and stood behind the door. I just waited there forever. The gray forms of the bed and dresser got fainter. The pistol was cold on my fingers. When Garnett came back he opened the door and closed it before flicking on the light. I hadn't expected to be blinded by the sudden light. 'What,' Vernor called out loudly as if maybe he was with somebody. But he was alone. Maybe if he had jumped me in that second I would have been keeping Sylvia company. But instead he clawed at the doorknob for two seconds, three. I flat-handed him with the pistol. He shook his head as if assailed by a sudden and unpleasant memory. I hit him again and he went down to his knees … 'Please,' he said in a small voice. A voice was screaming in my head, 'Kill him!' Over and over. My neck quivered. I honestly felt that if I didn't pull the trigger I would die … Maybe to some people

> revenge is sweet. All I know is that I had to stop my car five blocks away and vomit for a full minute before I could breathe again (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 268-269).

In this devastating confrontation with Garnett, who is a wealthy, high-powered attorney, Easy realizes that the basest instincts of humanity transcend artificial racial categories. The fact that Garnett is responsible for the death of his daughter, who was involved in a romantic liaison with a Black man, is also unacceptable to Mosley's principled protagonist. The murder serves as a peculiar counterpoint to the tender moments that Easy shared with his infant daughter Edna earlier in the novel.

Easy's perception of American racism, and his distinct brand of masculinity, is always informed by his harrowing experiences in World War II. As he steadily makes his way through the nineteen fifties, he also continues to draw upon his southern roots to gird himself against the assaults of White racist authorities and institutions. White men continually refer to him as "son" or "Rawlins", which always rubs Easy the wrong way. The character is remarkable, nevertheless, due to his ability to quickly disregard the disrespect of arrogant, ignorant bigots: " … The lot itself was decorated with two rusted-out Buicks that were hunkered down on broken axles in the weeds. A knotty oak had died toward the back end of the lot. Quinten and I walked through the crowd. There were men, women, and children stretching their necks and bobbing back and forth. A boy said, 'Lloyd saw'er. She dead.' When we walked past the line of policemen one of them caught me by the arm and said, 'Hey you, son.' Quinten gave him a hard stare and the officer said, 'Oh, okay. You can go on.' Just one of the many white men I've shrugged off. His instinctive disrespect and arrogance hardly even mattered. I turned away and he

was gone from my life" (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 12). Easy's practical attitude toward dealing with the burden of White racism is a survival tactic. However, his preoccupation with upward mobility also shields him from much of the harm he would otherwise suffer under the harsh and incessant glare of the White gaze: "One of the things that the Easy Rawlins series is about is the migration of Black people from southern Texas and Louisiana, into Southern California after World War II. People came back from the war and they didn't expect racism to be gone, but they expected a job. It's like: 'Listen, I know you're going to hate me; that's all right, but I need a job. I just came back from the war and at least I can have a job" (*Conversations*, 67).

Once again, Easy's wise investment in property ownership grants him just enough independence to feel as though he is in control of his own destiny, and to have a sufficient amount of self-respect to make it through the difficult circumstances that inevitably arrive on his doorstep. Throughout the series, Mosley makes it clear that despite whatever dangers await him out in the streets, Easy will always manage to find his way home; to family, to friends, and to community. The expansion of the once closely guarded boundaries of his personal life keep him firmly grounded as he witnesses the horrors that await Black men in the streets, interrogation rooms, and prisons of Los Angeles. Easy's investment in personal gain, a habit he may have acquired from "Mouse",[69] provides the character with a unique coping mechanism that acts as a sturdy buffer against the ravages of racist ignorance that assault him incessantly in the novels. His adopted children also provide him with a great deal of perspective on the subject of race. Jesus and Feather may not be his biological children, but he cares for them deeply

[69] See *Gone Fishin'*.

nonetheless, and does everything in his power to provide a stable home for them. Easy's alliances with Mexicans, such as his good and loyal friend Primo, Japanese farmers, and poor Whites also inform his more enlightened perspective on American racism, and the effect that it has on his community:

> One of the things that Angela Davis says is that race is a consequence of racism. There is no race; there is racism and then there is race. You think that it's a wonderful statement and you wonder if it's true, and then you look at it and think about what a black person is. So you can look at me and then you can look at the way my father looked which was about fourteen shades darker than me and had features much different from mine, and then you look at someone who is completely different, like someone who is black but then has red hair and freckles. Well what exactly does that mean? It's the color of the skin … It's very exciting, I think, to see black mystery writers. There's a problem with people complaining about how somebody has already written about a black detective. Well, yeah, there's more than one white detective, too, but that doesn't seem to be a problem. Being black is like a trick! It's not that interesting. Then you have the internal issue, which is that black people aren't writing- about anything. The problem is about discovering what race is. Within art and also within ourselves, our lives. I think that I can help in there. People say that I can still be real and write about something I like (*Conversations*, 54-55).

Mosley's concern with being "real" is clearly reflected in Easy's unwillingness to compromise either his Black southern identity or his manhood simply for the sake of getting along in the White world. Naylor, his Black connection in the L.A.P.D. in *White*

Butterfly, speaks and behaves like a White man. Easy, as he proudly notes, maintains his street credibility – his connection to the "element"- by being the best version of himself and conducting business in a way that permits him to remain a respected member of his own community. The "favors" that he performs for friends and neighbors are his ultimate investment in the project of Black uplift, and they pay back tremendous dividends in addition to allowing Mosley's protagonist to guard his own sanity amidst the chaos of his everyday existence.

The heroism and the assertive brand of masculinity that Easy Rawlins exudes in his street life, the emotional sensitivity that he demonstrates in his domestic spaces, and the calculating mind that he courageously employs to manage his entrepreneurial enterprises, make the character more than a raging Black militant. He is indeed militantly Black. However, Easy is also a classic American hero. His encounters and experiences with characters in the second and third installments in the series who broaden his political and intellectual horizons pile additional layers of complexity onto the bachelor, war veteran that Mosley introduced in the first novel. Easy's heroism is relatively straightforward given his continual effort to overcome the immense odds that are always-already stacked against him. Despite his failure to do so, he attempts to establish somewhat of a balance between his street activities and home life; a typical American struggle, particularly for the southern émigré Black folks that Mosley portrays throughout the series. For readers of color, the character's integrity and refusal to compromise his Blackness is indeed admirable. For the broader "mass" audiences that also aided in Mosley's rise to literary fame, the character's connection to the heroic narrative of WWII and his ability to empathize with a variety of individuals from various ethnic

backgrounds is also intriguing. In any case, Mosley's brilliant effort to mold a completely round character who champions the cause of the poor struggling to achieve their own distinct vision of the "American Dream" encourages the reader to continue following Easy from one enigma to the next.

> I think that Easy has entered the consciousness- there are not very many people ever in American history who write about Black male heroes that you can put a name on. Not many at all. And it's because of the nature of the country. Black men have been vilified partially because people are afraid of them, and the other part because people feel so guilty about what's been done to Black masculinity. And so it's hard, even among Black people, to create heroes that exist in other cultures, races, etc. And so in order to have a hero like Easy Rawlins … people are very happy just to have that hero. So they don't want to really change it and say, 'Man, good, you got it there? That's good … (Tavis Smiley) ' … when you say Black male heroes that you can put a name on, what did you mean by the latter part?' (Mosley) ' … There's a name on a character; it's like Zorro or some other character who people say, 'That's my hero. Batman, that's my hero.' (Smiley) 'I raise that only because I think a lot of people perhaps don't think that Black heroes even exist, much less can have a name put on them.' (Mosley) 'Yeah, no, I understand that, and of course they do exist. And certainly in my life, certainly in yours, there are all these Black men who are wonderful. It's not that there aren't other people who are wonderful. It's just that the Black men who are wonderful kind of fade into some kind of background and it's like they become caricatures that we could put- well, either it's the pimp or the preacher or the

sidekick, *not a man out there in the world, making a difference in the world*[70], (*Conversations*, 195-196).

Mosley's comment regarding the connection between Easy's heroism and his identity as a " … man out there in the world, making a difference in the world" is striking, and clarifies many of the questions pertaining to the character's popularity among a variety of reading audiences. Moreover, the author's creation of a strong "brand" associated with the name "Easy Rawlins" and the novels in the series, providing the reader with a Black heroic figure that is recognizable, believable, and moldable from narrative to narrative, permits him to construct a compelling counterargument to the stereotypes that derail serious explorations of Black masculinity as it is exhibited in daily life, and as it is studied as an important academic and intellectual pursuit. The alternate literary universe in which Mosley develops his hero offers the reader, especially people of color, with a wide range of exciting and thought-provoking possibilities for interpreting the role of Black men in their own communities and in society at large:

> Part of the problem with modern culture is that people don't want you to change … They don't want you to wander out one day, forgetting to go to work and never going back. They need you to work everyday and in order for that to happen they need to regularize the world. So you have a television with all kinds of channels: sports, music, food, and you're supposed to look at that and go to sleep and go back to work. Your world is reinforced that way so you'll live that life. So when someone asks you about the world you'll say the world is like this and like that. Racism comes out of that. Sexism comes out of that. What I'm doing is trying to

[70] Emphasis added.

> create a whole new world that exists underneath the world we're living in. In doing that, I'm saying there's all kinds of options for you. You don't have to stay where you are. You can be somewhere else. You can be someone else. *That's especially true for black men*,[71] because we're actually nowhere. It's amazing what happens to us. It's amazing how we strain to maintain our dignity and end up like Colin Powell[72], the only one who knows what the fuck is going on, but is unable to tell it" (*Conversations*, 190-191).

Easy's attempts to lead a stable domestic life with a wife and child are particularly noteworthy given the appearance of the novels in the early nineties, and the relevance of ongoing discussions in various sociopolitical institutions of the harmful impact of single-parent households and the mass imprisonment of Black men on the development of African American children; particularly young, Black boys. The narratives perpetuated by the "Gangsta Rap" genre and popular nineteen-nineties Black situation comedies such as *In Living Color* and *Martin* also place Easy's treatment of women in a much different analytical light. While the character does objectify women throughout the series, he also has a profound respect for the strength and independence of Black women; especially those that hail from his native Texas/Louisiana southwestern region. His vivid descriptions of EttaMae's physical power, gained from years of washing laundry for wealthy White folks and maintaining a proper home for her husband and young son, and

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[71] Emphasis added.

[72] Mosley's comment about General Colin Powell, made during a 2007 interview with D. Scot Miller, seems to refer to Powell's role in helping the Bush administration authorize the 2003 Iraq war by testifying about the existence of "Weapons of Mass Destruction". Powell later regretted his testimony, which remains a significant blemish on his otherwise honorable legacy of military and civic service. See Christopher D. O'Sullivan's *Colin Powell: A Political Biography*.

Regina's regal bearing and luscious black skin create a significant and compelling portrait of Black feminine beauty and grace. Mosley makes it clear the Easy draws his strength from these powerful women, and that they contribute to the development of the character into a more mature, and sensitive human being.

The portrait of responsible fatherhood that is connected to the depiction of Easy's relationships to powerful female characters also meshes well with Mosley's desire to propel his readers into a world that offers more possibilities for Black men. A major subject of discussion at landmark mid-nineties events such as the "Million Man March"[73], the role of Black men in the household – specifically a call for Black men to assertively claim their role at the head of the household- and the reconciliation of African American families became a much greater concern for Black male political and religious leaders as Mosley guided his Easy Rawlins character through the pages of his second and third novels. The dialogue related to the trials and tribulations of single parenthood is also relevant to Mosley's literary contemplations concerning his protagonist. In the first novel of the series, Easy grows accustomed to leading a relatively liberated bachelor's life. As he grows and matures in the second and third novels, he must confront and solve the challenges of raising three children; two of whom are adopted. After his wife Regina leaves the household along with baby Edna, the character draws from his experiences as an orphan in order to expand his capacity to love and nurture traumatized children:

[73] "The Million Man March" was sponsored and organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and took place on October 16, 1995.

> Bull Horker's[74] cook, Bailey, was more than happy to tell me where Cyndi stayed in Redondo Beach. For another fifty dollars he would have shed blood for me. The house on Exeter was inhabited by an old woman named Charla Fina. She was holding the baby for Bull Horker and she was none too happy that the Bull had died. But Feather seemed hale and more or less happy. When I first saw her she was sucking her toe. I looked down and she smiled at me and said something in baby talk that I thought meant 'Tickle my stomach and push my nose.' Five hundred dollars and the baby was mine. The papers the next day detailed the crime. The dead stripper Sylvia Bride (her real name was Phyllis Weinstein) had her picture on the front page all over California. The trial was front-page news for weeks. Everything the prosecutor wanted to avoid came out in public. His daughter's wild life, and death. The father's crime, the mother's cover-up. Nobody cared much about the baby. Most of the speculation was that the child had probably been killed by the mother. This was substantiated by the fact that no one had seen the baby after she was born. Anyway, the birth certificate had the baby listed as white. Feather was safe with me. Vernor Garnett died in prison two years after he was sentenced. His wife moved back east somewhere after she was found innocent of conspiracy … (Mosley *White Butterfly*, 270).

The obvious parallels between Easy's interactions with his biological daughter Edna and his newly adopted child Feather speak to the flexibility of the definition of Black fatherhood. Mosley also seems to be tapping into the roots of Black culture here. Easy's connection to the south recalls both the horrors of families being torn apart, and

[74] Bull Horker is the owner of a BBQ and chicken restaurant within the world of *White Butterfly*.

the freedom of individuals to adopt new family members despite the lack of a biological connection.[75] The same need to improvise that allowed Black men and women to survive the brutality of slavery, to create the innovative art form known as Jazz, and to construct new avenues toward achieving social and economic prosperity also informs the flexibility of the definition of family in Black culture. Easy first began to test his capacity for love when he rescued and adopted Jesus. His decision to take in another abandoned child speaks volumes regarding Mosley's argument for a more realistic definition of Black manhood and fatherhood.

In portraying Easy's role as a foster parent, Mosley seeks to remind his readers of the rich cultural traditions that twentieth century African Americans inherited from their slave ancestors, and to deconstruct the stereotypical, hyper-masculine "pimp/player" imagery perpetuated by nineteen nineties hip-hop and popular culture. Mosley's choice to depict his Black male protagonist as a single foster parent, contradicting the more common portrayal of the Black woman in the same role,[76] seems to serve a similar purpose. Mosley's insight on the complexity of the African American community, both its positive and negative qualities, also sheds light on the composition of the fictional Black Los Angeles enclaves that he portrays in his novels:

> You're born with a love for yourself, but you *learn* to despise yourself: because people in school think you're stupid, or because whenever the police see you they

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[75] Colloquially, in Black vernacular that is, individuals that are considered family – although they are not actually biologically related – are referred to as "play" brothers, sisters, cousins, etc. See Coles and the definition of "play cousin": http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=play%20cousin

[76] The 1994 television series *South Central*, featuring the African American family the Moseleys and set in South Central Los Angeles, is noteworthy in this regard.

> think that you're a criminal to the degree where you finally believe that you're a criminal. It's like that Chris Rock line where he says the police stopped him one day in his own car and before they were finished he believed he'd stolen his own car. In school you're treated as ignorant and told that you're ignorant and people get angry at you if you show any intelligence. You can't get good jobs. You can't hope for a future for yourself or for your children. Even while all that's going on, you still know it's not true. Somewhere in your heart you know it's not true. On one level you're thinking it's true, and you're thinking, 'Oh, I'm just another nigger,' basically. And on the other hand you're feeling: 'That is not true; I'm better than this and I deserve better than this.' That paves the way for rage. And rage shows itself in many different ways. In the mother who kicks her son out of the house. And the son who hates all black women who love white men. All kinds of things happen there. And as Easy points out … at one point the anger and the rage are so great you just go out on a hot summer day and start burning everything down. And that rage is partially exposed by people destroying their own community[77], which of course is self-loathing (*Conversations*, 158).

The strength of the communities that Mosley creates within the fictional microcosms of *Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, as well as the self-assured nature of his protagonist, contrast drastically with the realities that he touches upon in various interviews. The significance of the African American church, and Easy's friendship with the pious Odell[78], is a central issue in *Red Death*. The constant tension between secular

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[77] Here, Mosley seems to be referring to the destruction that occurred during the L.A. Riots (1992). The riots took place during the year that *White Butterfly* was first published.
[78] See *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

and sacred that gave birth to great African American art forms such as The Blues characterizes Easy journey toward mature manhood as well. The seeds of the Civil Rights struggle, and government interference in the freedom movement[79], also serve as central themes. The upward mobility of the Black middle class, as exemplified by characters such as detective Naylor in *White Butterfly* and Easy's growing catalogue of rental properties, and his business partnership with Mofass, serves as a thematic lens through which the reader can examine the significance of self-respect as it relates to Mosley's protagonist and the many other Black, Brown, and Yellow characters that populate his narratives.

Again, Mosley points to the African American church as the source of this cultural pride:

> *A Red Death* has several things going on. One is the concept of friendship in this modern, civilized world. Easy find himself working for the IRS and the FBI, and he hates them and they hate him. The other thing is, of course, the McCarthy period itself. Most Black people were poor and working-class and had nothing to do with Communist organizers. They were Black already. You don't need to be on a blacklist if you're Black. I just want to make that connection between the oppression of people … The church is a very important part of the Black community. It's different than a middle-class church where you go there on Sunday and you're part of the church but it's not really the heartbeat of the community; it's maybe like the conscience or something behind you whispering

[79] In *Red Death*, FBI agent Craxton references the NAACP as " … a so-called civil rights organization … full of Reds (communist) and people who will one day be Reds" (Mosley, 114).

> ‘Don’t do that. Don’t do that.’ But the Black church in the Black community is the heart of your life – everything goes on there. When I went back to Victory Baptist Day School, which I modeled my church after, they showed me an apartment building and said, ‘This is where all the elderly ladies go for the church wing, when they get too old to work and pay their rent.’ It wasn’t like bragging or anything. It was this is what we do for the young people and this is what we do for the old people. Of course, whenever you have that much emotional weight on an institution you have some amount of corruption and some problems. So I just wanted to talk about that (*Conversations*, 21-22).

While not necessarily a church-going individual[80], Easy’s moral code does seem to be drawn from his early experiences of Black church. The way in which he interacts with people of color and White folks in the second and third novels in the series substantiates this argument. The fact that Easy needs to keep in close contact with both the secular and sacred aspects of his community adds yet another layer of complexity to Mosley’s particular brand of detective fiction. The relative decline of the influence of the African American church on the broader segments of Black society and politics in the nineteen nineties also makes Mosley’s choice to highlight its cultural significance that much more noteworthy.

The civil rights struggle’s calls for integration in the late nineteen fifties and throughout the sixties also relate to Easy’s shifting view of White society and its relationship to the Black community in *Red Death* and *White Butterfly*. Phyllis

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[80] The African American church also plays a central role in the last canonical novel in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, *Gone Fishin’*, in which Easy attends a service in “Mouse’s” hometown of Pariah, Texas.

Weinstein's death at the hands of her father, and Easy's decision to adopt her biracial daughter, provide Easy with a means through which he can deconstruct the illusions of racial segregation and White supremacy. The tender scene featuring Easy's first encounter with baby Feather, and his helpful interaction with the White criminal Alamo, demonstrate that Easy is beginning to see more of himself and his/his community's struggle in individuals who bear no physical resemblance to him. In this sense, by identifying oppressed and poor people of various racial backgrounds who are struggling to make their way in a cruel and chaotic world, Mosley may be pointing toward elements of a quintessential American identity that transcends racial categorization. Easy's gradual growth toward a mature state of manhood thus coincides with Mosley's effort to deconstruct, challenge, revise, and extend/expand upon the "American Dream" notion; particularly as it relates to the trials and tribulations of people of color. Easy's continued fascination with the possibilities of owning a vast amount of property, of course, places him in a unique position to articulate a unique African American version of the ideal "American Dream" notion: (Craig McDonald) " 'Real estate and homeownership are a recurring theme in your fiction … Much is made of Easy Rawlins' homeownership and aspirations as a landlord … Why do you keep returning to this theme?' (Mosley) 'Wasn't this the dream in the 1950's- and all the way back- at least I want to own my own home? Now it's apartments, condominiums, and everyone is into the stock market … In the 1950's, if you wanted to have your money mean something, and retain its value, you put it into property. Today, if you want to be rich, you go into real estate. Easy is not very good at it …" (*Conversations*, 130). While Easy Rawlins does indeed struggle to keep a firm grip on his financial and personal investments, and in many cases fails to protect

them from the intrusion of hostile White institutions and their agents, the ambition of Mosley's detective to lead a successful, honorable life as an American Black man signifies the author's unique contribution to African American literature.

CHAPTER THREE – "THE LAST NOVELS OF THE NINETIES, PART I: *BLACK BETTY* AND *A LITTLE YELLOW DOG*, 1994-1996"

Between the years 1994 and 1996, Mosley published two more installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*: *Black Betty* (1994) and *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996). Both novels propel Easy into the turbulent and momentous nineteen sixties, and the narratives ultimately culminate in the earth-shattering assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November of 1963. More importantly, these tales mark a major transition in the protagonist's always already precarious existence; namely, Easy's decision to leave his life in the streets behind, to hold a steady job – as a Janitor at a local school – and to be nothing less than a devoted and doting father to his two adopted children, Jesus and Feather. Once again, Mosley meticulously manages to maintain a sense of continuity in his fictional world by diving deeper into Easy's past in Houston, complicating the protagonist's relationships with familiar characters such as "Mouse" and Easy's often unreliable and untrustworthy business partner Mofass, and depicting the deepening of the bond between Easy and his children; particularly as it concerns Jesus, who finally begins to speak after many years of being absolutely mute due to the trauma he suffered in the series' first novel. The strict boundaries of Easy's world also begin to erode over the course of these two important tales of intrigue, murder, and redemption. Easy joins forces with a White detective named Saul Lynx in *Black Betty* to solve a mystery that involves a Black maid – a woman that Easy knew in Houston when he was a child – a rich White family named Cain, corrupt Beverly Hills Police Department officers, and another crooked White attorney representing the interest of the Cain family and its deceased patriarch. Familiar themes that resonate in the canon of African American literature, such

as sexual abuse, miscegenation, and mixed-race identity, begin to emerge as Easy and his newfound investigative partner establish a connection between the novel's namesake character and the Cain family patriarch.

Easy's job as a middle school janitor in *A Little Yellow Dog* introduces him to the upper echelons of the Black professional working class. He has a brief fling with a teacher at the school, and afterward, becomes the caretaker for her beloved pet dog Pharaoh. While *Black Betty* focuses on the significance of family secrets and the tragic collision of figures from Easy's past and his present, *A Little Yellow Dog* is essentially an intriguing narrative about drug trafficking – specifically heroin – and the dangerous flirtation between educated professionals and underworld criminals; whether they be school teachers and drug dealers, or police officers and mafia kingpins. In addition to its depiction of the end of an era in American presidential history, this novel also portrays the death of Easy's longtime partner in crime, "Mouse", who dies after being shot several times in a rendezvous gone bad with underworld underlings. It's significant to note the many ways in which Easy must come to terms with the unresolved issues that still linger from his younger days in Texas. The violence that haunts his every waking moment confronts the entire nation in the closing pages of the novel, as Easy buries his face in his adopted daughter Feather's chest and desperately attempts to hold back tears as he absorbs the news of Kennedy's murder in Dallas on that ominous November day. Mouse's death also corresponds to the conclusion of a steady progression through the timeline that was first established in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Looking back becomes more important than looking forward as Mosley closes the books, so to speak, on the two cases that unfold in the pages of these novels.

As the title suggests, the plot of *Black Betty* revolves around a beguiling woman that used to strut down the streets of Houston's Fifth Ward in the bygone days of Easy's boyhood. Easy's connection with Betty is more than just sentimental, however; it is unmistakably romantic in nature. It is through Betty that Easy begins to learn of the mysteries surrounding beautiful women, sex, life, and death. The character is a clever mix of the Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes. Easy has a remarkable amount of reverence for this woman, and in fact, he is still deeply in love with her as he commences to track her down at the behest of the Cain family, and Saul Lynx[81], in the opening chapters of the narrative:

> Saul Lynx had a smile that was just about as sincere as the kind of grin the undertaker puts on a corpse. 'Have you ever heard of a woman named Elizabeth Eady[82]?' he asked. Her name struck a dark chord at the back of my mind. It fit with the humid September heat- and with my dreams. 'She's lived in L.A. for almost twenty-five years, but she's from Houston originally,' the little man was saying. 'From down in your old neighborhood, I think…Black Betty wasn't your warm sort of home-making girl…I had seen her sashaying down the wooden sidewalks of Houston's Fifth Ward. I was a raggedy twelve-year-old and she was more woman than I had ever seen in one place. She wore black lace, gloves, and fur and smelled so good that I forgot who I was. I was out in front of a bar called

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[81] The aforementioned White detective who eventually becomes Easy's ally in *Black Betty*. Concerning Mosley's emphasis on the roles played by White allies in Easy's investigations, see Drick Boyd's *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice*.
[82] A.k.a. "Black Betty". Charles E. Wilson, in *Walter Mosley: A Critical Companion*, argues that "('Black Betty') serves not only as a major character, but also as a link to the past" (63).

> Corcheran's on Blanford Street. I guess I was looking pretty hard, my nostrils were probably flared out too (Mosley, 13-14).

This portrayal of Betty as an alluring temptress, or as a type of Black Venus in the mind of young Easy, contrasts sharply with the woman that Easy eventually encounters as he delves deeper into the mystery of her disappearance and the motives underlying the Cain family's dogged pursuit of her whereabouts:

> 'Betty?' Odell[83] said… 'Betty? You okay, honey?' Odell asked. The question broke her. She seemed to fall in on herself, backing up and bowing to the pressure of her grief...(Betty) 'How'd you find me, Odell?' 'Easy figured it out. But we thought Felix[84] might be here.' 'Easy?' Betty looked at me again. (Easy) 'Yes ma'am.' 'You that little boy used to follow me around?' There was almost a smile on her battered face. And then there it was, that look of appreciation that Betty had for the male sex. A look that was at once hungry and satisfied. Men communicated to Betty with their bodies and sex. She didn't care about our words or our hearts. Here it was nearly thirty years later and I was almost in her thrall again (Mosley, 203).

Mosley's evocation of Easy's past in various flashback sequences throughout the novel coincide with his character's continual development into a mature man seeking to reconcile the violence, chaos, and disorder of his past and present with his desire to lead a

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[83] The relationship between Easy and Odell is strained by the events of *A Red Death*. Agustín Reyes Torres examines the critical implications of their affiliation in Mosley's series in her book *Walter Mosley's Detective Novels: The Creation of a Black Subjectivity*.

[84] Felix Landry is a good friend of Betty's. Betty often seeks refuge in his home in order to escape her troubled existence as a maid for the Cain family.

more stable life; preferably with the aid of a loving and supportive woman.[85] In Betty, and perhaps in some part of EttaMae[86] as well, Easy sees the uncompromising spirit of an independent woman who must have her freedom; particularly in her relationships with men. It's important to note, however, the role of these strong women in preparing Easy to "settle down" in order to lead a far more stable domestic existence. When he and Odell finally track down Betty, Easy's observations of her appearance – older yet still alluring and beautiful in her own particular way – also subtly indicate his need to revise his understanding of feminine sex appeal and the idea of love. Betty's close connection to the character's youth makes him awkwardly vulnerable, and reverent, in his interactions with her. Mosley utilizes these moments not only to propel the narrative, and the course of the unfolding mystery, forward but also to unearth elements of Easy's past that are essential to his growth as a man and as a character. Betty is no mere sexual object for Easy. She is both an unrequited love, and a signifier of Easy's need to come to terms with the harsh realities of the present.

The intrigue surrounding Betty also relates to sexual violence, and the complex relationship between African Americans and Whites. The wealthy Cain family is directly associated with both issues, the secrets that they refuse to reveal are the impetus for Betty's initial disappearance, and the harsh realities that they attempt to conceal behind a façade of wealth and privilege ultimately seal their doom. Betty works as a domestic servant for the Cains, and is raped on several occasions by the wicked patriarch Albert

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[85] By this point in the *Mysteries* series, Easy has moved on from his separation and divorce from his ex-wife Regina. But, of course, he still seeks to fill the place that she used to occupy in his domestic life. See Larson's *Understanding Walter Mosley*.
[86] "Mouse's" wife, and Easy's occasional love interest throughout most of the canonical series. See Larson.

Cain. As a result of this sexual assault, Betty gives birth to fraternal twins named Gwendolyn and Terry. Gwendolyn is raised by the Cains, and is unaware of the true identity of her mother. Terry is sent away from the home, raised by another family, and is informed by Betty's brother Marlon of his parentage.

Furthermore, the Cains' White daughter Sarah gives birth to a son, Arthur, after a brief romance with the gardener, Ron Hawkes. Betty essentially raises Gwendolyn and Arthur along with Sarah, her boss's daughter, even as she succumbs to and withers under the abuse of the lecherous and sinister Albert Cain. The intimate connection between the Cains' power and status with the complexities of the American racial caste system is best summarized by Sarah Cain in the latter portions of the novel, when Easy and his investigative partner Saul Lynx begin to gain insight into the mystery surrounding Betty and the family: " 'Did Betty kill your father?' I asked straight out. (Sarah Cain) 'Yes'. 'How?' 'He was suffocated. He was really suffering. Maybe she just wanted to help him… 'You see? You understand, Mr. Rawlins.' 'I don't understand a damn thing. What I wanna know is what's goin' on. 'Cause if you so worried 'bout Betty and her family, then why didn't you Gwen about all this?'... (Sarah Cain) 'I was going to tell her. I was. It's just that it was such a shock. A terrible shock. You can understand that, can't you? He'd (Albert Cain) made sure that Gwen never found out about him.' 'Why's that, Mrs. Hawkes?' Saul (Lynx) asked. She looked at him as if he had just peed on the floor. 'She's Negro. He couldn't let people know about that, not if she was still living in the house. That would be as if he recognized her'" (Mosley, 230, 231). Sarah Cain's confession provides further evidence of the myriad ways in which the Jim Crow South continues to

pursue Easy as he steadily makes his way through the labyrinthine episodes that Mosley constructs for the character within the Los Angeles microcosm of this novel.

Easy's interaction with Saul Lynx throughout the narrative simultaneously provides the courageous protagonist with yet another opportunity to confront White male hostility and to utilize White racist presumptions in a productive fashion in order to expand the boundaries of his relatively limited fictional world. The latter fact becomes very clear when Easy and Lynx surreptitiously make their way into the exclusive neighborhood in which the Cain household is located in order to question Gwendolyn, Sarah Cain, and Arthur Cain. Easy is not welcome here, so he conceals himself in the back seat of his car under a sheet while Saul drives toward the gate that bars undesirable riffraff from entering. Easy makes a simple, yet profound, observation about Lynx's understanding of the modus operandi of privileged, wealthy White folks and the system that seeks to protect their status and property:

> After quite a while Saul said, 'Here comes the gate.' I (Easy) huddled down under my sheet and the car came to a stop. 'Private,' a voice said. I couldn't tell if it was the man from the other day. There was the rustling of papers, the voice said, 'Security, huh?' 'Yeah,' Saul answered. 'Nasdorfs up on Fischer want something. Probably a burglar alarm for the kennel.' The men both laughed. Then there was silence for a minute…When we'd driven far enough away I asked, 'Why'd you go through the gate? We could have taken side streets in.' 'Cause they got this unmarked car surveillance system up here. If they see a strange car they call it in

to the gate. But now the gate knows we're here. So it's fine.' *I was a fish out of his bowl*[87] (Mosley, 224, 225).

The fact that Mosley provides Easy with a White investigative ally in this narrative gives the character essential insight into the restrictive methods that uphold the White hegemonic hierarchy in the upper echelons of Los Angeles. Practically speaking, Lynx – who is also a military veteran from the South[88]- provides Easy with vicarious access to White privilege, which grants him entrée past the many gatekeepers who carefully guard the rarified socioeconomic realm that rich and powerful Whites inhabit. Mosley utilizes Lynx as yet another means through which Easy can begin to deconstruct the concept of "race", and permits his protagonist to also see in this particular White ally a common humanity. When Lynx is gravely injured near the end of the novel, Easy visits with his Black wife in the hospital, and through that surprising interaction, establishes a long-term bond with the interracial couple. After Lynx's recovery from his injuries, Easy notes: "Saul Lynx lived. His wife nursed him back to health and he took a job doing security for WestBank in Santa Monica[89]. I get together with him and Rita[90] now and again. They're good people" (Mosley, 254).

Significantly, in addition to the obvious strides that Easy makes with regard to his willingness to allow another White man into his personal life, he also subtly dwells upon the importance of domesticity and family as he makes these seemingly matter-of-fact observations about Lynx's recovery. Easy's brief, but poignant, interaction with Lynx's

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[87] Emphasis added.
[88] The latter portions of the novel also reveal that Lynx is married to a Black woman. He and Easy maintain a long-term friendship after the events of the narrative.
[89] Yet another allusion to Santa Monica in the series.
[90] Lynx's wife.

wife in the hospital verifies this observation: " (Mrs. Lynx) 'Excuse me, but are you Mr. Rawlins?" The young black woman, with the baby cradled in her arms, had come up next to me. 'Yeah?' 'I'm Mrs. Lynx,' she said. 'They told me that if Saul lives it will be because of you. They said that he saved your life and that you kept him breathing for more than half an hour before the ambulance came.' 'I wasn't watchin' the clock.' My hand went down to hers. She held it next to her infant son's face. His lips pushed in and out. There was very little of Saul in his dark features but you could tell by the hair, a little" (Mosley, 252).

This touching moment in the narrative, which also provides the reader with a surprising twist concerning Lynx's character, relates to Easy's effort to provide a stable home for his two adopted children, Jesus and Feather; a Mexican boy and a biracial (Black and White) girl. Given the novel's meditation on the complex relationship between Blacks and Whites within the broader context of the American racial caste system, Mosley's keen emphasis on mixed-race identity, and Easy's capacity to grow psychologically and emotionally despite the strict racial restrictions that circumscribe his precarious existence, once again points toward the increasing importance of gradually redefining notions of love, family, and friendship as they relate to Easy's troubled life as a private investigator. Despite the fact that Easy is officially divorced from his ex-wife Regina in *Black Betty*, a separation that haunts the character throughout the novel's pages, his adopted children – particularly his daughter Feather[91]- function as balms that soothe Easy's long-festering wounds. In a literal sense, Jesus and Feather keep Easy alive when Betty stabs him – before she is aware of his identity, and after her son Terry's

[91] Feather plays a very large role in the plot of *A Little Yellow Dog*. See Larson.

murder- with an ice pick. The potentially lethal wound nearly kills Easy, but the presence of his children in his life saves him from what would otherwise be a certain and painful demise:

> Jesus came running out after he heard me plowing into the side wall of the house…'Go to the bathroom and get the witch hazel and the alcohol.' I said. 'And the gauze and some tape too.' Slowly, I let myself down into a perch at the edge of the couch while Jesus ran to get the things I needed. 'Daddy?' Feather was there at the edge of the room rubbing her nose and pulling at the hem of her little blue dress.[92] She didn't run to me because half my face was covered with Terry T's insides. 'Go up to your room, baby,' I said. My voice was thick and gravelly. The man she was running from wasn't her father. He was a real monster that had invaded her home (Mosley, 140).

The scene continues with Easy's observations of his interaction with his son Jesus as the latter attempts to heal his father's grievous physical injury:

> Jesus came in with his arms full. I stood up and let the blanket fall off me. 'Juice[93], I don't want you to get upset, but I need something from you.' He was all attention. 'I'm going to turn around and you're going to have to help me. Okay?' He nodded. I turned around slowly and faced the wall. There was a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation that I'd bought from Woolworth's hanging there – gilded frame and all. It struck me that hanging that document up there was like an

[92] A clever allusion to Daphne Monet from Mosley's first novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*.
[93] Easy's nickname for Jesus.

ex-convict displaying his discharge papers. 'Oh God, Daddy.'[94] Jesus's hushed cry made me forget the frame. I even ignored the knife in my back long enough to smile at my son calling me Daddy. 'Is it a knife?' I asked him. 'It's an ice pick,' he answered in perfect articulate English. 'All right, son,' I said lowering myself down to my knees. 'I want you to put both hands around it and pull it out the same way it went in. It might hurt me enough that I faint for a minute but that's okay. You take a wad of that gauze and press it against the wound until you're sure that it's stopped bleeding. You understand?' 'Yes, Daddy.' And then he did it- all at once and with no hesitation (Mosley, 141).

In the absence of the usual cast of adults who help Easy avoid an untimely death, or during troubled times- e.g. "Mouse", Odell, Primo, etc.- his children are present in the domestic space to both keep their father alive and to remind him of his determination to end his dangerous activities out in the L.A. streets. At this crucial point in Easy's life, he seeks stability more than anything else; for himself and for his children. He does his absolute best to shield them from the disturbing realities of his investigative work, and the new home that he provides for them is far more of a sanctuary than that represented by his house in the early days of his private detective career depicted in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The loving father-daughter bond shared between Easy and Feather redeems the tragic and sordid tale of abuse and betrayal that Daphne Monet recounts[95] in the closing chapters of the first novel in the *Easy Rawlins Mystery Series*. His adopted biracial

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[94] A significant, and rare, instance in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* that features Jesus's dialogue. The character is more or less mute in the early installments in the series, and gradually begins speaking in the latter canonical novels.

[95] Monet informs Easy that she was sexually molested by her father at a zoo near the end of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

daughter, the illegitimate child of a White stripper known colloquially as the "White Butterfly"[96], fills an essential space in Easy's private life in the absence of Regina and his biological daughter Edna.

Jesus, also a victim of abuse, seems to be healing throughout the latter portions of the series, but particularly in this novel. The father-son relationship, while more complicated than that between Easy and Feather, also allows the hardened private investigator to enjoy some semblance of a nurturing private domestic life. Easy's need to always find a way to return home safely to his adopted children is yet another extension of *Black Betty*'s thorough exploration of the protagonist's inner, emotional world; his memories, parental instincts, and his continual development into a much more mature man. In this sense, the probing aspect of the novel coexists with a deep analysis of Easy's evolution as a character within this carefully crafted fictional microcosm. As Mosley begins to gradually reveal the details of Easy's past in this novel[97], it becomes clear that the family that the character creates by way of adopting these two vulnerable children provides him with the essential motivation to survive the potentially lethal predicaments that always-already accompany the various aspects of his investigative enterprise.

Of course, Raymond "Mouse" Alexander continues to haunt – and in many ways hinder- Easy's every waking moment and progress in this narrative. Fresh out of jail, and determined to search for the men who turned him in to the police for a murder he committed, "Mouse" still manages to confound Easy with his casual disregard for human

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[96] Refer to *White Butterfly*. Also see Larson.

[97] Mosley later reveals that Easy was orphaned early on in his childhood, and arrived in the Fifth Ward of Houston by rail alone. He survives mostly on the street, where he first encounters Betty and "Mouse". See Brady's *Conversations with Walter Mosley*.

life. Odell also plays a central role in the novel, and although the close friendship once shared between he and Easy has been strained by the events of *A Red Death*, Easy is nonetheless willing to role up his sleeves and help the old gentleman and his wife quietly bury the body of Betty's murdered brother Marlon in the basement of their home with the aid of plenty of cement and quicklime. These complex bonds firmly tether Easy to the past while also permitting him to reassess and adjust his path as he grows and develops. His interactions with these two men also provide a means through which Mosley can explore his protagonist's profound meditation on matters relating to morality and mortality.

Easy's contemplation of "Mouse's" psychopathic violence and Odell's stubborn unwillingness to forgive past grievances - despite his strong religious beliefs, his close connection to the chaos surrounding Betty's disappearance, and to the murder of her brother Marlon- strengthen the character's resolve to fully commit to a life of stable domesticity as soon as he is able to do so. Indeed, Betty's reemergence in Easy's life causes him to reevaluate the role of these men, and other figures from his past, in his current endeavor to escape the dangers inherent in life in the Los Angeles streets. Easy makes such an observation as he considers "Mouse's" need to obtain retribution for his imprisonment: "Mouse laid his hand across the pistol. He couldn't help himself, I knew that. He needed to kill somebody, and even though it would hurt him he'd kill me if there was nobody else to blame…Three seconds before my death I said, 'I know who did it.' 'Well all right then.' Mouse's grin was his relief at my survival. I told him everything that he needed. 'Just call this number and tell her that her husband's sick. That'll get the house open for ya and you could just walk in.' With every word I swore to myself that I'd

never get involved with another man's problems again" (Mosley, 253). This solemn resolution will eventually shape Easy's journey toward a slightly more quiet working life in *A Little Yellow Dog*.

Other allies from past installments of the *Mystery Series*, such as Alamo, a White prisoner that Easy met while incarcerated in *White Butterfly*, gain access to Easy and his world due to the protagonist's need to utilize their particular skillset to gain valuable information concerning the intrigue that surrounds Betty and the Cain family. Alamo is a gifted thief whose talent for committing burglaries comes in handy when Easy needs to peer into some files locked away in an attorney's[98] office building. Through this relationship, Mosley highlights Easy's close connection not only to the Black working class community, but also to lower class whites. In fact, after Easy has a tense confrontation with a group of White men in a residential hotel before a meeting to ask for his assistance to accomplish this break in and obtain the necessary information for his case, Alamo explains that there is very little that distinguishes the oppression of lower class Blacks and Whites:

> I went to a small residential hotel called the Piper on Grand in downtown L.A. The Piper was a hotel for poor whites. A lot of rural sons and a lot of criminals lived there. It wouldn't have been a surprise for a black man to get his throat cut just for walking into that place… 'What you want, boy?' The bulbous man was next to me… 'I'm lookin' for Alamo, cracker,' I said. I had to say it. I wasn't marching or singing songs about freedom. I didn't pay dues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or the NAACP. I didn't have any kind of god on

[98] Hodge, Albert Cain's attorney.

> my side. But even though the cameras weren't on me and JFK never heard my name, I had to make my little stand for what's right. It was a little piece of history that happened right there in that room and that went unrecorded…Alamo put his hand on my forearm. 'Don't be too mad at 'em Easy.' 'At who?' 'Those boys in there don't know what it's like. They ain't never seen what a white man truly is. They think it's all TV and *Look* magazine. They don't know that it's white men who cut off their balls.' I liked Alamo. He was insane but he had a clearer view of the world than most do (Mosley, 146-149).

Such a moment in the text is another explicit example of the value of Easy's alliances to figures who expand the boundaries of his world and clarify his understanding of the status quo. Easy's powerful metaphor for this type of enlightenment, i.e. being a "…fish out of his bowl", indicates that as the series progresses further along the timeline – and again, the chronological setting of *Black Betty* is the early nineteen sixties- its protagonist also becomes a wiser and far more capable detective with greater access to valuable resources. These resources are, for the most part, information and people in this fictional cosmos that are willing to supply it along with any other needed aid. Alamo's particular expertise grants Easy access to revealing files on a crooked Beverly Hills Police Commander named Styles who is, much like the corrupt LAPD officers depicted in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, notorious for committing vicious acts of police brutality, and on Albert Cain. Easy also expects to find a file on Saul Lynx, but that portion of his search proves to be fruitless.[99]

[99] Easy initially seeks to obtain the file on Lynx in this portion of the novel because he does not yet view him as an investigative ally. At this point, despite the fact that Lynx

These files had been locked away in the safe of Albert Cain's attorney, Calvin Hodge, who is closely connected to both Cain and Styles. Styles later plays a central role in the trial[100] that resolves the mystery surrounding the conflict between Betty and the Cain family, which is primarily related to Albert Cain's last will and testament and the matter of who will inherit his wealth. White allies such as Alamo also allow Easy to place some necessary distance between himself and his psychotic friend "Mouse." Through this alliance, Mosley portrays the allegiance of two working class men, two military veterans[101], who bend the law in order to even the odds stacked against them. Alamo's insight into the consciousness of the White lower class, specifically into its inability to recognize its complicity in the oppression of Black folks at its own expense, is Mosley's means of complicating the development of his heroic protagonist, and allowing Easy to see through the illusory aspects of Los Angeles's racial caste system. The author's understanding of the ties that bind the Black and White lower classes is evident in his response to an interviewer's observations on race during a 2006 Q & A:

> Yeah, it's (race) what people believe. If you believe it, in your mind and in your heart, there's a certain truth to it. Whether or not there's any kind of objective truth to it in the world in general…if you're a poor kid raised in South Central-some of that area is nasty, it's really tough. It's a hard life to start out in, and you

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hires him to ascertain Betty's whereabouts, Easy does not fully trust him. See Wilson's *Walter Mosley: A Critical Companion*.

[100] Near the novel's conclusion, Easy learns from Sarah and Arthur Cain that Ron Hawkes, Sarah's lover, Arthur's father, and Albert Cain's gardener, is responsible for the murders of Marlon, Gwendolyn, and Terry; Betty's brother, daughter, and son respectively. Hodge argues that Hawkes and Marlon were interested in obtaining Cain's fortune. Marlon was also mentioned in the files contained in Hodge's office, and was once arrested by Styles for a burglary at the behest of Albert Cain.

[101] In *White Butterfly*, Mosley reveals that Alamo is a veteran of WWI. Easy and Alamo first meet in jail during the events depicted in that novel.

> don't get the breaks if you're raised up in Sherman Oaks and get to go to a nicer public school, or you're raised up in Beverly Hills and have a lot of money…you're a poor white kid in Bellflower. You know, living in a tiny little house, or living in a trailer, let's say. Your father's gone, your mother's not treating you right, the school you're going to is filled with poor kids that are also not being treated well. So you could say, well, the poor white kid and the poor black kid are the same. And the truth is there are a lot of similarities and there are a lot of problems which either one of them might carry through their lives, but there are also racial overtones in this country (*Conversations*, 179).

Mosley's comments suggest the true import of Alamo's role in Easy's character development. Even as his audacious protagonist confronts the most vicious White racism, with a more than admirable amount of self-assurance and swagger of course, it does not limit his capacity for growth. He is capable of recognizing the humanity in a White brother who is willing to deal with him man-to-man. It is also, again, noteworthy that both Alamo and Lynx are military veterans, and Mosley seems keen to connect his heroic detective with fellow vets from the World Wars of the early twentieth century. Their common experience of these devastating conflicts, and their interactions in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement, make them uniquely capable of making a "…little stand for what's right".

Black Betty marks the beginning of a new phase in Easy's post-WWII existence. It becomes very evident that street life has taken its toll on the man; both physically – he's severely injured for the majority of this novel- and mentally. The reemergence of Betty, and the foul play associated with the Cains and their wealth, causes Easy to

reevaluate his involvement in investigations that constantly place him in harm's way. His ultimate objectives are always very simple and straightforward. He needs to obtain money, which he earns from the cases that he chooses to take on, and he needs to make it home safely to care for his children and keep a roof over their heads. The emotional aspect of this mystery foreshadows the much deeper glimpse into Easy's past that is offered in the final canonical novel of the nineteen nineties, *Gone Fishin'*, which fully explains the history of the complicated relationship between Easy and "Mouse".[102] The novel's preoccupation with the broad question of what happens to a certain generation of Black folks who emigrated from their Texas home to seek greater opportunities out west in California is also extremely important and fascinating; especially given Mosley's talent for weaving together various elements of an extremely complex story that involves several characters who are all, in one way or another, connected to the Great Migration from the southwest. Betty's particular journey, which began with a ride from Texas to California in Felix's car, proves ultimately to be a tragic example of the conflict between the Black working class and wealthy White folks.

The trauma that she suffers at the hands of Albert Cain, and the birth of her biracial children, is a continuation of the old plantation drama that once involved Black female slaves and lascivious White masters sneaking off in the dead of night in the direction of the slave quarters. Her predicament is a small episode in the broader Civil Rights struggle, but Mosley makes it clear that justice does not provide a soothing balm to heal Betty's festering physical and psychological wounds. As Easy summarizes the

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[102] *Gone Fishin'* serves as a prequel to *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and takes place during the early days of Easy's young adult life in Pariah, Texas prior to his deployment to the horrific battlefronts of WWII.

events of the trial that concludes the investigation into the true nature of Betty's connection to the Cain family, he also subtly comments on the struggles of the woman who first caught his eye in Houston's humble Fifth Ward:

> It was early morning again. The children were safe with Primo and I'd have them home with me again soon. My money problems weren't solved yet but I had some hope. And I was definitely sure that I'd never enter work that didn't have a paycheck and benefits involved. I was through with the streets. That was a younger man's game…Officer Connor[103] was able to get an indictment against Arthur Hawkes[104] and Commander Styles, and Marlon Eady too- though he was never found to stand trial.[105] Styles, the workingman, went to jail for his crimes. The fool had used his own pistol to kill Terry Tyler[106]. I was sure that he was the one who helped Hawkes beat Marlon. Arthur went free. His lawyers made Marlon Eady and Ron Hawkes the bad guys…The prosecution didn't fuss much. *The trial destroyed Betty*.[107] They hauled her up on the stand and asked again and again if she was aware of her brother's plotting. They made her seem like a whore who had beguiled Albert Cain (Mosley, 253-255).

Betty's highly ironic downfall calls into question the significance of redemption and justice in the narrative. Surely, Betty does not reap the fruits of her labor, and both of her children are murdered before the beginning of the novel's final chapter. While Styles

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[103] Commander Styles' fellow Beverly Hills Police Department officer. A "good cop" who wants to see Styles pay for his corrupt activities with Albert Cain and Cain's attorney Hodge.
[104] A.k.a. Arthur Cain.
[105] Recall that Marlon, Betty's brother, is dead and buried in Odell's basement.
[106] Betty's son.
[107] Emphasis added.

is punished for his crimes, White privilege and power rescues Arthur Hawkes/Cain from serving time for his role in the murders, which both he and his mother, Sarah Cain, explain in detail as Easy listens:

> 'Tell Mr. Rawlins what you told me,' Sarah said, seemingly oblivious to the changes in her son…'Dad (Ron Hawkes) got me together with Marlon.' He went right into the story with no preparation or pretense. 'He told Marlon about how Grandpa (the elder Cain, Albert) got him to set him up for that robbery and about what he did to Aunt Betty[108] after Marlon was gone. He told him that Grandpa was Gwen and Terry's father. He said that Betty couldn't ever be free until Grandpa was dead. Then he told me that I had to forge a check to Marlon, 'for reparations', he said, and I had to let him and Terry in the house that night. And after I did that and Marlon was gone he wanted me to call the cops…'Was the cop you called Styles?' I asked. Arthur nodded. 'That's the one.' 'Who told you about him?' 'Dad did.' 'He knew Styles?' 'Yes. Grandpa sent Styles to tell Dad to stay away from us, but then they got to be friends. They were working together.' 'Who told you about the will?' 'Calvin Hodge did,' Sarah said. 'He found out somehow and told us that we'd better make a deal with Betty' (Mosley, 250-251).

Ultimately, and unfortunately, it seems that Betty is only redeemed in Easy's comments regarding her mistreatment during the course of the trial. The novel ends on another extremely bitter note as well. "Mouse" manages to locate the man who sold him out to the police, and kills him in his own home. The gentleman is an elderly religious man

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[108] An ironic reference to the titular character that evokes the "Aunts" of antebellum days on the slave plantations. Of course, Arthur is not biologically related to Betty, which makes this title all the more offensive and obsolete.

named Martin, who in many ways, resembles Mosley's portrayal of Odell. Easy notes the horrific details of the crime in the final paragraph of the narrative in cold, stark prose that indicates the strength of his commitment to leave his days of running the treacherous Los Angeles streets behind him for good: "Mouse had come in and asked him who had turned him in and Martin said that he'd done it. He said that the Lord wouldn't let him keep quiet on that. And Mouse shot him. A sixty-year-old man dressed in a small boy's clothes, but all Mouse saw was the man who'd turned him over. So he shot him and walked out of the empty house" (Mosley, 255). This senseless violence leaves Easy exasperated, and ready for a drastic and timely change; a transition into a much simpler domestic and working life. However, trouble always manages to catch up to Mosley's heroic, humble detective despite his best effort to outrun and outsmart it.

A Little Yellow Dog is a fascinating novel primarily due to the fact that it is the first in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* to feature the protagonist holding down a steady, and rather ordinary job; i.e. Easy is a custodian for a local junior high school. In fact, Easy is the *head* custodian, and manages several workers who perform various maintenance-related tasks on the campus of the institution. In this intriguing installment in the series, he is not so much offered a case that needs solving as he is dragged into a murder mystery that also relates to drug trafficking, theft, illicit drug use by teachers at the school who hold clandestine private parties, scandalous affairs, two twin brothers, and of course, a mangy, mean old dog named Pharaoh who loves Easy's daughter Feather, but would rather chew his ear off than save him from being killed by a vicious gangster near the novel's conclusion. The dog's original owner, a teacher at Sojourner Truth Junior High School named Idabell Turner – who Easy describes as a "…knockout for any

man-from Cro-Magnon to Jim Crow" (Mosley, 12) and a flight attendant from Paris named Bonnie – who eventually serves as somewhat of a surrogate mother for Easy's adopted children in Regina's absence- manage to get involved with the Gasteau brothers– Holland and Roman- and their illegal activities.

The twins, whose deaths mark major turning points in the narrative, are eventually connected to several thefts of school property that Sojourner Truth's principal and the LAPD want to pin on Easy. The brothers are also intimately connected with the trafficking of heroin. Thus, as Mosley's reluctant, heroic detective witnesses middle school-aged kids sniffing glue in the bushes that line the well-kept grounds of the campus, he's also forced to take on his first major drug case. In the opening chapters of the novel, Easy has a quick physical relationship with Mrs. Turner, through which he acquires Pharaoh; mostly as a favor to Turner. She entrusts Easy with her beloved dog while she attempts to settle matters with her abusive husband Holland Gasteau. Holland, or Holly as Mrs. Turner refers to him, is also determined to get rid of the miserable mongrel, which is her primary motivation for placing the mutt in Easy's care.

Roman Gasteau's mutilated body is located on the school grounds, which draws the attention of the local authorities. An ambitious Latino officer, named Sergeant Sanchez, thinks that Easy is responsible for the murder and for the robberies that have been taking place at Sojourner Truth and many other schools in its vicinity. Both Roman and his twin brother Holland are murdered during the course of the narrative; Roman's body is located in the school's garden by staff while Easy is off-campus, and Easy eventually finds Holland's corpse in the man's home. Mrs. Turner, a "…(thirty-two-year-old woman who) had been born in French Guiana but had immigrated to America when

she was four years old" (Mosley, 47), is also murdered while she is in Easy's company. Easy encounters Mrs. Turner's friend Bonnie when her life is threatened by a henchman who is later tied to the Gasteau brothers' illicit drug activities, and develops a fondness for her; particularly in the wake of Mrs. Turner's[109] untimely demise. Bonnie also cares for Easy's children Jesus and Feather while he wraps up the case in the latter portions of the novel. When President John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, TX on November 22, 1963, a crucial event in the novel, Easy returns home to find Bonnie, Jesus, and Feather watching the television as the nation, and much of Los Angeles too, mourns the tragic passing of the "…new young Irish President" that Easy greatly admires and first mentions in *Black Betty*. Despite the fact that Pharaoh seems to despise Easy, doing everything that is possible to make the man miserable- including defecating on his bed, and on his favorite pair of slippers- Easy's daughter Feather loves the dog and provides the adopted animal with a new name; "Frenchie." While the tension between man and dog provides some much-needed comic relief in the narrative, Feather's playful nickname for the troublesome mutt also plays on themes related to Idabell and Bonnie's geographic origins in the African Diaspora; namely, French Guiana and Paris, France. The name Gasteau[110] is also relevant to this aspect of the novel.

More importantly, this particular chapter of Easy's misadventures is the final depiction of his dangerous, intriguing life in Los Angeles in the canonical novels published during the early to mid-nineteen nineties. The next novel in the series, *Gone Fishin'*, looks back on the character's early days in Texas. Mosley utilizes *A Little Yellow*

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[109] As Easy explains, Turner is her maiden name. Her married name is Gasteau. Her choice to go by her maiden name is another indicator of the tension between the schoolteacher and her husband Holland Gasteau.
[110] Gasteau is a French surname.

Dog to portray the changes that have occurred in Easy's troubled life after the tragic events of *Black Betty*, the senseless violence of which propelled him into his current occupation as a simple, honest, hardworking school janitor. The key to understanding Easy's character development is, once again, to consider his gradual transformation into a settled man devoted to domesticity, family, and home. His relationship with Jesus and Feather, as it was in *Black Betty*, is also thoroughly explored in the pages of this novel.

Feather's playful interactions with Pharaoh/ "Frenchie" and her heartrending, tearful reaction to the assassination of the President of the United States permit Mosley to portray his protagonist's growth as a doting father figure who is utterly incapable of saying no to his precious adopted daughter despite his hatred for the yellow dog that makes his life a living hell. Easy also develops a closer bond with his adopted son Jesus, although father and son do have a brief and bitter argument over the matter of some missing money that is eventually revealed to be in the hands of Easy's old friend Jackson Blue[111]; yet another former acquaintance who is also involved in illegal activities in Los Angeles, and betrays Easy and his family by stealing Jesus's life savings, a significant sum of cash. This novel also marks the death of Raymond "Mouse" Alexander, which just so happens to occur on the same day that JFK is assassinated in Dallas. This event especially acts as a device through which Mosley begins to contemplate the details of Easy's past in Texas, and the early stages of his relationship with his murderous friend. Shortly before his death in *A Little Yellow Dog*, Mosley permits his readers to witness the

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[111] Jackson Blue is first introduced in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and is described as a man who is involved in the illicit trade of liquor in that novel. In *A Little Yellow Dog*, he develops a clever occupation as a bookie with the aid of devices, which he designs and installs on local telephone polls, that allow him to clandestinely accept bets from his clients.

miraculous transformation of the man who has committed a seemingly unquantifiable number of senseless murders throughout the course of his reckless and chaotic existence.

"Mouse" is also employed as a school custodian, working under Easy's management at Sojourner Truth, and has decided to forgo killing and life in the streets in favor of redeeming himself in the eyes of the Lord:

> (Easy) 'Mouse!' 'You got a drink, Easy?' 'Naw, man. I gave it up[112]. You know that.'…Pharaoh crawled up beside him and muzzled his hand for a caress. Mouse scratched him behind the ear.[113]…'You know, Easy,' he began, 'I done some terrible things.'[114] The silence that followed his declaration was such that we could have been on a stage or in a courtroom, the performance just begun. 'You remember Agnes Varel?' he asked…'Etta[115] was down Galveston an' he was at work. Agnes told me to come on upstairs… 'We been goin' at it for half the night when her boyfriend walk in…An' 'fore he could do anything I grabbed a bottle an' th'ew it upside his head.'…'I don't feel a damn thing about it…I coulda killed the motherfuckah. If I had a gun in reach I probably would have. Just like with William.[116]…("Mouse")'That policeman[117] come up to me on the third flo'a the manual arts buildin'. I was doin' the windahs an' he come up an' ask if I wasn't

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[112] Yet another indication of Easy's transition into a life of stable domesticity and childrearing.
[113] One of many moments in the novel in which Pharaoh, comically, displays his preference for anyone other than Easy.
[114] A striking admission from "Mouse" considering his famous reluctance to acknowledge any sort of guilt for his crimes in past novels in the series.
[115] "Mouse's" wife EttaMae, who also works at Sojourner Truth under Easy.
[116] Here, Mosley foreshadows the events of his prequel novel *Gone Fishin*'. William is actually "Mouse's" biological father.
[117] Sergeant Sanchez.

> Alexander.'…then he showed me a Polaroid picture of that man they found.[118] He asked me if I knew him.' (Easy) 'Did you?' 'Not that I told him, I didn't. But you know that picture stayed in my mind. It was in my mind all night. I kept on seein' him an' then all the other people I seen dead, daddy Reese[119], that sheriff in Texas…William…'…'You ever think that William looked like me?'…You an' Etta an' LaMarque[120] just startin' out again. I think one day real soon you'll wake up and be happy with your family and so these things you thinkin' will be far off like. Far off.' The words seemed to call to me. ("Mouse") 'You mean like I'll get a sign tell me which way to go?' Mouse asked. My eyes were closed. I was drifting on the way to a dream. 'Yeah,' I remember saying. 'Like a sign' (Mosley, 62-65).

The remarkable transformation of "Mouse" shortly before his death precedes Mosley's transition to a vivid contemplation of the past in *Gone Fishin'*. *A Little Yellow Dog*, in many ways, serves as the conclusion of the linear chronological story arc that connects it to all of the previous installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Easy is not so much a detective-for-hire in this novel as he is a man attempting to avoid being blamed for crimes he did not commit. Again, his primary concern is maintaining his job at Sojourner Truth and making it home every night to make dinner for his kids. These basic, yet utterly important, concerns far outweigh any interest Easy may have in the intrigue that surrounds the murders of Idabell Turner and the Gasteau brothers. Sergeant

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[118] Roman Gasteau.
[119] "Mouse's" evil stepfather, who once lived in Pariah, Texas. Mosley provides readers with the complete details surrounding his murder at the hands of "Mouse" in *Gone Fishin'*.
[120] "Mouse's" son with EttaMae.

Sanchez, a Mexican-American officer in the LAPD who is eager to make an impression with his White superiors in the department, much like Naylor, stalks Easy throughout the novel in the same fashion as the racist Whites who harass Mosley's protagonist in earlier installments in the series.

Despite his fervent commitment to leading a clean, stable, domestic life, Easy cannot avoid the troubling gaze of law enforcement, or the attention of underworld criminals; including those associated with the Mob, which has a great deal of influence within the corrupt ranks that comprise the LAPD. Of course, Easy wants to solve the mystery, but this time, his primary justification for doing so does not involve a mere cash payment from a wealthy White family, or an inquisitive fellow private eye/police investigator. He simply desires to avoid wrongful imprisonment and being separated from his children who are always-already waiting for him to return home from his job at the local middle school. The tenderness of the moments shared between Easy and his small family serve as poignant highlights of the novel; particularly as they pertain to Easy's tense rivalry with the dog Pharaoh and his subtle romance with Idabell Turner's friend Bonnie after the former's murder:

> Bonnie stood up with my girl in her arms. She looked good like that.[121] 'Will you be my mommy sometimes?' Feather asked. 'Hi, Dad.'[122] Jesus came in from the back hall. 'This is my son, Jesus. Jesus, this is Miss Shay.' 'Hi,' Bonnie said. She stuck out her hand as far as she could while holding Feather. All three of them

[121] This moment suggests Easy's desire to complete his family. He needs a good woman in his life to replace Regina.
[122] Another notable moment in which Jesus speaks.

> laughed at how silly it looked. *It was a regular family scene*.[123] All we had to do was to clean up a few murders and a matter of international dope smuggling, then we could move next door to Donna Reed. Jesus and I made breakfast. That was his Bisquick phase. We turned out pancakes and sausages while Feather sat on Bonnie's lap and Pharaoh took turns barking with them and snarling at me. It was all over by eight-fifteen. Jesus took Feather off to school after which he was going to practice for track[124] (Mosley, 205).

This charming, very unique, portrayal of the more mundane, yet nonetheless remarkable, aspects of Easy's family life at home is directly related to the tragic events of *Black Betty*, and the protagonist's continual effort to distance himself from past flirtations with death, the law, the criminal underworld, and the prison-industrial complex. Bonnie represents a potential replacement for Easy's ex-wife Regina, who ran away with Easy's former friend Dupree; a past ally from the protagonist's days working at Champion Aircraft in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Her presence within Easy's home completes the hodgepodge, improvised family that he has created by way of his adoption of Jesus and Feather. Bonnie's interaction with the children also signifies the ways in which Easy's private, domestic life takes precedence over any and all aspects of the troubling intrigue that never fails to catch up to him. Mosley's effort to add this relatively light, heartwarming touch to his otherwise hardboiled fictional universe in this particular novel provides further evidence supporting Easy's gradual evolution into a settled, grounded

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[123] Emphasis added. Perhaps, the first "…regular family scene" depicted in the series since the days of Easy's marriage to Regina and the birth of his biological daughter Edna.
[124] Jesus is a noted local track and field star at his high school.

family man devoted to the simple pleasures of home, and attending to the everyday tasks that pertain to the often joyous labor of childrearing.

When considered alongside "Mouse's" confession about the evil deeds of his past- and concerning a man who he thinks is his biological father- this portrayal of a brief moment of domestic bliss subtly indicates that Mosley's cast of troubled émigrés from Houston's Fifth Ward are simultaneously, and progressively transitioning into a more mature phase of adulthood:

> (Easy) 'Where you from?' I asked. (Bonnie) 'Originally?' 'Uh-huh.' There was a tiny spot on her dress, over her left breast. It was probably a food stain. Something that she saw but then said to herself, 'It's just a little spot.' Her beauty couldn't be dampened by a blemish or a wrinkle. 'I was born in Guiana,' she said. 'French Guiana's what they call it. But I was raised in New Jersey. That's why I can work for Air France.[125] I'm fluent in French and American English.' 'Yeah. You're the first black stewardess I ever heard of.' 'There's a lot of black people doing things outside America.'[126] 'You spend mosta your time outside America?' 'We do lots of flights to Africa, Algeria, the Sudan.' 'How come you live here then?' I asked. It was an innocent question but I struck a nerve there. We were still standing at the front door so I said, 'Here, have a seat.' Bonnie sat on the couch. The brown one that I bought after I bled all over the old sofa.[127] 'You want some coffee,' I asked. 'Would you?' When I returned from the kitchen she'd

[125] Here, Bonnie refers to her work as a stewardess.
[126] Another moment in which Easy seems to be a "…fish out of his bowl."
[127] Easy is referring to a pivotal scene in *Black Betty*. Namely, one in which Jesus removes an ice pick from his back.

calmed down a little. She tasted the brew and smiled when she saw that I put in the right amounts of sugar and milk. (Bonnie) 'I came here because of Roman Gasteau.' She said it all at once, in a hard voice. 'I met him in Paris. I mean, I was introduced to him by Idabell (Turner). He was her brother-in-law. He was from Philadelphia but spent a lot of time in New York. Paris was my home base but I flew into New York twice a week. Ida told him where I stayed and he looked me up.' (Easy) 'So how'd you wind up here?' 'I liked Roman. He was fun and he made me miss living in the States. He'd spent a little while with me in Paris but then he was offered a job in Los Angeles. A blackjack dealer's job in Gardena.' She looked at me as if to say, So. 'Idabell was here. It's not too hard to change your route if you have seniority. All I had to do was wait a few months for a slot to open up.' (Easy) 'So you came to L.A. on a lark?' I was unconvinced. 'It wasn't like that. Not really. Roman and I had gotten close. He wanted me to come to L.A. I thought it was because he was too jealous to leave me in Paris. I was flattered. I didn't know that he was using me to make visits to Paris to set up some deal...(Easy) 'And then he made you his (drug) mule,' I said. 'He said he was importing French toys that he sold on the side. He wanted me to bring them in now and then so that the tariffs wouldn't cut into his profit. It was only toys. A set of Italian boccie balls, a dollhouse.' (Easy) 'An' you didn't know?' 'Not until I forgot once. I left this set of wooden carpet balls on the plane. I forgot. When I got home and (Roman) came over he went crazy. I told him that I'd go back in the morning, that the ground crew had probably put the package in my basket. It had my name on it. He struck me. He knocked me down. I was afraid that he was

> going to kick me when he pulled me up by the hair and told me that he'd kill me if I didn't go down with him right then to get it. He dragged me down there at three in the morning. I told him that that would be suspicious but he didn't care. I had to sign all kinds of forms and I think the customs agent was suspicious but he knew me and let it go…Roman took the balls to his car and left me to take a bus home.' Bonnie trembled with the memories. I didn't doubt a word that she said…'I didn't know if it was drugs or something else, Mr. Rawlins. It didn't matter, because he hit me. My mother always told me that you can't let any man treat you like that.' The steel in her eyes was fine by me (Mosley, 205-207).

It's significant that the comfort and warmth of Easy's home and his small family makes Bonnie comfortable enough to confess her role in the Gasteau brothers' drug trafficking ring. She also later confesses to the murder of Holland Gasteau, Idabell's abusive husband. The twin brothers are revealed to be the perpetrators of the various robberies that have been taking place at local schools throughout the Los Angeles area. Bonnie's cosmopolitan nature further removes Easy from his comfort zone, as well. Mosley is adamant to introduce his protagonist to the broader context of Blackness; to the far-reaching expanses of the African diaspora. The name of the titular hound, Pharaoh, also plays on this significant theme in the novel. In many ways, this subtle commentary on international Blackness serves to complete the journey that Easy began as a young recruit fighting in Patton's army during the dark days of WWII; a conflict which, despite its traumatic toll on the character, nonetheless provided him with an opportunity to experience the world that lies beyond the confining –particularly for Black folks and other lower class people of color- geographical borders of America.

It's rather significant that Bonnie and the Gasteau brothers are involved in a highly complex "white collar" form of crime; a type of illegal activity that is far more intricate than the usual run of the mill Los Angeles street crime that Easy is accustomed to investigating. The fact that Mosley chooses to depict these people of color engaging in a criminal enterprise that is typically associated with well-organized criminal organizations- such as the mob- or wealthy, privileged Whites, serves to complicate the author's contemplation of the often muddled and controversial distinction that American law makes between "white" and "blue-collar" crime. Bonnie's accidental involvement in the Gasteau brothers' international drug trafficking activities leads her to commit the greater sin of murder as well:

> (Easy) 'Why'd you kill Holland?' It was past three. Bonnie and I were lying together in the bed, fully dressed…(Bonnie) 'He called me after he got home. When he found Ida gone he called me looking for her. I told him that she was gone; that she had left the state. I thought that that would send him off looking for her. But instead he said that he wanted me to come over to his house right then…He said that he had the forms I'd filled out the night I went back to the airport, the night I forgot those damned carpet balls. Roman kept the copies that the customs official gave me. He said that he had the balls too. They had official seals glued to them. He said that if I didn't come over right then he'd give it all to the police…He was excited when I got there. He told me that he wanted sex and for that he'd give me back the things he had…he raped me. He took me to the bedroom and made me…He had this big black knife…(Easy) 'And so you killed him?' 'He said that I was going to be his new wife now that Roman was dead and

> Ida was gone. He made me get dressed. He made me sit on his lap and kiss him. It was like you said. I got the gun from his drawer while he was in the bathroom. I shot him. I did…(Easy) 'And then you called Idabell at the school and told her, right?' 'I told her to come over but I didn't say that Holly was dead. We packed her things. I took my carpet balls and she took the croquet set.[128] I took the glass because I just didn't know what to do with it.' She looked me in the eye as if to say that she couldn't help it; that she'd had to kill him. I was in no place to pass judgment (Mosley, 294, 295).

Bonnie's confession to the murder liberates Easy from his fears regarding the ever increasing threat of imprisonment posed by Sergeant Sanchez and his unceasing determination to pin the crime(s) on him. Strangely, Bonnie's tale also draws Easy closer to her. She is tainted; much like most of the figures who populate Easy's close-knit Los Angeles microcosm, and he has never shied away from playing the role of the chivalrous gentleman who attempts to rescue a damsel in distress. Perhaps equally odd, but nonetheless true, Bonnie's justifiable sin makes her all the more compatible for Mosley's protagonist as a potential life partner. After all, Easy- along with his troubled friend "Mouse"- still struggles to come to terms with his own past mistakes and misdeeds, but nonetheless finds much needed redemption and forgiveness in the sanctity of domesticity.

Near the novel's conclusion, Easy and "Mouse" are involved in a shootout that lands the latter in a hospital's severe trauma unit. Easy accepts the blame for "Mouse's" eventual demise, and EttaMae refuses to forgive him for his part in this tragic, and highly

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[128] The Gasteau brothers utilize these French toys to stash their heroin while it is in transit.

consequential death. After witnessing the early stages of her mourning for the loss of her husband, and the perplexed look in his son LaMarque's eyes after seeing his father dying in front of the family home, Easy must also seek to comfort his own family as the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination send shockwaves throughout the troubled nation. Cleverly, Mosley transforms a significant moment in American history that is typically viewed strictly through the lens of White first-hand accounts and mournful remembrances of that somber day in Dallas, and makes it more applicable specifically to the experiences of his Black cast of characters in Los Angeles. Easy weeps for the loss of John F. Kennedy, along with his daughter Feather, his son Jesus, and his new romantic acquaintance Bonnie, as he also seeks to come to terms with the loss of his lifelong ally; a man that he simultaneously respected, loathed, and feared, but who- in spite of his glaring shortcomings as a human being- always had his back when trouble inevitably came knocking on his door.

> I left in Mouse's car. I had to leave, to hide the weapons. Along the streets the traffic was light, but there were lots of folks out in front of their houses and stores. People were talking to each other with rapt attention on every corner. I saw more than one woman crying. Children walked listlessly, on the whole, not playing or laughing out loud. The world was in sorrow, it seemed. Was Mouse's death so powerful? Did everybody feel it when a brave gangster died? Maybe it was that I hadn't looked around me lately. Maybe a deep sadness had entered my community but I had been too busy being a workingman; a company man. On the corner of Pico and Genesee there were three white men and one white woman standing at the bus stop, listening to a transistor radio that one of them held up. I

took the heroin[129] from my glove compartment and went up to my house. The front door to my house was open. Inside, Feather was crying in Bonnie's arms. Jesus stood next to them holding one of Feather's favorite dolls. 'Easy.' Bonnie had looked up. There was no smile on her face for me. 'Daddy, Daddy,' Feather cried. She lumped over to me and I lifted her into my arms. 'Jackson[130] here?' I asked my son. He shook his head to say no. His voice lost again. Lost again. Everything was lost. 'What's wrong?' I asked out loud. 'Haven't you heard?' Bonnie asked me. I was as mute as my son. 'Kennedy. He's been shot. He's dead.' 'What?' I staggered across the floor with Feather and slumped down on the couch. I buried my head in Feather's chest too sad to even cry. Bonnie came to hold us and so did my son. My lungs were burning and my throat was sore from choked tears. I lifted my head and noticed that there was blood on my little daughter's dress. 'What's this?' I said. 'What's wrong with you, baby?' My voice was high from the strain. 'It's from your ear, Daddy,' she said. 'Wha' happened?' As if on cue Pharaoh yelped down at our feet. 'Frenchie!' Feather cried. 'Frenchie.' She pulled away from my arms and hugged the dog on the floor. I was too sad to be angry at the damn dog. I sat there thinking that he must have jumped into the car while I was helping Mouse[131]. He'd probably hidden under the seat where I had put the gun and knife. Gun and knife. 'Bonnie?' 'Yes, Easy?' 'Can

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[129] Easy locates the Gasteau brothers' heroin, once secreted away in the French toys that she transported from Paris at the behest of Roman Gasteau, in the trash near Bonnie's apartment building.

[130] Jackson Blue steals Jesus's savings from his closet. Jesus's stash of cash, his "treasure chest" as Feather refers to it, bears a striking similarity to the money that Easy buries in his backyard near the conclusion of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

[131] Here, Easy recalls the events that immediately followed the shootout that left "Mouse" mortally wounded.

you drive?' 'Yes.' I gave her the keys and Primo's address. I told her about the gun and knife under the seat.[132] 'Take the kids out to his house. He'll know what to do.' (Bonnie) 'What about you, Easy?' 'I'm tired,' I said. I still had unfinished business with Philly Stetz[133]. I didn't know if he had sent Beam[134] to kill me or not. I didn't know if he wanted the heroin or if he knew my address. I did know that I didn't want my children in the crossfire and so I sent them to Primo.[135] 'Daddy,' Feather had tears in her eyes. 'Can't you come with us?' (Easy) 'Later, honey.' 'Can't I keep Frenchie, though?' Being so weak themselves I think that children understand weakness better than adults. I couldn't say no to her then. 'Okay. Yeah, okay.'…At the door Jesus was the last to leave. 'Did you take the money out of my closet, Dad?' (Easy) 'No.' 'It's gone.' He looked at me with his solemn eyes. Jackson Blue (Mosley, 286-288).

Jackson Blue's betrayal of Easy's trust – again, Blue steals Jesus' savings, a significant sum of cash money- represents another falling domino in the chain of events that eliminates once beloved and/or helpful figures and allies from his past. This long, somewhat disastrous chain of events, extends throughout the pages of *Black Betty* and *A Little Yellow Dog*, and signals Mosley's intention to break away from the standard formulas that he presents in the first five novels of the nineteen nineties. Kennedy's death marks the end of a certain American Dream that rang true with most White folks in the early nineteen sixties. However, by connecting the death of the president with the death

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[132] It's worth noting that Easy trusts Bonnie both with his children and with the details of the trouble that he currently faces.
[133] A mob boss.
[134] A mob henchman.
[135] Another manifestation of Easy's parental instincts taking precedence over the details of the case; highlighting the importance of domesticity v. the mystery itself.

of "Mouse", Mosley contemplates the relatively more personal, and yet equally momentous, tragedies that conclude a particular chapter in Easy's adult, post-WWII life. A brief list of some of the significant others and friends that he has lost over the course of these last five novels, due to a variety of intensely personal matters, would include Joppy Shag[136], his ex-wife Regina, Dupree, Odell, Raymond "Mouse" Alexander, and his wife EttaMae, and Jackson Blue. With the exception of Regina, these figures once formed the core of the Black community that supported Easy's early forays into the treacherous world of private investigation.

Ironically, Easy has always been keen to note Jackson Blue's intellectual brilliance; his knowledge of history- particularly Black and African history- and literature. Easy acquires a disciplined reading habit mostly due to his conversations with Blue on such weighty matters: "I'm a book reader. There's always a book on my nightstand; sometimes more than one. I was reading *Dr. No* by Ian Fleming[137] and *The Earth* by Emile Zola. I love literature but the phone book was still my favorite reading. It was the ledger of my world" (Mosley, 105). In addition to Blue's extensive knowledge of more historical, literary, and philosophical matters, he was also once a highly reliable resource of knowledge regarding the inner workings of Los Angeles's criminal underworld: "Jackson was better than a library when it came to information about the criminal side of L.A.- both black and white. His head was a vault of who did it, when they did it, and how much they got paid for it. That was the way he stayed out of jail for so long; the cops would arrest him for this or that and then ask him what he knew that

[136] The bartender who introduces Easy to DeWitt Albright, another crooked White attorney and murderer, in the opening pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.
[137] Mosley inserts one of JFK's favorite authors into the narrative with this allusion. Fleming is the author of the famous James Bond novels.

would make them agree to let him go. That was also why he found no sympathy from the black hoods from Watts and thereabouts. Very few people liked Jackson Blue. But he was worth the trouble he might cause" (Mosley, 172, 173).

The fact that Easy asks his son Jesus about Blue's whereabouts, after leaving the man in his home in order to seek more information, suggests that Blue had earned enough trust to enter the sacred domestic space that Easy shares with his children. Furthermore, this fact makes Blue's betrayal all the more personal and loathsome in Easy's eyes. As he reviews his conclusions concerning his investigation into the murders of Idabell Turner and the Gasteau brothers, Easy subtly highlights the significance of Blue's unforgivable transgression:

> I had found, I said, that Bill Bartlett was Holland's partner in the little paper route business that worked out of the shack that held the stolen goods (from the schools). A few days later there was an account in the paper of how Roman and Holland (Gasteau) and Bartlett were in business stealing from the schools. Roman, who had obtained his job under an alias with forged references, had abused his power as a nighttime building consultant. In a falling-out among thieves, the article speculated, Bartlett had killed Roman and then Holland. Later on, after meeting with Bartlett at Whitehead's restaurant, Idabell Turner was found dead. Traces of heroin had been found and Bartlett was being sought for questioning. However, his house had been broken into and a goodly quantity of

blood had been found. Foul play had not been ruled out in his case. *Jackson Blue disappeared with Jesus's life savings*[138] (Mosley, 296).

Given that *A Little Yellow Dog* represents the end of an era, both in Easy's adult life and in the social and political life of the nation at large, a portion of Agustín Reyes-Torres's article, "Coffin Ed Johnson, Grave Digger Jones, and Easy Rawlins: Black Skins and Black Psyches", is relevant to this analysis of the narrative:

> Mosley presents in the background of these novels the tense atmosphere between blacks and whites in U.S. society of these decades. Furthermore, the novels echo the disruption of African Americans' hope for social change, when President John F. Kennedy was killed. In the series, Mosley emphasizes the impact of that fatality by placing the putative death of Easy's best friend, Mouse, on November 22, 1963, just a few hours after Kennedy's assassination. Although Lyndon Johnson rapidly used the shock of Kennedy's murder to push forward the 1964 Civil Rights Act…many African Americans still reacted with discontent. There were riots in northeastern cities because many African Americans believed that the act did not go far enough. All forms of power, but especially political power, were still dominated by whites. Johnson's dismay at this lack of public support among those in black communities only intensified with the Watts riots of 1965. Significantly, while Easy does not directly participate in the riots, he is a close witness who has the wisdom and the experience to explain why they happened. In this case, his becoming an official private investigator can be seen as a reflection

[138] Emphasis added. This line is also separated from the rest of the text in the pages of the novel; seemingly to indicate the depth of Blue's betrayal in Easy's mind.

of the gradual social advancement and recognition that his people gained (Torres, 54, 55).

Furthermore, some very poignant advice from one old friend who manages to survive the deadly intrigue of this narrative rings especially true. John, the proprietor of John's bar, first featured in *Devil in a Blue Dress* notes the urgent need for Easy to fully sever his ties to the Los Angeles streets, and the figures that run through both its lofty upper echelons and its dark, sinister underworld: (John) " 'You know you can't be livin' like this, man. You too old for this shit. Things gettin' serious in this town, Easy. People turnin' mean. Even Mouse got hisself killed.' (Easy) 'I know, John.' I said it so softly he might not have heard. 'Easy, you need a woman,' John said. 'A woman who wants a home an' ain't gonna take no shit.'[139] Bonnie Shay came to mind. She smiled and carried no weapons" (Mosley, 298, 299). John's wisdom propels Mosley's protagonist even further down the road toward a more settled type of manhood. In the final pages of the novel, Easy has a brief telephone conversation with Bonnie as she considers leaving Los Angeles, returning to Paris, and resuming her work on the trans-Atlantic Air France route as one of the few Black stewardesses that Easy has ever known. Mosley takes this opportunity in the narrative to highlight his heroic detective's desperation for the love of a good, caring woman. This depiction of Easy's longing marks the end of Mosley's preoccupation with his protagonist's life in Los Angeles, and the beginning of his focus on Easy's past in Texas.

[139] This is the core of the argument for Easy's transition to a more stable, domestic life.

CHAPTER FOUR – "THE LAST NOVELS OF THE NINETIES, PART II: *GONE FISHIN'*, 1997"

Mosley's final canonical novel of the nineteen nineties, *Gone Fishin'*, makes a drastic transition from the linear chronological progression of the previous five novels which trace Easy's post-WWII adult life from the late nineteen forties to the early nineteen sixties; ultimately culminating in the shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. The novel is a prequel that fully explains the details surrounding the journey of Easy and "Mouse" to Pariah, Texas to confront the latter's evil stepfather in order to acquire a much sought after inheritance. Many of the details of this quest were first provided in Mosley's first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and the consequences of the trip reverberate throughout the subsequent installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. The book offers somewhat of a hazy, mythological glimpse into a pivotal chapter in Easy's young adulthood, and provides readers with a satisfying explanation regarding the tension that exists in the uneasy alliance between Mosley's protagonist and his murderous friend/enemy. The question that one must ask, however, is why does the author choose to divert so radically from the chronology that frames a majority of the detective narrative in the series in order to take a prolonged look at the protagonist's past?

A few clues are provided in the fourth and fifth installments in the series, *Black Betty* and *A Little Yellow Dog*, that portend Mosley's intention to dwell at length on several significant and unresolved issues in Easy's history. Whether it's Easy reminiscing about his early days in Houston's Fifth Ward, or discussing with "Mouse" the murky details of the latter's parentage, Mosley utilizes these key pieces of narration and

dialogue in order to provide much needed context for his prequel, and to foreshadow his interest in taking a much deeper dive into his heroic detective's memories to further investigate an as yet unexplored aspect of Easy's character development; his pre-detective days.[140] The author also elaborates on the logic underlying this tremendous narrative shift in a 2009 interview:

> (Q) '…as someone who's written so many books across different genres, how does writing mystery differ from writing other genres?' (Mosley) 'Well, it's hard to compare a literary novel to a mystery novel; they're both literary. But with a mystery novel, you have to address the plot every three or four pages. Every three or four pages we have to get back to: what's this story about? That's what a mystery is: you're solving the mystery therefore the plot is kind of ornate and very structured. In a literary novel, it's boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back again. That's enough plot for a literary novel. You can use a lot more space to get to know the characters and how these people feel: how they relate, what they do. They're different kinds of books and they both pose their own problems, but they're still books, they're still the same thing, really.' (Q) 'Who or what inspired you to begin writing mysteries?' (Mosley) 'I had written a book called *Gone Fishin'* with Easy Rawlins that wasn't a mystery but nobody wanted to publish it. And then I started writing another book about Easy Rawlins (*Devil in a Blue Dress*), and I didn't know it was a mystery until I reached a certain point and realized it was a mystery. It was almost like a non-event' (*Conversations*, 202).

[140] Elisabeth V. Ford, in her article "Miscounts, Loopholes, and Flashbacks: Strategic Evasion in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction", argues that "...Easy's flashbacks are often useful tools that use wild oscillations in narrative time to evade or reshape present-tense events" (1081).

Mosley's revealing comments provide a very succinct answer to the question addressed above; namely, that *Gone Fishin'* had in fact been written long before the first Easy Rawlins mystery, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, but it did not entice publishers in the way that particular novel did. The success that the author garnered with the publication of the first five novels in the series permits him the creative license to return to that earlier work, which also in many ways serves as a fitting elegy for Raymond "Mouse" Alexander. In essence, *Gone Fishin'* takes place within Easy's mind as he seeks to come to terms with the death of "Mouse" sometime after the tragic and consequential events of *A Little Yellow Dog*. It is indeed rather brilliant that Mosley chooses to place this prequel novel directly after that installment in the series to provide his protagonist with a necessary moment of reflection on the life and legacy of his fallen comrade, and perhaps, to provide his audience with a strictly "literary" narrative that offers a refreshing respite from the hardboiled intrigue that characterizes the other canonical novels. This aspect of *Gone Fishin*' is also foreshadowed in the vivid depiction of Easy's domestic life with his adopted children in *A Little Yellow Dog*, which momentarily lures the reader's attention away from the unrelenting course of the protagonist's investigation.

There are still a few mysteries that need to be solved in this "literary" novel, however; i.e. how do Easy and "Mouse" get to Pariah to seek the latter's inheritance, who do they encounter on their way to the small town, what happens when they confront daddyReese[141], and what are the consequences of this fateful encounter? Nonetheless, again, Mosley's emphasis on the strictly literary aspects of the novel is confirmed by the fact that these mysteries represent an act of remembering, or seeking to remember,

[141] "Mouse's" sinister stepfather; first introduced in a conversation between "Mouse" and Easy in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. See Larson.

crucial facts that will allow Easy to make peace with "Mouse's" passing. This narrative does not feature Easy wandering the treacherous Los Angeles streets seeking clues, but it does portray a vivid journey into the deep recesses of his consciousness. In this sense, metaphorically speaking, the novel provides the "missing piece of the puzzle" that completes the depiction of Easy Rawlins first offered in *Devil in a Blue Dress*; a hardened military veteran whose primary motivation for deploying to the battlefields of WWII was, ironically, to escape the senseless violence of Houston's Fifth Ward and "Mouse's" homicidal madness.[142]

The plot of *Gone Fishin'* emerges from a conversation between Easy and "Mouse", who are portrayed as young men just beginning to grasp the harsh realities of manhood; particularly those that are relevant to the lives of poor Black men in the Southwest. Easy manages to maintain a humble, one-room apartment, which signifies his lifelong emotional attachment to property and to the prospect of leading a stable domestic existence– his most valuable possession is a comfortable chair positioned next to his bed – and works on a temporary basis as a gardener. "Mouse" is chronically unemployed, skips out on any rent that he owes for the several apartments he has lived in and abandoned, and yet somehow keeps himself well-dressed, and has plenty of access to good liquor even in Post-Prohibition, Great Depression-era Texas. Nevertheless, his primary concern is obtaining enough money to fund his impending wedding to his

[142] Easy explains his rationale for joining Patton's army in Europe during the final years of WWII in a significant flashback scene depicted in *Devil in a Blue Dress* that focuses on yet another disturbing conversation with "Mouse" about a murder that he committed. See Ford.

fiancée EttaMae[143]; a woman that both he and Easy love dearly. The crux of the conversation between the two men is gradually revealed; "Mouse" has been pondering the matter of how to obtain this money for himself and EttaMae, and knows that a large sum of cash is located in Pariah on the farm of his stepfather daddyReese.

He wants Easy to put down his gardening tools, and drive with him to get it in a borrowed nineteen thirty-six Ford. For Easy's trouble, "Mouse" offers him a whole fifteen dollars, a lot of money for two poor Black men in the late nineteen thirties, and introductions to all the pretty women in Pariah:

> (Easy) 'So what, man? What you gonna do 'bout the money?' 'I'ma go up to Pariah an' get it, that's what.' 'How you gonna do that?' 'I don't know, Easy. All I can tell ya is that I ain't gonna hesitate one minute…(Mouse) 'I tell you what. I give ya fifteen dollars t'drive me to Pariah fo'a couple a days'…I wanted to go. I knew it from the minute he yelled in my (apartment) door. I was a young man then, barely nineteen years old, and alone in the world. Mouse was my only real friend, and even though he was crazy and wild I knew he cared for me- in his own way. He made me mad sometimes but that's what good friends and family do…This would be the last time we would go running in the streets together.[144] I'd've gone with him without the threats and the IOU.[145] (Easy) 'I want my fifteen

[143] The complex relationship between Easy and EttaMae is explored throughout the canonical novels that comprise *The Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. See Larson.
[144] A rather ironic statement given the many adventures the two men have in Los Angeles throughout most of the series.
[145] During his conversation with Easy about the trip to Pariah, "Mouse" subtly implies that he will pay the fifteen dollars at a later date. Of course, the implication is directly related to "Mouse's" desire to obtain the money on daddyReese's farm.

dollars, man,' I said. 'You know I ain't doin' this fo'my health.' 'Don't you worry 'bout a thing, Easy. We both git sumpin' outta this' (Mosley, 14-17).

This initial conversation with "Mouse" in the narrative subtly corresponds to those moments in previous installments in the series that portray Easy negotiating the details of a potential job with an untrustworthy figure offering to financially compensate the wary detective.[146] However, the only elements of intrigue that exist at this point in the narrative relate to the relatively simple matters of how long it will take to get to Pariah, and what will happen when the two men arrive. In other words, this is a tale of adventure and intrigue, not a hardboiled detective novel.

As Easy and "Mouse" make their way toward southeast Texas in their borrowed Ford, they pick up two hitchhikers named Ernestine and Clifton, who are on the run after the latter nearly kills a man for flirting with his girlfriend in a bar. "Mouse" suggests that they make a quick stop at the house of a "witch" that he knows named Momma Jo; a tall, jet black, and mysterious woman who works with herbs and potions, keeps armadillos and a white cat as pets, and has a collection of skulls among which rests the decapitated head of her long-dead husband Domaque. "Mouse" brings Momma Jo liquor, and introduces his guests. After he introduces Easy, and Momma Jo accepts "Mouse's" alcoholic offering, the old woman of the woods humorously notes that he has brought her both "lightnin'…an' sugah" (Mosley, 45). "Sugah", of course, is a metaphor for sex, which occurs in abundance in Momma Jo's earthen hovel.

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[146] For example, Easy's discussion with DeWitt Albright in the opening chapter of *Devil in a Blues Dress* or his initial conversation with Saul Lynx in *Black Betty*.

The "witch" tells a story about her first sexual encounter at age thirteen with a much older Domaque, and gives Ernestine and Clifton an elixir, or more specifically an aphrodisiac, and sends them into a small room hidden behind a curtain to begin making love. Momma Jo then seduces Easy, and seemingly rapes him in so much as he makes it clear in his narration of the sex that he tried to resist but could not due to the overwhelming strength, and otherworldly allure of the woman:

> Her kisses were salty and thick…What I remember most are the smells: her mouth and her musky armpits, the strong smell that almost burned from between her legs. Her feet smelled like earth along with the weak scent of manure. She tasted of salt. And after Ernestine quieted down, the only sound was the deep breathing and the rise and fall of Momma Jo's body. The sound filled the room like God watching from some dark corner. *I didn't want to do it but Momma Jo was strong*[147]; she clenched her arms and legs around me so powerfully that my 'No' was crushed down to 'Yes.' She whispered in my ear what she wanted and I lost my mind for a while; lost it to her desire (Mosley, 62).

The scene once again highlights Mosley's flair for writing erotica, and the author subtly indicates that Momma Jo has her way with both Easy and Ernestine before "Mouse"- who disappears during this traumatic episode- returns to fetch Easy and to continue their journey toward daddyReese's farm. "Mouse" introduces Easy to Momma Jo's deformed, and hunchbacked, son – also named Domaque- and after a brief excursion to a local pond to catch some fish with the aid of a pistol and some verses from the book

[147] Emphasis added.

of Genesis[148], Domaque takes the two men to his small hut in the woods to give "Mouse" an item that he intends to take to daddyReese's farm:

> (Domaque) 'Here you go, Ray.' Dom handed Mouse a doll that had been burned and mutilated. It had once been a white baby doll but the hard-rubber skin was now burnt black and the clothes it wore were the overalls that a farmer wore. The brown hair was clipped short and the arms were straight out as if it were being crucified on an invisible cross. The eyes were painted over as the wide white eyes you see on a man when he's frightened and trying to see everything coming his way. Mouse smiled and took the doll from Dom. It seemed that Dom was a little uneasy about giving away his ugly toy but I knew that it was hard saying no to Mouse. 'Thank you, brother,' Mouse said. 'daddyReese gonna just love it.' Mouse's laugh filled Dom's garden until all the flowers seemed to vibrate with it. (Mosley, 86-87).

Easy and "Mouse" then confront daddyReese in person on the old man's farm, which has fallen into disrepair due to years of neglect: "The yard, if you could call it that, was a mess. There was an old wagon that had both of its axles broken, the rusted-out metal hulk of a steam boiler, and pointy-spouted oil cans scattered around. There was a jumbled pile of old bales of hay that must've laid there for five years or more. Old furniture tossed anywhere and many things I couldn't even put a name to. I got the feeling that the old farmer went into a rage, taking everything he had and throwing it from the house and barn" (Mosley, 93).

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[148] Domaque recites the biblical verses taught to him by a local, wealthy White woman named Mrs. Dixon, whose family has owned most of the land in Pariah for generations.

Mouse makes the intent of his unexpected visit clear, and adamantly demands the money secreted away on the farm: " 'I come fo'my part'a Momma's dowry, Reese,' Mouse said. 'I know she had some jewelry an' some money from her folks when you two got married an' you leased land wit' it. I know you got money out here now, an' I want some for my own weddin'. It's mines, Reese, an' I want it'" (Mosley, 97). After daddyReese refuses to part ways with his hidden fortune, "Mouse", in a fit of rage, kills his stepfather's pet dogs with his pistol, fires a final shot just over the old man's head, and then suggests that he and Easy make a run for it.

Before they completely leave the grounds, "Mouse" reaches for the baby doll given to him by Domaque: "Half a mile down, Mouse stopped and pulled the baby doll from his jacket. He took out a string and tied it roughly around the doll's neck and then he hung the doll from a branch so that it dangled down over the center of the road. 'He gonna come down here with that shotgun but you know he gonna be stopped by this,' Mouse said loudly, to himself" (Mosley, 99). Much later in the novel daddyReese, who appears during a church service –Momma Jo, Domaque, and Ernestine are also in attendance- in a state of near complete physical deterioration due to what he believes is a curse placed on him by Momma Jo, threatens Easy and inquires about his stepson's whereabouts:

> The chill I felt when I saw daddyReese was the cold that a corpse might feel. His arms and chest sagged down like flab but he wasn't fat; he must've dropped ten pounds in those few days, I'd never seen a man lose weight so fast…(daddyReese) 'Where Raymond?' daddyReese asked me. I told him that I hadn't seen Mouse in a few days. He grabbed my wrist and leaned against me; he

hissed into my face, 'You tell him that I don't care what happens. I see my soul in hell fo' I let up on a dime, you hear that?' (Mosley, 157-168).

During the course of a final confrontation on daddyReese's farm, both he and Clifton – who was assisting "Mouse" in an effort to subdue his stepfather in a large sealed basket- are killed. Easy passes out during the brief shootout due to a severe illness that debilitates him throughout the latter portions of the novel. "Mouse" finally obtains his money, and stands reverently by his stepfather's corpse at the funeral, which also takes place in the small Pariah local church. Easy, perhaps unconsciously displaying his latent talent for detection, is able to connect the dots regarding the murders as he sits in a pew observing "Mouse" standing at the front of the church with "…tears streaming down (his) face. He was crying outright" (Mosley, 207):

> Reese was a hard man and an angry man. He had turned the whole world against him and no one cared to look beyond what seemed to be the story. It was told that Reese was out at his house when a fugitive from Houston came upon him to steal his money. The fugitive, Clifton, had heard that Reese was rich from Raymond Alexander[149], who was coming to tell Reese about his coming marriage. Reese shot Clifton but Clifton managed to get his gun and shoot Reese before he died. Mouse came upon them when he'd come to tell Reese that he was returning to Houston. There was no money found.[150] Big Jim, the colored deputy, was at the funeral, and I think he suspected that there was more to the story. But you don't go doing police work for a colored killing when you got an answer lying cold at

[149] "Mouse's" birth name.
[150] Mouse has in fact obtained the money, and placed it in the same tan rucksack that once contained the liquor that he gave to Momma Jo in an earlier portion of the novel.

> the back of the barber's shop. Jim warned Mouse that Navrochet[151] wouldn't take it so easy. He said that Mouse's stepbrother would wonder at how Clifton got to Pariah. But Mouse just smiled and shook his head (Mosley, 207, 208).

Moreover, Easy makes it clear that these moments represent a pivotal turning point in his young life: "I've been counting my steps from that day to this one. From Louisiana to Texas; from childhood to being a man. I wasn't quite yet a man as I walked down that country path (leading toward daddyReese's farm). But I was headed for maturity. I had driven Mouse out there and anything he did was a reflection on me. It was the noble thought of a fool…I thought of Reese's dogs and went cold somewhere; that one spot in my heart has never kindled again" (Mosley, 195, 203). As Easy describes the dire consequences of the fateful encounter on daddyReese's farm, his narration also suggests that his journey to Pariah with "Mouse" portends many of the moments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* wherein the protagonist searches his soul for some bit of optimism while courageously facing the harsh realities of his investigative life in the racially stratified streets of Los Angeles. It is a key moment of crucial character development for Mosley's future heroic detective.

Alongside "Mouse's" quest to obtain his mother's dowry from his evil stepfather lies a separate, more subtle, plot element that relates to young Easy's effort to recall memories of his own father. Many of the details concerning Easy's status as an orphan in Houston's Fifth Ward are provided in *Black Betty*, in which he is depicted as a ragamuffin wandering the streets, running errands for the adults. In *Gone Fishin'*, Mosley provides a more complete explanation regarding what happened to Easy's biological

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[151] Mouse's stepbrother; also first alluded to in *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

parents, and why he is essentially alone in the world from such an early age; a fact that relates to his bold and uncompromising brand of masculinity. Much of this essential information also places the adult Easy Rawlins depicted in the previous canonical installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* in a much clearer context. For example, Easy's somewhat hazy recollections of his final days with his father and mother shed light on the significance of domesticity in the world of the previous canonical novels as well; particularly in *A Little Yellow Dog*.

The tremendous effort that Easy makes to provide a stable, safe, and pleasant home for his adopted children when he is a grown man stems from the trauma that he experiences as a small boy. The first piece of crucial information, which Mosley provides early in the novel in Chapter Five, concerning the relationship between Easy and his father pertains to a very specific traumatic episode that takes place in a slaughterhouse. The memory, in many ways, is similar to the audacious confrontations that Easy has with racist White men throughout Los Angeles in the previous novels, and clarifies the protagonist's particular understanding of the nature of violence and death. His father is just as defiant and daring when challenging the absurdity of White racism, but of course, the consequences of his resistance are severe:

> On the last day I saw my father he took me down to the slaughterhouse. It was an awful place. They had cows walking down an aisle that came to a sharp turn. When the cow[152] took the turn she came to a window and a big man hit her on top

[152] Mrs. Dixon, the White woman whose family has owned most of the land in Pariah for generations, is also referred to as a sacred cow in the eyes of the local residents. Importantly, they also wish to do away with her in order to obtain ownership of the land upon which they live and work. The extended metaphor that Mosley draws here is clear.

> of the head with a sledgehammer; she'd hit the floor shaking just like those fish[153]…The smell of death by the dozens and by the hundreds;[154]…The foreman was a white man with great big arms and blood all down his thick apron…He was taller than anyone else in the slaughterhouse. My father stood up straight and said, 'You said it was seventeen dollars an' this here is only 'bout half that.' (The foreman) 'I ain't got time t'talk to you, boy. You take what you can git.' My father stood up taller as if he was trying to be as tall as that white man; I got behind him and grabbed onto his pants. (Easy's father) 'You made me a deal, Mr. Mischew, and I want what's mines.' (The foreman) 'Niggah?' the white man exclaimed as he slapped the flat of the blade on his apron. 'You want sumpin'? 'Cause you know I'm just the man give it to ya.' If that man did much business with my father he must've known that he was always soft-spoken and respectful. But when you cheat a man and call him nigger- and his boy is standing there too? Well that was why Mr. Mischew looked so surprised when he found himself flat on his back on the bloody floor (Mosley, 80-82).

The harsh facts of life for poor Black men is reflected in this disturbing scene, and it clarifies the nature of Easy's distinctly hard-nosed Houston, TX brand of masculinity. The horrifying gore that young Easy witnesses in the foul slaughterhouse is also a subtle commentary on the senseless violence that Mosley's protagonist observes when in the

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[153] Here, Easy is referring to the fish that "Mouse" and Domaque catch with the aid of a pistol earlier in the narrative. "Mouse" fires the pistol into the water, and waits for the fish to react to the sound and force of the blast, before he scoops them up out of the water. This is his preferred "fishing" method. The violence of this scene is, in some ways, comparable to that witnessed by a much younger Easy in the slaughterhouse.

[154] Easy's observation of the violence of the slaughterhouse subtly reverberates in his comments on the liberation of the Death Camps in the closing days of WWII near the conclusion of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

company of "Mouse" throughout the series. The author continues to explore this vivid flashback sequence much later in Chapter Eleven:

> We were running out of the slaughterhouse and everybody was yelling. One man grabbed my father but he sent that man to the floor. Another man came up and he went down too. I noticed then that the rest yelled but they kept their distance. We ran out into the truck yard in front of the building and down an alley. My father had picked me up into his arms and he was running fast. You could see the fear in his face, and that fear is what I remembered most. A scared little colored man with a child in his arms; the world shaking up and down like it was about to break apart and we were panting like dogs on the run. Only dogs are hunters and we were hunted. We ran down to the stream, where we had been trawling for crayfish not three days before, and fell into a heap. My father was breathing so hard that his throat sang. 'You gotta run up home, Ezekiel,' he said to me. 'You gotta go up the back way an' get yo' momma an' them an' go down t'Momma Lindsay's. You hear me, Ezekiel?' 'Yes, Daddy.' 'I love you, boy.' 'Where you be?' 'I gotta run right now, son. I don't know where I end up but I tell ya when I get there.' 'You gonna come get us?' He said, 'Take care'a yo'self, boy,' then he kissed me on the lips and hurried me on my way. And then I was a man running down the path yelling for my mother but never getting there (Mosley, 176, 177).

This particular scene, more than any other, seems to place Easy squarely on the path toward the bold, independent manhood depicted in the pages of the previous canonical novels. It certainly explains the protagonist's courageous rebelliousness when

he confronts White racists throughout the series.[155] Easy's recollection of his traumatic separation from his father concludes with a memory of his mother that is a bit more surreal than the relatively realistic tale of his father's defiance in the slaughterhouse. It's worth noting that here, and throughout the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* –particularly in the series' first novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*- the line between reality and fantasy is often quite blurred in many of Easy's visions of the past:

> My mother and I sat in the parlor of Momma Lindsay's house. My mother was on a chair and I was sprawled out on the couch. I was thirsty and she had made lemonade. Everything was natural except that a line of black ants ran down from the arm of her chair, they seemed to be coming from her clothes, and I was a full-grown man- I knew that she had been dead for many years. 'Where's Daddy, Momma?' I asked. 'I don't know, honey,' she said. She was smiling at me with so much love…[156]…'What you callin' fo', honey?' a voice asked.[157] 'My daddy!' I yelled, not like a man at all. 'Where is he, Easy?' 'He's gone,' I said and then the world started to cry (Mosley, 178, 179).

These fantastic visions occur in Easy's delirious mind just before he begins walking the path that leads to daddyReese's farm, and finds "Mouse" and Clifton in the act of holding the old man hostage in a basket in an improvised effort to locate the hidden

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155 Refer to the residential inn scene in *Black Betty*, which takes place just before Easy's meeting with his White ally- and fellow military veteran- Alamo. Also see Boyd's *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice*.

156 Easy has many dreams about his mother after the horrors that he experiences on the battlefields of WWII. Many of these visions are depicted in the pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. See Ford.

157 Note that this surreal dream sequence occurs as Momma Jo attempts to nurture a very ill Easy back to good health in the real world portrayed in the novel.

cash. During the ride back to Houston, the "big city" when compared to small, rural Pariah, "Mouse" places three hundred dollars wrapped in newspaper on the dashboard, and explains how he and Clifton arranged the lethal confrontation:

> ("Mouse") 'Here ya go, Ease, maybe this brighten up yo' face.' Mouse put a fat envelope, folded from a sheet of newspaper, on the dashboard in front of me. (Easy) 'What's that?' 'I might not be able t'read like ole Dom(aque)[158] but I can count like anything,' he said. Another time that might have gotten a rise out of me but those days were over. 'Yeah,' Mouse said. 'I cain't read but I can count to three hundred in my sleep.' I didn't say a word. I wouldn't even look at the envelope. 'What's wrong wichyou, man?' he asked me. 'Ain't nothin wrong.' 'Then why you cain't even talk.' 'Ain't got nuthin t'say, that's all.' 'Yeah. I know.' He stared at me for a moment, then went on, 'Easy, I want you t'take that money. It's yours an' it would be a insult t'me if you leave it lyin' there fo'Otum[159] t'take.' I said, 'Where you get that money?' 'Fount it.' 'Fount it where?' 'Out t'Reese's place. I mean he got a will say ev'rything go to Navrochet. But you know he owed me sumpin' so I just look at it like this here money I got is mines' (Mosley, 213, 214).

The tense conversation between the two men continues:

> (Easy) 'How much was it?' He (Mouse) pointed to the envelope. 'That there's just a piece of it.' I was quiet again. (Mouse) 'You wanna know what happened, huh?'

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[158] Mrs. Dixon teaches Domaque how to read the Bible, and in turn, Domaque teaches an illiterate Easy how to read the newspaper. These lessons seem to explain Easy's lifelong love of literature and reading.

[159] Otum is the owner of the nineteen thirty-six Ford that carries the two men to and from Pariah.

He was grinning at me. 'I don't wanna know nuthin'.' 'Yeah you do. You think I did sumpin' wrong, don't you? You think I murdered Reese, don't you?' Mouse sat back and put his foot on the dash. He was getting ready to tell me another story, but I had lost my love of his tales. 'Ya see, Ease, it started wit' Clifton. I knew he could he'p convince Reese about gettin' up offa that money an' I also knew that Ernestine was young enough and wild enough an' she like (Momma) Jo enough that she might give Dom(aque) a li'l pussy. You know Dom could use some'a that. So I went an' tole Big Jim[160] 'bout what I knew 'bout Clifton.' 'You tole the law?' 'Yeah, I can't be lyin' round Jo 'cause she so good she even got me. Anyway Clifton did beat that boy so it ain't like I was lyin' t'Jim. Only I didn't tell Jim where Clifton was. Ya see, I'as givin' him a chance.' 'Uh-huh!' I had Clifton buried out in the woods at night while I was layin' up wit' Theresa.[161] I tole him that I was watchin' for Jim. Clifton was so scared that he couldn't even sleep. He'da done anything I said. So I warned 'im that Big Jim was gonna get'im sooner or later unless he got far away, an' then I tole him bout Reese's money… 'Ya see, I figgered we'd rob Reese, it was my due anyway. An' Clifton went along wit' it after some convincin'. I gave Clifton a shotgun I borrowed from Sweet William[162]. I tole Reese Clifton was a killer an' we was gonna have it. He (daddyReese) was a mess, Easy. He smelled from garlic, I guess he thought that would save him from voodoo.[163] It was pitiful.' There was glee in Mouse's voice. 'But I was gonna have that money. We put'im in that bamboo basket an' told'im

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160 The "colored" sheriff that Easy mentions during daddyReese's funeral service.
161 A young woman from Pariah to whom both Easy and "Mouse" are attracted.
162 A local musician in Pariah, and "Mouse's" biological father.
163 Recall daddyReese's fear of Momma Jo and her "witchcraft."

> we was gonna shoot'im 'less he climb outta there an' show us to the money.' Mouse was savoring every moment of the torture. He really believed that he hadn't done anything wrong. 'But then that fool Clifton had to grab me an' th'ow off my kick. If you'd hadn'ta run Reese down I'd be dead now. Shit. I'm lucky my gun landed near Clifton, 'cause you know Reese woulda beat me t'death with that shotgun.' (Easy) 'An' then you fount the money?' I asked. 'Yeah.' Mouse was staring out over the panorama of his brilliant future. He saw black-and-white dice through glasses of amber whiskey. He saw EttaMae in cashmere and silk. Somewhere there were children calling out, 'Daddy.' And all the while Reese lay in the ground, turning to sludge (Mosley, 214-217).

The guilt that Easy feels as a result of helping "Mouse" in his effort to rob and murder his stepfather is a key indication of his transition from being a young man struggling to survive on his own, to being a mature adult contemplating weighty matters related to his morality, and on the verge of exploring all of the various nuances of his manhood. Easy's tense discussion with "Mouse" about the actual details of the murder also marks yet another instance of the protagonist fearing for his life while in the presence of his homicidal friend. Easy notes the significance of this moment in the narrative-not only here, but also in a crucial scene in *Devil in a Blue Dress* that recounts this very conversation between the two men- as the discussion about the events on daddyReese's farm concludes:

> (Easy) 'If you fount that money when he (daddyReese) was dead, then why couldn't you have fount it when he was packed in that box?' Mouse laid those cold eyes on me. 'Yeah," he said. 'You right.' 'And I don't believe it, Raymond.'

'You'ont believe what?' 'I don't believe that Clifton shot Reese. That boy had his hands full tryin' t'hold his guts in.'[164] It was like I had forgotten who I was, and where I was; and who I was with. Maybe it was because I had a full stomach and I sat behind the wheel of a nice car. Maybe it was all that money up on the dashboard. For a moment there I thought that the truth was more important than the need to survive. Mouse winced and nodded. I realized that I had caught him in a lie. 'You right,' he said again. I turned away from his cold stare only to see the red blood of a fat bug smear across the windshield. 'An' that's why I need ya t'take this here money, Ease.' He pointed at the envelope again. 'Because you the on'y one got my confidence. You the on'y one know why I come down here an' you the on'y one know what happened. If you don't take that money then I know you against me.' He looked at me with a plain face. But this time that face wasn't hiding laughter. His voice was the whisper of death, the slither of a snake over the nape of my neck. Death had always been a part of my life. He lived in my neighborhood, in my apartment building, right next door to me. But I'd never worried about him coming knocking. I was innocent and I knew that I would live forever. But at that moment I realized that the wrong words would cut my life down to seconds or, at the most, just a few days. *And I also knew that whatever I said would be my first words as a man in this world*.[165] I reached out for the bundle and said, 'Thanks, Ray.' Mouse laughed and slapped my knee. I had survived again. I had risked my life to save Clifton only to fail. But I had survived

[164] This is another moment in this narrative that highlights Easy exercising his latent potential as a talented detective.
[165] Emphasis added.

> that failure. I was following in my father's fleet footsteps; standing up when I couldn't take any more and then running to fight another day. Mouse started telling me how hungry Theresa was for love. I didn't care. When we saw Houston in the distance Mouse said, 'You know, Easy, when I was standin' there listenin' t'Peters[166] preach, somethin' touched me, I don't know if it was God or the devil or what, but it felt like all the pain and fear I ever known was gone. I been scared'a Reese day and night for my whole life and now he's dead.' A smile of pure joy spread across his face; tears sprouted from his eyes. 'An' I'ma be married and I'ma be happy fo' the rest'a my years' (Mosley, 217-219).

Here, it is important to note one last observation that Easy makes concerning his thoughts on daddyReese's murder. The tales of the reckoning of sons and (step)fathers- "Mouse" and daddyReese, Easy and his father, even "Mouse" and Sweet William, who is also identified as Raymond's biological father in a consequential conversation between Easy and "Mouse" in *A Little Yellow Dog*- in *Gone Fishin'* stem from this critical event in the lives of the two men. And even as a young man, Easy is painfully aware of the long lasting impact it will have on his character, and on his soul: "Back in those days rent was two dollars a week and you could eat your fill on a quarter a day. I had three hundred dollars; I could've lived for more than a year on that. But I wasn't careful. I bought a quart bottle of bourbon every other day[167] and sat in that room, stinking and drinking. Most of the time I was too drunk to worry about it. But late at night the demons would come at me. *I was a part of the murder of a man's father. Me, Ezekiel Rawlins, the man*

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[166] Here, "Mouse" is referring to daddyReese's funeral service. Peters is the local preacher in Pariah.

[167] Perhaps this is the beginning of the drinking habit that Easy struggles with throughout most of his adult life. Easy quits drinking just before the events of *A Little Yellow Dog*.

who worried after his own father for years[168]. It's not that I cared for Reese but murder is a sin that burns your soul" (Mosley, 220, 221). These thoughts portend the ways in which Easy is haunted by the death of daddyReese, and by his role in it, throughout the series. In many ways, it is this tremendous amount of remorse that propels him onto the bloody killing fields of WWII.

The murder of daddyReese is the crime element of this literary novel, and it lends *Gone Fishin'* certain similarities to the previous canonical installments in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. Again, the novel does not represent a work of detective fiction per se, but there are several intriguing elements of the narrative that need to be solved by Easy and "Mouse" as they make their way toward Pariah; i.e. where is the legendary stash of money located on daddyReese's farm, and in the aftermath of the murder, what actually took place during the robbery, who pulled the trigger, etc.? As is noted above, Easy and "Mouse" sort out all of these details; Easy connects the dots in his own mind, and "Mouse" confesses in his own way during the course of a conversation with his running buddy on their way back to the bright lights of Houston. In a broader sense, as far as the series is concerned, the novel answers several significant questions regarding its two most prominent characters. Readers learn the true story of what occurred when Easy accompanied "Mouse" to Pariah to demand his mother's dowry from his evil, abusive stepfather, much more about Easy's origins and his parents, and appearances by EttaMae and Sweet William simultaneously explain the complicated love triangle that exists between Easy, "Mouse", and Raymond's bride-to-be, and "Mouse's" paternity. The narrative expands upon the sordid details of a conversation that began in *Devil in a Blue*

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168 Emphasis added.

Dress, and again, provides Mosley's protagonist with some much-needed breathing room to mourn "Mouse's" loss in *A Little Yellow Dog*.

However, once again, Mosley adamantly notes that *Gone Fishin'* was the first novel he wrote in the series, and when publishers refused to distribute it, deciding when to release it to the public became somewhat of a difficult task weighed down by complex political and financial negotiations with the publishing houses:

> The first book I wrote was *Gone Fishin'*, long ago; it wasn't in the (detective genre). Mouse is in it, so it had to be a crime novel!...Nobody published it. Nobody wanted to publish it. Nobody would touch it. My publisher, when I brought it to them after they did *Devil in a Blue Dress*, just said 'No'. Then, they said, 'Well, maybe if we published the first three together, this could be an introduction.' And then, they said-when I said I was going to go to Paul Coates's Black Classic Press-'Well, maybe if you would promise to change it into a mystery, we would publish it.' But, when I wrote that book, I wanted to write about that migration of black folk from the western south into Los Angeles, and about all the aspirations, all the hopes, all the successes, and then all the losses, and all of that changing, the generations. I wanted to do that, and that's what I am doing. How the book unfolds though, this is over time. I'm just having fun with it. When I'm writing, if I'm on page eighty-eight, I don't know what's going to happen on page eighty-nine. It's the same thing book after book. They come out (*Conversations*, 154).

The insight that these comments provide into Mosley's writing process is fascinating, but it also sheds light on the significance of improvisation in shaping the

narrative. Mosley's comment about "having fun" with the narrative seems to suit the improvisational nature of the road trip that sends Easy and "Mouse" careening toward their intertwined destinies. But, despite the author's humorous summary of his intentions for the novel, it is nearly impossible to overlook the evidence of Mosley's intent with regard to the ways in which *Gone Fishin'* reimagines the detective narrative. Mosley disguises what is for all intents and purposes a murder mystery as an entertaining coming-of-age narrative. In that sense, the author seems to satisfy some of the demands of his publishers by "sneaking" elements of the detective genre "through the back door", so to speak, while also remaining true to his original motivation to produce a strictly narrative novel. Easy does display a latent talent for detection and investigation as the novel concludes, particularly during daddyReese's funeral service and during his conversation with "Mouse" on the way back to the violent streets of Houston's Fifth Ward, and it is that element of the narrative that lends support to an argument asserting that this prequel could be playfully classified as a "crime narrative", rather than a typical detective novel.

Easy's observations on the consequences of his trip to Pariah in the closing chapters of the narrative reflect Mosley's talent for managing all of the significant details of his fictional microcosm, and connecting elements of this particular story to the broader context of the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. This aspect of *Gone Fishin'* becomes particularly clear when Easy secludes himself in his small apartment in Houston, in the aftermath of the tragic events in Pariah, and when he states his intent to leave the city during Raymond and EttaMae's wedding ceremony:

…And to help a man ("Mouse") murder his father (daddyReese)…People came to my door but I didn't answer it. They'd knock and call my name but I'd lie in the bed and bite my pillow. I'd shut my eyes tight against the sound and finally they'd leave. Mouse would come to the door and call me. He'd rattle the doorknob and bang away. He talked to me as if he believed I was in, but I didn't answer him. Our business was over with. There was nothing left to say. Even today, six years later[169], I feel guilt and fear. The same fear I had when I thought my father knew everything that I did wrong; every thought that I thought wrong. How could I have known? I asked myself. How can anyone hold me responsible for the death of that man and that boy (Clifton)? But then I'd think of standing there with Miss Alexander[170] looking down on that wasted frame of flesh on brittle bones. A man who I helped to torment; a man whose murder goes unavenged. I was unworthy. In my misery I told myself that that was why my own father never came back for me. My mother was a churchgoer but I never had much use for it. Just as soon as I was old enough to hold back I fought with her on Sunday mornings so I could go out exploring the country and see my friends…For the first time I thought about God.[171] I wondered if he'd forgive me like Reverend Peters said. But I didn't see how he could. I wasn't going to the law, I wasn't going to give myself up. I loved

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[169] As the novel concludes, Easy reveals that he's been narrating the events of this tale from a room overlooking the streets of Paris in the aftermath of his tour of duty in Patton's army in the closing days of WWII. See Linda Hervieux's *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes, at Home and at War*.

[170] Raymond's aunt and the proprietor of a small drinking and dining establishment in Pariah.

[171] Note the way in which this moment corresponds to "Mouse's" conversation with Easy about feeling guilt for his past misdeeds in *A Little Yellow Dog*. Significantly, that discussion is also connected to the events of *Gone Fishin'*.

> freedom and life and the only thing that would come from confessing was prison and death. I took Mouse's money. It's true I was afraid not to take it but I didn't throw it away. I could have found a worthy cause and given up my loot for that but I didn't, and I wasn't intending to do it. All I could do was to lay up in my room and drink. If things had continued like that I would have died there in Houston all those years ago; I'd've never learned to live with my guilt and remorse (Mosley, 221-223).

Further into the closing portions of the novel, Easy's narration subtly draws a narrative line of connection to the pivotal event that occurs in the last pages of *A Little Yellow Dog*; i.e. the tragic assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, TX. Easy's comments also propel him toward his deployment to the battlefields of Europe prior to the events portrayed in *Devil in a Blue Dress*:

> That was the longest month of my life. Every minute stands out like an hour; every hour stands out like a day. I met the strangest people and went to places that I could never have imagined. I lost what a religious man would call his soul. Pariah is gone. Miss Dixon died a month after Mouse was married and her relatives came down from Chicago to split up the land. They leveled Pariah and moved all of the people out of the area. They charged back rent on the land, so everyone ran away; they didn't have any money. Momma Jo and Domaque and Ernestine disappeared too. They didn't come to Mouse's wedding. I think that he didn't want stories about Reese's death to be around when he had so much cash. On that Saturday every soul that I knew in Houston was at the biggest wedding Victory Church ever had…It was something else. Etta(Mae) and Raymond

walked up to the gazebo. The minister stood there waiting. A breeze was blowing and the pastel silk flags that hung from the roof of the gazebo waved like angels calling out the great day. There were children who could barely hold in their excitement. The women were in fine dress; all of them in tears. I wondered if they cried because Mouse was going off the market or because they were so happy or because they knew how hard Etta's life would be with a man like that. The bachelors were standing around snickering and wondering what being married meant-not in much of a hurry to test it out themselves. The minister asked his questions and the wind blew harder. I stood there next to Raymond. He was sharp as a tack and so cool that you could almost see the mist rising from him. His eye was certain. Etta was beautiful at his side…Everyone said that it was the best party that they had ever been to; it was even more than that for me. I was feeling romantic that night. It wasn't that I was looking for a woman; I had lost my wild passion for young girls that night with (Momma) Jo. Jo showed me something about love. She showed me that I didn't know what it was…But I wasn't feeling romantic toward a woman; I felt that way about my life- the life I had lived in Fifth Ward for years. All of my friends, and people who could have been my friends, were dancing and drinking. Some of them were around Mouse, listening to his wild stories. It was so beautiful but it was my last night there. It was Mouse's wedding party and it was my goodbye. I couldn't live with those people anymore. They were living on the edge of despair; like those two friends fighting on my street.[172] I had the image that we were all, all of us in Houston and Pariah,

[172] Easy witnesses a bloody conflict between two men on the Fifth Ward streets below his

> living between Miss Dixon and Mouse. It was a deadly line we had to walk and the only thing that kept us going was some kind of faith. Either you believed in God or family or love. I didn't believe in any of those things anymore. Maybe I never had. So I had a ticket for Dallas, Texas, in my breast pocket. I was as happy as I could be at that party because I felt safe. I felt safer with that ticket in my pocket than I would have felt with a gun. They couldn't hurt me anymore. Mouse couldn't come banging on my door in the middle of the night. Married women and old witches couldn't seduce me on dirt floors (Mosley, 231-237).

This crucial turning point, or more precisely, this moment of enlightenment, in Easy's young adult life clarifies much of the meditative remorse that Easy experiences in the wake of "Mouse's" passing in the closing chapters of *A Little Yellow Dog*. The protagonist's trip to Dallas also highlights the poignancy of John F. Kennedy's assassination as it relates both to Easy's personal connection to Texas and to the lost innocence of the nation at large. Easy's flirtation with the violence and death that always-already surrounds "Mouse" throughout the series also places this moment of exodus in its proper context. Mosley makes it clear that Easy is utterly incapable of escaping such violence; after all, he's gradually making his way toward the bloodstained battlefronts of WWII as he attempts to cut ties with his roots in Houston's Fifth Ward. The thin line that Easy walks between life and death is effectively erased by "Mouse's" violent passing in the denouement of *A Little Yellow Dog*, and much of the meditation on the subjects of morality and mortality that takes place within the mind of Mosley's protagonist begins in earnest in the final pages of *Gone Fishin'*:

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apartment during his drunken seclusion in the aftermath of the events in Pariah.

Texas by train is a real desert. They have miles of flat gray stone and tumbleweeds blowing and plenty of nothing. I watched the desolate earth through my reflection in the window with a deep feeling inside me. I was the only one who cared about my leaving. No mother or father to wonder where I was. I could be dead; Mouse could have shot me for refusing his gift and who would have known? He would come back to Houston and Etta would ask him, 'Where's Easy, baby?' and he would answer, 'Easy say he gone up to California, babe.' And that would be it. I'd just be a corpse moldering under some bridge or an ornament on Jo's mantel. Poor men like me are no more than a pair of hands to work, if there's work to be had…The train was loaded with people. All those Texans headed north. The only car with room to stretch out in was the colored car in back. There was just a few of us. Sitting across from me in the almost empty car was an elderly couple from Galveston. He had a bent back from working around the docks for so many years and she had the peaceful face of a woman who is most at home in church…I didn't talk to them much at first; I was too busy feeling the sweet pain of leaving. But I looked past them at the door to the car once when a porter came in to sit down and smoke a cigarette. She caught my eye then. Her name was Clementine and her husband's was Theodore. Russell was their last name. 'We goin' t'live with our son in California[173],' she said, and he smiled…California was a little too far away for me then. At least I had heard of people going to Dallas. No. California would have to wait. I saw three people die the first week I was in Dallas; two car accidents and a heart attack. I didn't get a

[173] This moment seems to plant the seed that eventually leads Easy out to Los Angeles after the war.

> good job but I got gardening work. I learned how to read just about well enough that when Uncle Sam called on me he put me in a tent with a typewriter, with a rifle under my desk. But through all of that I dreamt about Reese and Clifton almost every week. They were always covered with blood, gasping as if they were just about to die. But they didn't die. They grabbed at Mouse's cuffs while he was sitting in a big chair counting out my three hundred dollars. 'I don't know what you worried 'bout, Ease,' he said as he rubbed a blister of blood with the corner of a five-dollar bill. 'You ain't done nuthin', man.' (Mosley, 238-241).

These significant moments of reflection during Easy's exodus from Houston's Fifth Ward plant the seeds of the great migration westward that eventually places him on the violent streets of Los Angeles as an amateur private investigator in the pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Again, despite Mosley's humble claim that he was having "fun" improvising the creation of this narrative, it is clear that the author took great pains to maintain a sense of continuity in the closing portions of the novel by reflecting on the implications of the movements of Black folks from the southwest to California. Mosley also places his protagonist in Paris in the aftermath of WWII as the novel concludes. Here, Easy contemplates his impending return to the United States after his traumatic tour of duty in the battlefields of Europe, and attempts to imagine a future for himself after the horrors that he witnessed there. This critical moment of meditation intentionally creates a forward chronological trajectory that leads directly into the pages of Mosley's first novel in the canonical *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, and again, illuminates Easy's distinctive brand of masculinity:

> Now I've been through a world war and I'm on my way back home (to the U.S.). They've given us three weeks R&R[174] in Paris. I've got a room at the Hotel Lutétia on the Boulevard Raspail. This hotel was recently vacated by the Gestapo[175] and now houses our military elite. I got a room here because I saved a white major's ass in the front lines and so he thinks I'm a hero. I got tired of all the white soldiers calling me a coward for working behind the lines. So when the call came up for any soldier, black or white, to volunteer for Patton's push I raised my hand. Maybe I thought I could make up for my failure in Pariah. But being a white man's hero doesn't make any difference to me. Maybe that's why I've spent the last two weeks remembering what happened in Pariah, and looking at the Eiffel Tower, rather than thinking about this white man's war. Maybe, if I have a son one day, and he asks me about the war, I'll tell him about the time I had in Pariah. *I'll tell him that that was my real war*[176] (Mosley, 241, 242).

Easy concludes his post-WWII introspection by reflecting on his impending, treacherous journey back to the U.S., and on the dangers that await him back in the states:

> When they asked me where home was I said Houston. It wasn't until that night, hours after I was asleep, that I realized I had bought a ticket back to Etta and Raymond and everything I had left behind. But it didn't bother me. There were gangs of white American soldiers roaming the streets, killing solitary black enlisted men. There were gangs of black soldiers getting their revenge. All over Paris there were thieves, escaping Nazis, and loaded guns in hungry men's hands.

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[174] A military acronym for the phrase "rest and recuperation".
[175] The infamous and corrupt Nazi secret police force.
[176] Emphasis added.

> I had a transport ship to survive and America yet to see again. Every step could mean death to a black man like me. Why worry about the destination when the road is full of vipers? Mouse is probably dead by now anyway.[177] How could a man so violent and reckless survive? And if he has endured, then married life has changed him. Maybe he's fat now, working as a cook in some hotel. There's no way for me to tell the future from this room in Paris. All I can do is follow my footsteps, not at all like my father, and go back home (Mosley, 243, 244).

Buried within these observations are also the seeds of Easy's longing for a much more stable domestic life that begin to flower within the pages of *A Little Yellow Dog* as the protagonist takes more confident steps into assuming the role of father to two adopted children. When Easy's final thoughts on the war, and on his last days in the chaotic streets of post-war Paris, in *Gone Fishin"*s poignant denouement are placed alongside the depiction of his desire to settle down with Bonnie in the closing portions of *A Little Yellow Dog*, the theme relating to the protagonist's desire to escape the violence that persistently haunts and pursues him throughout the series becomes all the more clear.

Easy's desire to explore the potential of a more secure, domestic existence much later in the series is foreshadowed by his longing for the presence of his absent mother, and by way of his tender interaction with Momma Jo midway through the narrative. Despite the fact that Easy first scoffs at the possibility of a leading a stable life under Momma Jo's care, his mother's untimely passing after the disappearance of his father makes him more than susceptible to her maternal charms: "I made it out the slim passage through the woods thinking about all the steps I'd taken to bring me to that path. It came

[177] A rather humorous, and ultimately false, observation.

to me that it all started when my father ran away from that butcher and out of my life. He never called for us. One day I came home from school and our neighbor was waiting there for me. When she told me that my mother had some kind of stroke I wasn't even surprised. I had expected her to leave too" (Mosley, 194, 195). Momma Jo heals a debilitating illness that nearly kills Easy in the middle of the novel, and in her, he sees shades of the mother who died and abandoned him just as his father did after a confrontation with a racist White man in a slaughterhouse. Much later in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, Momma Jo's maternal instincts are subtly reflected in the poignant interaction between Bonnie and Easy's adopted daughter Feather in *A Little Yellow Dog*. There too, the impact of the absence of a mother figure in Easy's household becomes a significant issue when Feather asks Bonnie if she intends to stay in order to fulfill the role; i.e. "Will you be my mommy sometimes?" (Mosley, 205).

Momma Jo's healing practices not only rescue Easy from the cold grip of death shortly before the fatal confrontation on daddyReese's farm, they also instill in him a profound urge to seek the type of woman that John describes near the end of *A Little Yellow Dog*, "A woman who wants a home an' ain't gonna take no shit" (Mosley, 299). Once again, the love of a good, caring woman becomes a much more significant issue than the deadly intrigue that nearly envelops Mosley's protagonist:

> (Momma Jo) 'Res' now, Easy,' Jo said. She was swaying in a homemade rocker at the foot of the bed; a giant mother in a child's small room. The chair and the floor creaked as she moved forward and back. There was vapor rising from behind her. The room was hot. 'Water,' I croaked. I didn't even recognize my own voice. When she rose I was filled with awe at the size and might of her. I

remembered the armadillos and that severed head. It was nighttime again and felt like I was back in the bayou, out behind those stunted pears. She lifted my head to pour water into my mouth from a liquor bottle. She'd tip a spoonful in and wait for me to swallow, then she'd pour another one. When the water hit my empty stomach I got small cramps that quivered down through the intestines. But I didn't complain- the water tasted too good for any complaints. (Momma Jo) 'You been real sick, baby. Ev'rybody been worried. Dom an' Mouse an' li'l ole Ernestine. You had us all goin'.' (Easy) 'How long?' 'It's just been twenty-four hours but it was close. If I had come in the next morning rather than right after Sunday school we'd be plannin' yo' funeral right now. It's been comin' on ya for a few days. Miss Alexander say you was drinkin' an' I was mad that she let you do it.' When she stroked my face I felt the rasp of my stubble against her hand. I fell asleep with my head on her lap. Later I woke up and she was still cradling me. *I was so happy then*[178] (Mosley, 181-183).

Easy's feeling of satisfaction stemming from Momma Jo's skillful, backwoods treatments sustains him as he continues to recover from his severe illness:

(Easy) 'Thank you,' I said. She (Momma Jo) grinned at me. 'Baby, you better rest some more. The fever gone but you still weak, it could come back, and it's always harder gettin' rid'a it the second time.' (Easy) 'What is it?' 'I seen it before. It's a kind of poison that gets in ya an' acks like grippe but it ain't. You gotta use some old-time medicine to get that. Lucky you got ole Momma Jo t'fix ya.' I pressed my head against her thigh and she smiled down on me like she had smiled down

[178] Emphasis added.

on Raymond ("Mouse") when I first saw her in the woods. When I woke again it was night, Jo was rocking and embroidering. I thought it was strange that a woman like her would take up needle and thread. 'Could I have some water please, Jo?' I said. 'How you doin', Easy?' She brought me the liquor bottle. 'Fine.' 'You lookin' good. I guess we gonna have you a li'l while longer, huh?' 'I guess.' I raised myself to be fed the water and then laid back. There was still vapor rising from behind the rocker. I must've been staring at it because Jo said, 'Just some herbs in water on a oil burner. Keeps it warm inside and keeps yo' lungs clear so you don't get pneumonia. You feel like you can have some broth, baby?' I wasn't hungry but I said yes, I needed some strength. I felt the life coming into me. Not exactly the same life I'd almost left behind. When Jo came back Miss Alexander stuck her head in the door and smiled. 'Hi, Easy,' she said. 'Glad to see you feelin' better.' Jo had a steaming bowl of beef broth with a big shank bone in it. She propped me on her knee and fed me spoon by spoon (Mosley, 183, 184).

The rural community of women that surrounds Easy with their affection, their tender love and care, heals his debilitating ailment. Once he is well enough to do so, he and Momma Jo begin a crucial conversation pertaining to "Mouse", and the sexual assault that traumatizes Easy in Momma Jo's hovel, which is forgiven but not forgotten:

(Easy) 'You seen Mouse?' I asked her. (Momma Jo) 'Oh yeah,' she said reluctantly. 'He been around. He tole me t'tell you that he'd be ready t'go when you feel better.' 'Where is he?' 'No tellin' wit' Raymond but he prob'ly wit' some girl. I think he been hangin' 'round Miss Alexander's li'l friend-Theresa.' I

felt a flash of jealousy but it went away as soon as it came. (Easy) 'So he wanna go home, huh?' I let out a short laugh and it hurt me on my stomach. 'I guess he finished up whatever crazy nonsense he had wit' (daddy)Reese.' 'I guess so,' Jo said as she pushed the spoon into my mouth just a little too hard. 'So I guess you be headin' back home when you get to your feet?' 'Uh-huh, that's right. You know Houston cain't get along wit'out me for more'n a few days.' 'Yeah.' She smiled with me and I was glad. It seemed like the only thing I'd ever done was to sit alone with Jo in the night. And I was liking her pretty much then too. I was thinking about what Mouse had said about not turning up your nose at a woman like her. (Momma Jo) 'Easy?' 'Yeah, Jo?' She let my head down on the pillow and went back to her chair. She sat down with a sigh and said, 'I been thinkin' 'bout what happened out to the house, baby.[179] You know, wit' us. And I feel kinda bad cause'a what you must be thinkin', so I just wanna tell ya 'bout how I feel.' She took a deep breath that brought me back to the night we were lovers. 'You could see that I ain't a normal woman. I got big bones and I'm taller than almost any man I ever seen. An' I ain't like big girls neither. Us'ally a big girl sag down an' be quiet hopin' that a man won't notice her size- but I cain't do that. I'm loud and rough and I'm pretty smart too. It's not that I'm vain, Easy, I'm just tellin' it like it is. I'm better than most men at bein' like a man. Domaque was the

[179] Here, Momma Jo is referring to the her act of sexual assault, which she perpetrated on Easy in her hovel during the course of their initial encounter shortly after he and "Mouse" arrived in Pariah from Houston. See Torres's *Walter Mosley's Detective Novels: The Creation of a Black Subjectivity*.

on'y man was my match.[180]' She had a lost look in her eye and I knew how she felt after all I had remembered about my father and losing him. (Momma Jo) 'And he (Domaque) was too good to live. On'y reason I stay out to that house is because I'd be more alone wit' people. 'Cause if I come in on a situation an' I know what's right, then I'ma do what's right. And if a man, even a white man, stand up an' be stupid then I just set him straight. I mean women can be wrong too an' they can be just as dumb as any man. But a woman us'ally come around quicker than a man 'cause if you hurt a man's pride you might as well give up on him ever thinkin' right' (Mosley, 184-187).

Momma Jo's mea culpa continues:

'Mens don't like a woman big as I am, not if they manlike too. They wanna feel they power but they don't want none'a yours. But I could see you wasn't like that.' She gave me that shy smile. 'They is somethin' diff'rent in you, Easy, somethin' soft. It's like you looked at me an' said, 'Okay this here is one big woman; now let's get on wit' it. An' you didn't worry 'bout it no more. You didn't look at me wit' them big eyes like you was scared or like I'm a animal you gotta train. I liked that. That's why I done that mess wit' Ernestine an' that sour boy she was wit.' I thought about Domaque and Clifton then.[181] (Easy) 'What's she gonna do now that Clifton's gone?' (Momma Jo) 'She wanna learn some

[180] Momma Jo alludes to her deceased husband, who raped her when she was a girl, and whose decapitated head rests on her mantle in her wooden hovel.

[181] It's interesting to note the juxtaposition of these allusions to Domaque-Momma Jo's deceased husband-and Clifton. Both men succumb to horrible deaths, many years apart. Domaque is murdered by Momma Jo's father, and Clifton is killed during the robbery on daddyReese's farm. Easy may also be thinking of Momma Jo's son, also named Domaque, who is involved in a budding romance with Clifton's girlfriend Ernestine.

things I know an'...' She looked down and smiled. 'She been goin' out to Dom's house t'pick flowers wit' him. I cain't hope she gonna be no more than friends wit' him but Dom sure could use the company.' (Easy) 'I like you, Jo.' I held my hand out to her. She came over to hold it. 'That's all I wanted, baby. I know I shouldn'ta done what I did. I wanted you t'be my friend. I mean I cain't ask you to wanna be out here wit' me…' she said, but there was a hope in her voice. (Easy) 'I couldn't, Jo. I mean, I could love you but it would turn out bad.' I wanted to say yes, to say that Mouse was right. 'I gotta stand up fo'myself, Jo, an' I just couldn't do that wit' you, out here.' I should have just said that she was too much woman for me- that's what I felt. I lied about everything back then. There just wasn't any truth to be had. We talked for a long time, about everything. She told me stories about her and how she kept things going out around Pariah. She delivered babies, made potions, and settled disputes. I told her about wanting to read and about women I'd known. We were fast friends, holding hands and talking the night away. But whenever I'd mention Mouse she started talking about something else. She told no stories about him when he lived there and if I asked she'd just say, 'Oh you know Raymond; he ain't nuthin' but bad news wit' a grin.' (Mosley, 187-189).

Even this brief mention of Raymond "Mouse" Alexander's name interrupts the idyllic moment of domestic bliss shared between Easy and Momma Jo during the course of their significant conversation. Here, the discussion begins to shift toward the events that will eventually culminate in the traumatic murders of daddyReese and Clifton:

Finally I asked, ‘How come you won’t talk about him (“Mouse”)?’ (Momma Jo) ‘I don’t wanna be thinkin’ ‘bout Raymond now, Easy. I know he yo’ frien’ an’ I ain’t got nuthin’ good t’say.’ (Easy) ‘But he brung that girl (Ernestine) down.’ (Momma Jo) ‘I’m thankful fo’ Ernestine but Raymond din’t make her. An’ all his foolin’ ‘round ain’t helpin’ my boy (Domaque).’ (Easy) ‘What he do?’ ‘I don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout what Raymond be doin’.’ ‘But I bet you could guess.’ I smiled at her but she didn’t smile back. (Momma Jo) ‘All I know is that I seen Raymond an’ that Clifton headed out Blacksmith Row, out toward (daddy)Reese Corn’s place. They left when the sun was goin’ down.’ The tone in her voice spoke of violence. All the drowsy recuperation in my brain burned off like morning mist. Sweat formed on my forehead and hands. I gulped once because of the nausea that accompanied the decision I made. My stomach rumbled. ‘You hungry, huh, Easy?’ Jo asked. ‘Yeah, yeah. Hey, Jo, could you go’n get me sumpin’ t’eat?’ ‘I got some bread an’ fruit right here in my basket.’ ‘Naw,’ I said. The sick frown on my face came naturally from the sour pitch in my gut. ‘Couldn’t you go’n get me some hot soup or sumpin’?’ ‘It’s late, Easy,’ she whispered, to show me that she was afraid of waking people up. I stared at her while thinking about my own dangerous purposes. Maybe it was the fear showing through my eyes that moved Jo. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’ll go see what I can find.’ She kissed me. It was the natural brush of lips against skin. I imagined prehistoric wolves making the same gesture with their snouts before they howled as men, women, and children sat shivering in their caves (Mosley, 189-191).

The Platonic moment of intimacy between Easy and Momma Jo in Miss Alexander's small room highlights the significance of domesticity in the life of Mosley's troubled protagonist. Easy's gradual development into a mature man much later in the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* depends upon his ability to seek something more than just physical gratification, sex, from the many women that he encounters within the pages of the canonical novels. As Easy asutely notes regarding Momma Jo's impact on his understanding of women and love, "…Jo showed me something about love. She showed me that I didn't know what it was…" (Mosley, 235). Easy's conception of love eventually evolves into an idyllic portrait of domestic bliss featuring he and Bonnie and his adopted children:

> 'Will you be my mommy sometimes?' Feather asked. 'Hi, Dad.' Jesus came in from the back hall. 'This is my son, Jesus. Jesus, this is Miss Shay.' 'Hi,' Bonnie said. She stuck out her hand as far as she could while holding Feather. All three of them laughed at how silly it looked. *It was a regular family scene*. All we had to do was to clean up a few murders and a matter of international dope smuggling, then we could move next door to Donna Reed. Jesus and I made breakfast. That was his Bisquick phase. We turned out pancakes and sausages while Feather sat on Bonnie's lap and Pharaoh took turns barking with them and snarling at me. It was all over by eight-fifteen. Jesus took Feather off to school after which he was going to practice for track (Mosley, 205).

Gone Fishin''s narrative reveals that Easy's effort to create a stable home for his small family stems from his abandonment issues pertaining to the disappearance of his father, and the untimely passing of his mother after she suffers a stroke. These traumatic

events in Easy's childhood fan the flames of his longing for the "regular family scene", home, and wife/mother, that is subtly signified by his interaction with Momma Jo as he recovers from his illness[182] shortly before the robbery on daddyReese's farm. Furthermore, it's noteworthy that Easy's ex-wife, Regina, abandons Easy in much the same way that his parents left him to fend for himself in a cruel, treacherous world as an orphaned child. These festering wounds only begin to heal as Easy finally sees a reflection of Momma Jo's love in Bonnie during yet another all too brief moment of domestic bliss in *A Little Yellow Dog*. In many ways, the protagonist's decision to abandon the dangers of his life as an investigator in favor of taking on the role of guardian of his sacred domestic space in that novel stems from his recovery while under Momma Jo's skillful care and the seemingly tireless observation of her maternal eye in *Gone Fishin'*.

1997 marks the conclusion of the first phase of Mosley's prolific literary career. Amazingly, there is a four-year gap between the publication date of Mosley's final canonical novel of the nineteen nineties and the next "Easy Rawlins Mystery", *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, which is released at the bittersweet dawn of the new millennium in 2001. *Gone Fishin'* addresses many of the questions that linger throughout the pages of Mosley's first canonical novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), and represents a fitting transition from the equally tragic events of *Black Betty* (1994), and *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996). Mosley's rather brilliant decision to revisit the novel that he wrote long before the publication of *Devil* also signifies his motivation to complete a crucial aspect of Easy

[182] This mysterious illness may be caused by the many mosquitoes that bite Easy as he and "Mouse" arrive in the swamp-like terrain that surrounds Momma Jo's hovel early on in the narrative.

Rawlins' character development. Within the pages of this "crime narrative"[183], the critical issues that inform Easy's particular brand of bold, and uncompromising masculinity are clearly illuminated for the final time[184] in the canonical *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*. As Mosley's protagonist contemplates the consequences of his military service in the closing chapters of WWII in the novel's conclusion, the author also subtly provides his character with sufficient breathing room to meditate on the significance of his friendship with Raymond "Mouse" Alexander, and on the importance of the decisions that he must make in order to escape the incessant cycle of senseless violence and death that defines it.

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[183] Again, note the distinction between a "crime narrative" and the typical detective novel. Mosley was adamant about focusing on the strictly narrative aspects of *Gone Fishin'*, while also infusing various elements of detective fiction into key portions of the novel in order to please his publishers, who were reluctant to release the prequel. For a precise definition of "crime/murder narrative", see Jean Murley's *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture*.

[184] Many of Easy's personal and psychological issues are submerged within the narrative elements relating to the demands of his various investigations in the previous canonical novels.

AFTERWORD

Mosley's prolific first decade of literary production represents a pivotal moment in the author's career. The six *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* novels that permit him to rise to prominence as an immensely gifted craftsman of African American Detective Fiction in the last decade of the twentieth century consistently highlight Easy's heroism, bold masculinity, and penchant for domesticity. A proud member of America's "Greatest Generation", Easy utilizes the skills he gained from serving on the brutal battlefronts of World War II in the equally treacherous streets of Los Angeles as he hones his investigative skills, resists the agents and institutions that act as the guardians of White hegemony, defends the sanctity of his home, and provides for his family. Mosley's insistent emphasis on these three essential elements of his fiction permit him to portray a particularly genuine, relatable, and striking Black male heroic figure that stands in stark contrast to the widely disseminated, and intensely painful, imagery associated with notoriously scandalized Black men such as Rodney King, Clarence Thomas, and O.J. Simpson. In fact, the publication of the series' first and sixth installments, *Devil in a Blue Dress* and *Gone Fishin'*, serve as significant bookends to the Rodney King beating and trial, the testimony of Law Professor Anita Hill during Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearings in Ocotber 1991, and the controversial conclusion of Simpson's dramatic murder trial in October 1995. Of course, it is also noteworthy that Mosley dwells at length on the critical elements that characterize his intriguing prose in the midst of the transformative chronological span associated with the Los Angeles Riots, the

election and reelection of President Bill Clinton[185], and the Million Man March. Examining the fruits of the extremely productive early phase of Mosley's literary career through the lens of the nineteen-nineties decade can produce some significant conclusions regarding the three essential elements[186] that characterize the portrayal of his protagonist within the pages of the series.

Firstly, Mosley's vivid and complex depiction of his courageous detective reimagines the possibilities for the portrayal of heroic Black men in African American literature. The emergence of Easy Rawlins within the American public imagination coincides with the meteoric rise of actor Denzel Washington, and director Spike Lee's production of the cinematic adaptation of Malcolm X's autobiography in 1992.[187] As the public commences to deconstruct the connotation of Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X as a potent signifier of a strong, archetypical category of Black manhood, the third canonical novel of the series, *White Butterfly*, features Easy investigating the murder of a White female stripper and ultimately adopting her abandoned biracial daughter, Feather. The distinctive qualities of Mosley's heroic protagonist depicted in this narrative are not, however, exclusively framed by the pre-Civil Rights era[188] thematic concerns that eventually propel Malcolm X to the lofty and weighty heights of American political

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185 "President Bill Clinton has proclaimed Mosley his favorite mystery writer…" (*Conversations*, 30).
186 I.e. Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity.
187 Written with *Roots* author Alex Haley. The release of Lee's film also coincides with the publication of Mosley's novel *White Butterfly*. Washington stars as Easy Rawlins in the 1995 Carl Franklin cinematic adaptation of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.
188 *White Butterfly* takes place at a relatively early point of the linear chronological progression that defines the series; i.e. the year 1956.

discourse. Easy's cunning investigations can be accurately interpreted as audacious acts of resistance against White hegemonic agents and institutions.

His numerous conflicts with local law enforcement, the nefarious criminal underworld, and the corrupt individuals who collectively constitute Los Angeles's upper-class elite, serve as opportunities for Mosley to emphasize his detective's intrepid refusal to be emasculated by the venomous remnants of southern Jim Crow racism as he intelligently navigates the city's perilous streets. The many sequential and circuitous misadventures that serve as the subjects of Easy's investigations are not a form of protest literature. Rather, they represent a profound reinterpretation of the heroic Black male detective figure. By way of utilizing an improvisational combination of military strategy, acquired at great cost from his traumatic experience of the Second World War, "street smarts", and a clever method of maintaining and manipulating valuable personal relationships with people from all walks of life, Easy valiantly makes his own "…little stand for what's right."[189] It could be asserted that the foundation of Easy's idiosyncratic Black male heroism is his use of his intelligence and survival instincts to obtain access to the information and people that he seeks throughout his career as a self-taught private investigator.

Secondly, in addition to the immense cultural impact of Washington's 1992 performance in Lee's *Malcolm X* biopic, his critically acclaimed portrayal of Easy Rawlins in Carl Franklin's 1995 cinematic adaptation of Mosley's first published novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, makes the actor's on-screen charisma synonymous with the fictional detective's bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity. The release of

[189] See *Black Betty*; (Mosley, 147).

the film shortly before a massive gathering of Black men in Washington, D.C. to participate in the first Million Man March indicates the prevalence of theoretically rich dialogues concerning the question of Black masculinity in the mid-nineties. Mosley's often insightful and humorous focus on his protagonist's assertive, forthright Houston, Texas bravado acts as a fitting and timely complement to the various discussions of the significance of Black male civic leadership and engagement taking place among Black folks as the author's sequential canonical novels are released between the years 1990-1997. Easy's steadfast commitment to his beloved Los Angeles community of Houston émigrés marks him as a leader of those individuals who embark on the unique westward route of the Great Migration. Pivotal scenes near the conclusion of Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* film that depict a very muscular Washington watering his front lawn, and standing in utter awe as he silently and thoughtfully observes the idyllic beauty of the dynamic Black community in which he resides, visually manifest Easy's machismo and his devotion to civic duty.

Thirdly, late twentieth century public dialogues concerning the absence of Black men in African American homes due to unacceptably high rates of incarceration and neglect also highlight the importance of Black domesticity in Mosley's canonical novels. Easy's commitment to his home and family certainly endears the detective to Mosley's many Black readers, and in many ways, this aspect of his protagonist's character development compensates for some of the more problematic qualities of his machismo[190].

[190] Note that before and after his first marriage to Regina, in *White Butterfly*, Easy engages in numerous sexual affairs with a variety of women existing at various levels of Los Angeles's equally troublesome social hierarchy. In fact, in this third canonical novel in the series, Regina makes a poignant, and valid argument that Easy essentially commits

Easy's eagerness to provide a stable domestic existence for his adopted Mexican son Jesus and biracial daughter Feather also highlights Mosley's desire to dwell on the underexplored role of the single Black father within the African American household. While Easy has a brief opportunity to develop his paternal skills during his short-lived marriage to his first wife Regina in *White Butterfly*, he truly begins to refine his performance of his fatherly duties within the pages of *Black Betty*, and *A Little Yellow Dog*. The "…regular family scene"[191] that Easy describes in the latter novel as he observes his children interacting with Bonnie, a new female presence in a formerly male dominated household, effectively contradicts the many inaccurate stereotypical conceptions of Black domestic life, and deconstructs debates concerning the problematic nature of African American single parenthood and the "Black relationship crisis".

Furthermore, the racially diverse makeup of the domestic life that Easy so desperately seeks to maintain within Mosley's fictional Los Angeles microcosm offers yet another reinterpretation of "Blackness" as it relates to the African American family. Despite Jesus and Feather's exotic racial backgrounds, they inevitably adapt to the customs established within Easy's household, which are unambiguously representative of southern Black culture. Easy often refers to Jesus as "Juice", an epithet that is imbued with a delightful Black southern sensibility. Mosley's protagonist explains the origins of

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rape when he forces her to engage in sexual intercourse within the context of their marriage. See Larson.

[191] See *A Little Yellow Dog*; (Mosley, 205).

this nickname in an early portion of *A Little Yellow Dog*: "…Nobody wanted to use the Lord's name in vain, so Jesus became Juice at Hamilton High School[192]" (Mosley, 46).

The improvisational nature of Easy's domestic life with his children is also directly related to the character's own experiences as an orphaned child wandering the streets of Houston's Fifth Ward after the tragic disappearance of his father and the subsequent death of his mother due to a condition that resembles a stroke.[193] Easy explains the perilous nature of the informal, non-biological, familial relationships established between himself, Jesus a.k.a. "Juice", and Feather within the world of *A Little Yellow Dog*: "I could feel my heart swell in fear. Neither Jesus nor Feather was legally mine. I had gotten Jesus the papers of a child that had died in infancy, but his real story was worse than most orphans. He'd been sold as a child prostitute when he was about two and had probably come from Mexico, or maybe even from further down south. There was no birth certificate for Feather at all. If the sergeant[194] started looking into my private life everything could have fallen apart" (Mosley, 48).

The Blues aesthetic implicit in Easy's willingness to accept "Juice" and Feather as his children within the context of his very improvisational private, domestic life also serves as a subtle response to the many complex questions concerning the role of Black fathers within African American households. The popular reassessment of the fundamental qualities of Black manhood during the early to mid-nineties, and the passionate debate regarding Black paternal neglect of essential domestic duties, provides

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192 See Kun and Pulido's *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*.
193 These events are described in detail within the pages of *Gone Fishin'* (1997).
194 Here, Easy is referring to the Mexican-American Sergeant Sanchez of the L.A.P.D., who is first introduced in *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996). See Kun and Pulido.

a crucial lens for examining Mosley's depiction of Easy's status as a relatively responsible single father. The key to comprehending the significance of his role in the private, domestic space of his home is to consider the ways in which Easy attempts to break the cycle of family dissolution that permanently separated him from his own father and mother. As he conducts his various investigative duties in the perilous streets of Los Angeles, he is always-already aware of the fact that he needs to return home safely to care for his children. He often arrives home late, or in some cases, grievously injured after these treacherous excursions, but he nonetheless views home as his ultimate destination once his investigative work concludes.

Fourthly, and finally, the three essential elements of Mosley's intriguing sequential detective fiction published during the nineteen-nineties collectively function as a subtle, yet profound, argument for the accurate literary portrayal of Black men and Black life in the last decade of the twentieth century. As the author seeks to convey the distinct sensibility of Easy's Houston, Texas émigré community, he also emphasizes the inextricable connection between their struggle and the notion of the "American Dream." Common issues that appear consistently throughout the pages of the novelist's *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* include home ownership, entrepreneurship, civic responsibility and engagement, and work ethic. By way of depicting the mundane details of the fictional microcosm that Easy inhabits in stunning detail, the author portrays Black life not as a pathological deviation from Whiteness, but as a distinctively human, and essentially American experience. Mosley succinctly and eloquently summarizes the elements of Black male heroism, Black masculinity, and Black domesticity that lie at the core of his detective's character development: "The idea about Easy is, who will be there for you

when you really need it? And this is not whether you need $10, this is like when you come running and somebody's after you. Easy is not the kind of guy who figures, 'Well if I do this, I'll get killed.' He says, 'I'll do this, and I might get killed but I'm going to do it anyway, because this is where you have to stand up" (*Conversations*, 32).

The return of a radically new Black detective figure to literary prominence, by way of the emergence of Mosley as an eminent craftsman of the African American detective novel in 1990, represents a profound reinterpretation of the role of the Black male protagonist in the detective fiction genre. Easy Rawlins, as he is depicted within the six canonical novels that collectively comprise the *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series*, signifies a much longed-for era characterized by strong and closely connected Black communities. As activists and institutions sought comprehensive and preventative solutions to such disturbing trends as Black-on-Black crime, gang violence, toxic masculinity, and disproportionate rates of imprisonment in the early to mid-nineties, Mosley published an extended meditation on the value of a principled Black manhood that maintained a close connection to a community consisting primarily of supportive relatives, close friends, and kindly allies. Throughout the novels of the series, Mosley emphasizes those aspects of Easy's character development that are most pertinent to the historical context into which the narratives are released. His focus on Black male heroism, a bold and uncompromising brand of Black masculinity, and the importance of Black domesticity endeared his *Easy Rawlins Mysteries Series* to an African American reading public eager to receive the thoughtful, and vivid portrayals of a heroic, assertive Black detective whose base of operations is a home filled with the sounds of young children, and the smells of good down-home cooking.

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