

# *Being Black There: Racial Subjectivity and Temporality in Walter Mosley's Detective Novels*

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African American literature has conventionally, if not universally, been understood as following a distinct timeline. That African American literature has its own genealogy and history is readily demonstrated by the existence of a number of current anthologies of African American literature, with the *Norton* only the most well-known. Even when the various anthologies dispute textual selection within and theorizing of the tradition, they concur that African American literature forms a separate tradition both literarily and temporally and that it ought to be anthologized separately. They all also identify Lucy Terry's 1746 poem "Bars Fight" as the "earliest known work of literature by an African American" and believe that it thus starts the African American literary tradition (Gates 186). But ascribing a distinct temporality to black *people* has been far more controversial, and rightly so. To the degree that black people have been perceived to be of another time, they have also quite often been excluded from dominant understandings and constructions of modernity. As Michelle Wright argues, "[A] logical fallacy develops in . . . the dialectical [racial] discourses" of figures like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Comte Arthur de Gobineau, and Thomas Jefferson, for whom modern subjectivity was contingent on whiteness and maleness (9). I would add that it is contingent on contemporaneity as well—on being in time, or being there: *dasein*, as Martin Heidegger would term it (148).

But the idea that black people inhabit a distinct temporality, albeit an imposed one, has also been advanced by black intellectuals, at least since Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life*. On the very first page of the *Narrative*, Douglass declares that slaves "seldom come nearer" their birthdays than "planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time" (21). Here Douglass countermands Hegel's notion that slavery functions as the only potential means to bring black people to history, to progress—to modernity. For Douglass, slavery suspends black people in a perpetual laboring season, in an essentially premodern condition of serfdom. To adapt Heidegger in this context, *dasein* in Douglass's view does not describe slave time as much as would a term such as *arbeit-sein* (to be/being in work) or *da-arbeiten* (working there).

Douglass is not alone. Pauline Hopkins, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, begins her novel *Hagar's Daughter*, set in antebellum times, with one slave character saying, "Ef I live to see the next corn plantin' I'll be twenty-seven, or thirty, or thirty-five, I dunno which," and another saying, "I was born at sweet per-tater time" (11). Hopkins's focus on the slave past, and on slave time, in a 1901–02 (serially published) text functions as a political statement about the retrograde state of black civil rights in the postreconstruction era; as Hopkins's narrator puts

it in her 1902 novel *Winona*, “[R]everision is the only god worshipped by the south” (317). Even the black moderns who followed Hopkins believed that (at least some) black people were not truly modern, however involuntarily. W. E. B. Du Bois in 1911 argued that “Negroes” needed to slip “the bonds of medievalism” in order to take their rightful place in a modern body politic (15). Contemporary scholars have quite reasonably raised concerns about positing black people’s temporal or economic alterity. Madhu Dubey, for one, cautions us against “situat[ing]” African Americans in “residual zones” outside the socioeconomic structures of post-modernism (8). I argue here, via Walter Mosley’s Easy Rawlins detective novels, for a “both/and” approach: African American people and African American literature can be seen as occupying at once a temporal and aesthetic zone of alterity as well as dominant temporalities and canons.

In both content and form, Mosley’s novels support my argument in that they represent black people who live according to a distinct timeline; they also help demonstrate the commonplace that black literature traces a distinct timeline. Yet Mosley and his writings are also very much of and in their time. His Easy Rawlins detective series, his best-known fiction, obviously inhabits multiple temporalities. These hard-boiled novels operate as historical fiction on at least two levels. Not only are the novels’ settings prior to their publication dates, but the hard-boiled detective novel itself constitutes a kind of literary anachronism, a postmodern return to a form born in and of modern disillusionment regarding the liberal democratic state. It is precisely through their distinctive, multilayered temporality that Mosley’s novels and, I conclude, the African American novelistic tradition as a whole, achieve much of their political force.

In Mosley’s 1990 *Devil in a Blue Dress*, set in 1948 and the first Easy Rawlins detective novel, Easy tells us: “It was fifteen blocks to John’s speak[easy] and I had to keep telling myself to slow down. I knew that a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered” (76). Here Easy has been forced to adjust both bodily and temporally as a result of racially marked disciplinary structures. Like the slaves in Douglass’s *Narrative*, Easy is suspended in a raced temporality and a raced epistemology that together are causal for his quotidian material and emotional experiences. He doesn’t *run* because he *fears* the police because he *knows* what they can do—and what they in fact *will* do to him later on in the novel. Easy isn’t just being there; he is being *black* there. Easy clearly has a highly complex experience of time. He resides very much in the same time frame as do the police, yet he also experiences a kind of temporal double consciousness that in turn determines his speed.

Significantly, he shares that complex temporality with others in his community. In the fourth novel in the series, the 1994 *Black Betty*, Easy tells us what the word *retired* meant to black men at the time of the novel’s setting: “Back in 1961 that meant you worked ‘part-time’ forty hours a week and paid your own insurance” (64). Here Easy, again like Douglass, inextricably links time and labor, and he does so via a multilayered narrative temporality in which he reports from a later vantage point about the past’s tendency to keep working-class black men, including himself, outside an emergent postmodernism and its attendant economic and social benefits. *Postmodern Times*, if we had a contemporary Charlie Chaplin, would

likely show us the film's star caught in a cubicle, not a cog. But as of the 1960s, Mosley's characters are still working in the factory—that is, if they're lucky. The first novel in the series, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, actually begins with Easy's being fired from his job building airplanes in a defense plant. Later installments in the series only underscore the temporal lag experienced by poor and working-class African American men.

Yet the time in which *Black Betty* is set had appeared to be a time of promise, particularly for African Americans. At the beginning of the story, Easy says, "I tried to think of better things. About our new Irish president and Martin Luther King; about how the world was changing, and a black man in America had the chance to be a man for the first time in hundreds of years" (45). The naming of Kennedy and King as metonyms of hope, within a national narrative that according to Easy had been unchanging for centuries, suggests that hope will soon be dashed. Just so, Easy's optimism quickly falters: "I wanted to feel better but all I had was the certainty that the world had passed me by—leaving me and my kind dead or making death in the dark causeways" (46). While acknowledging that hope is rooted and located in futurity, the Easy Rawlins novels document the emptiness of hope when the future is likely to be experienced by their characters in much the same way they experienced the past and are experiencing the present. The novels show that time measures at once changelessness and a particular sort of lived, laboring temporality for working-class and poor African American men. Being (black) is working in time, but it is also dying in time and over time.

Mortality undergirds modern philosophers' analyses of time. The limit of our existence, death itself, connotes temporality as well as the nature of human subjectivity. Heidegger in his definition of the individual human subject asserted that "no one can relieve the other of his own dying" (310). More recently Jacques Derrida observed in *The Gift of Death*: "Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given,' one can say, by death" (41). Although Easy Rawlins may not precisely relieve or undergo others' deaths, he does share the sense of always-possible and ever-present mortality with others of his "kind"—"leaving me and my kind dead or making death in the dark causeways"—to such a degree that his mode of being there in LA in 1961 challenges both philosophers' "given" that human subjectivity, human individuality, depends upon the unshareability of death. The result is a curious kind of atemporality, or *not* being in time; in other words, a lack of change over time collectively for poor black men in Los Angeles permits them even to "share death." Death becomes not a process of "singularity" (Derrida 41) but a process of collectivization, of community. This keen awareness of shared mortality—the predictability of one's own and one's comrades' deaths in and across time—is perhaps the most profound and stirring thematic thread in African American literature—and in African American history.

In his implicit challenge to modern philosophical understandings of time and subjectivity, humanity and mortality, Mosley's private detective participates in and complicates recent debates over the nature of time. Some contemporary philosophers have engaged and challenged the assertion—delivered by Aristotle at the outset of the Western philosophical tradition—that time is the measure of change

and that it cannot exist without change; others have upheld the notion that time is the dimension of change, while still others have questioned the very reality of time. The Easy Rawlins novels intervene in the abstractions of this debate by representing time in terms of day-to-day, physical, violent experiences in Watts. As Easy says in the 2004 installment, *Little Scarlet*, “[N]o matter how far back you remember, there’s a beatin’ there waiting for you” (48). This is not to say that Easy himself is static. He actually does change and learn, despite the seemingly unchanging nature of his social and racial surroundings. Over and against a model of temporal suspension and alterity, Easy Rawlins and the Easy Rawlins series—and, I conclude, African American literature as a whole—must also be seen as *coeval*, to use Johannes Fabian’s anthropological term (30)—that is, as fully inhabiting, shaping, and being shaped by present-day temporalities, cultures, economies, and canons.

The Easy Rawlins novels are quite clearly engaged in present-day aesthetic and national politics. His history *is* our present. For example, the plot of *Black Betty* turns on the disclosure of a secret interracial family. The title character, Betty, while employed as a maid by a wealthy white family, bore two children as a result of repeated rape, or at the very least coerced sex, by the family’s patriarch. This story should sound familiar to us. It was only relatively recently that US senator Strom Thurmond’s secret interracial family came to light; Essie Mae Washington Williams came forward only after the senator’s death in December 2003. The Easy Rawlins series thus travels back in time to recover and record a national genealogical history that really is not past at all.

Such a temporal-political dynamic—of the past inhabiting the present—occurs throughout the African American literary tradition. In the late eighteenth century Phillis Wheatley used the poetic forms of early eighteenth-century poets, establishing her mastery of them and thereby issuing a moral and political challenge to slaveholders. In the late nineteenth century, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins represented slave settings in Gothic and Romantic novel forms, thereby underscoring and protesting the ways that the postreconstruction era held African American people in the past. In the mid-twentieth century, Ann Petry and Richard Wright wrote naturalism, a literary mode associated with turn-of-the-century novels by Theodore Dreiser and Frank Morris, signaling how as of the 1940s many black people remained trapped in neighborhoods and workplaces more suited to a pre-reform era; in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Walter Mosley writes hard-boiled detective fiction, a form born of post-Depression misery, to comment on stasis and hopelessness in South Central LA.

In one of Mosley’s recent nonfiction books, the 2006 *Life Out of Context*, the first sentence reads: “This monograph was written over a very short period of time. It was a feverish episode in which I felt it necessary to uncover and articulate methods we could employ to make the world safer for the millions who are needlessly suffering” (1). Here Mosley is very much in the present tense; he is outlining a plan for *now*, for overcoming the past’s apparently relentless pull. As part of that plan, he advocates science fiction as a valuable “tool . . . in the realm of literature” (91) because it can “move your consciousness fifty years into the future or a hundred years back. From that point of view, we can look back (or forward) at ourselves. . . . The science fiction story is almost always a criticism of the lives we

are living today. . . . [Through it] we are able to question the contexts of our lives that have hitherto seemed absolute" (91, 93). In practically the same breath that he argues for science fiction, Mosley advises the "Black and Brown" citizens of South Central Los Angeles that they demand to be included on "city boards and town councils, federal and congressional fact-finding groups and police reviews" (82, 83). He concludes that "[o]ur place at the table is always a possibility, but if we never go there, we will never *be there*" (84; emphasis added).

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