

WHAT LIES BENEATH: AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AT THE BOTTOM OF EVERY CASE

*Agustín Reyes Torres
Universitat de Valencia*

Abstract

Walter Mosley has reappropriated and reconceived the detective genre into a vehicle for the continuation and display of African American cultural traditions. This essay shows how the Easy Rawlins novels not only critically explore the American society of the 1950s and 1960s but also extend popular African American literary conventions through the portrayal of black vernaculars, the art of Signifyin(g) and the representation of black folklore figures such as the trickster and the storyteller. Easy Rawlins is consequently a black hero whose attachment to the black community and to deep African American values and beliefs shape his identity, his use of English and his hostile perspective of the world.

Key words: African American culture, black vernaculars, black folklore, Walter Mosley, Easy Rawlins, identity.

Resumen

Walter Mosley se apropia de la novela de detectives y la usa como marco literario para mostrar las tradiciones culturales de los negros en Estados Unidos. Este ensayo presenta como las novelas de Easy Rawlins no solo constituyen una crítica de la sociedad norteamericana de los años 1950 y 1960, sino también una representación, y una continuación, de ciertos aspectos culturales tradicionales dentro de la literatura afroamericana como el uso oral del lenguaje, el arte de “connotar” diferentes significados a través de las palabras, y el uso de figuras pertenecientes al folclore negro como el embaucador y el contador de cuentos. Easy Rawlins es así un héroe negro cuya identidad y forma de pensar vienen determinados por su conexión con la comunidad afroamericana, sus valores y sus creencias.

Palabras clave: Cultura afroamericana, folclore negro, lenguaje, Walter Mosley, Easy Rawlins, identidad.

The manner in which culture has been acquired
lives on in the manner of using it.

Pierre Bourdieu

The presence of a strong black culture in Walter Mosley's detective fiction represents a crucial factor in the shaping of his hero Easy Rawlins as a black private eye. Blues, black vernaculars and specific aspects of black traditional folklore such as the art of Signifyin(g) and the representation of the figures of the trickster and the storyteller provide a cultural frame for Easy Rawlins' stories within the America of the 1950s and 1960s. Together they establish a firm reference for the protagonist to observe and comprehend the world, and therefore constitute a central element in his education as a black individual throughout the ten novels in which he appears. Although there are many different black cultures in various parts of the world, the term *black culture* will be used in this case with an African American paradigm in mind to discuss Mosley's portrayal of such a culture in the Easy Rawlins series. This essay will comment on Mosley's use of the detective conventions, the meaning of culture and what cultural aspects distinguish African Americans according to their past, their traditions and daily life. Next, it will explore the author's representations of black vernaculars and black folklore as a key factor in Easy's consciousness as an African American. As will be shown, linguistic and dialectic differences due to the ethnicity, history and segregation of the black community in the U.S. directly contribute to the creation and development of the black culture. This can be seen through Easy Rawlins' use of English and the way he relates and interacts with his friends and other black members of his neighborhood in Watts, Los Angeles. Definitely, all these elements illustrate Mosley's interest in creating a literary work that goes beyond the category of mystery or detective fiction. The Easy Rawlins series constitutes, in fact, a major representation and continuation of black cultural traditions in African American contemporary literature.

Like other African American intellectuals, in his work, Mosley has endeavored to find narrative and theoretical alternatives which would allow for the creation of an African American subject through which to articulate their experience, their history and their culture. In this way, as indicated by John G. Cawelti in his essay "Detecting the Detective," the adaptation of detective conventions to define and represent a particular culture has become a common practice in the last decades:

Whatever may be the reasons for the detective story's remarkable popularity since Poe created it over a hundred years ago, one of the genre's central features is the kind of light it sheds on particular cultures. The criminal act disrupts the social fabric, and the detective must use his unique investigative skills to sew it back together again. In the process, the skillful writer can reveal certain aspects of a culture that otherwise remain hidden, and this may be one reason the genre has increasingly proliferated into the representation of different national, regional, and ethnic cultures. (Cawelti 2006)

Using the detective genre to their own ends and in contrast to the accepted conventions of classical and hardboiled detective traditions, especially those popularized by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Ross Macdonald in the U.S. in the 1930s and 40s, African American authors have challenged and altered those conventions to create their own version of the detective persona. Easy, like other black private eyes such as PaPa LaBas in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), or Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones in Chester Hime's Harlem detective series, is portrayed as having some peculiar cultural traits that distinguish him from the typical hardboiled sleuth. Not only does he have a different set of priorities but he also shares a sense of community and family that the mainstream white detective does not have. For this reason, along with his constant criticism of white America, Mosley's detective fiction, like Chester Himes', becomes in fact a counterdiscourse in which the people from the margins of society come to be represented.¹

In spite of this, there is no question that Easy's profile as a hardboiled detective is inescapably attached to the usual hardboiled formula fully established by Chandler in his essay "The Simple Art of Murder" (1950). If we look, for example, at Chandler's description of the private eye, we can see that Easy's representation as a detective responds in many ways to these formerly stated characteristics. Chandler specifies:

[...] down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a

¹ In this regard, it is possible to trace Walter Mosley's detective fiction not only to Chester Himes' novels but also to the work of black writers such as *Black Sleuth* (1908) by John E. Bruce and *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932) by Rudolph Fisher. Likewise, Mosley's writing style and approach to popular African American issues such as the discrimination, segregation and injustices that many members of the black community endured in the 1950s and 60s in America situate him among celebrated black American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, *et al.*

common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor –by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (1950:78)

Reading this quote closely and applying it to Easy Rawlins, there is no doubt that he, like Phillip Marlow in Chandler's, is "everything" in Mosley's stories. He is the main protagonist and the hero. That is the reason why the whole series has been identified with his name and appears on most covers of the books: they read "An Easy Rawlins novel." In the same way, Mosley frequently conveys the idea that his detective is a "complete" man in many aspects of his life: he is independent, able to carry out any task in any field regardless of its difficulty.

In addition, he is presented as a "common" but an "unusual" man. This contrast is clearly given in his personality. On the one hand, he is humble and considers himself another black person in his community; just one more that emigrated from Texas to Los Angeles. On the other hand, his wit and his outlook on the world makes him somehow different from the rest, and his lifestyle does not entirely conform to the norm because he is a single black man with two adopted children that apparently works as a janitor but who also does his own business on the side as an entrepreneur, and of course, as a private investigator. He is therefore "unusual." As for his "honor," he definitely commits to the word he gives and has a reputation for being fair and doing justice. For this reason, he is considered in the black community as a dependable man and many the members of the community go to him asking for *favours*. This is, in fact, how his job as an amateur detective starts. In this view, it seems reasonable to say that he is good enough for this world.

According to the critic Andrew Pepper, Mosley has changed the Anglo detective into an investigator who is part of a socially marginalized group and is perceived as a positive figure by most members of his community (1999:242). "This does not mean," Pepper explains, "that he functions like some kind of morally pure state-sponsored henchman, but simply that in his refusal to capitulate to authority and in his dogged determination to uncover what has really happened, he usually comes across as an attractive figure" (1999:242). In this case, Easy, unlike other white detectives such as Phillip Marlowe or Sam Spade, will not be entirely in control of his actions because as a black man during a period of strong social discrimination he bears the burden of class inferiority. As an African American, Easy plays the role of the underdog. As explained by Robert Hopper, he is an example of the development of intergroup attitudes and the differences in social privilege that were present in American

society at the time (1986:8). The law and the entire justice system were biased. Thus, living in a society dominated by whites, Easy's "status as an African American means that he is constantly torn between what he must do in order to survive and what he feels might be in the best interest of his specific community" (Pepper 1999:246). Walter Mosley imbues his protagonist with all the characteristics that any other detective might have with the crucial difference that, as a private black "eye," he "sees" the world from the perspective of an African American: this denotes and carries underneath it a central cultural distinction.

The concept of culture has been studied and discussed from many perspectives. Culture has been conceptualized as a code (Philipsen 1987), that is, as a system of meanings and ideals. Philipsen defines culture as "a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings, premises, routines, procedures, and rules [that] is *suis generis*" (1989:260). In the same line as Philipsen, Carbaugh characterizes culture on the basis of four assumptions. The first assumption contends "culture is a system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings" (1990:19). It is not words and meanings that constitute culture; rather, culture is constituted by particular systems or clusters of symbols.

The second assumption about culture explains "culture systems have integrative and transformative potential" (Carbaugh 1990:19). Culture is integrative in the sense that it enables a certain group of people to generate shared meaning. As B. J. Hall explicates,

[culture allows people to] participate in the emotive world of a community, and coordinate potentially diverse lines of action by integrating named entities into a recognizable whole. Culture is also integrative in that it binds generations together (future and past), not through forced stagnancy, but through a continual, yet cohesive change. (1992:55)

New meanings are created on the basis of the already existing system, thus leading the culture in a certain direction. This is clearly seen in Mosley's representation of the black community and the connection that exists among those African Americans that migrated from Texas to Los Angeles. While there is a gradual change between generations, they still also maintain a strong sense of unity and belonging.

The third assumption poses "the culture system is mutually intelligible, commonly accessible, and deeply felt" (Carbaugh 1990:20). A particular cultural pattern is mutually intelligible only if the members of the concrete cultural group deem it to be meaningful. A cultural pattern has to be easily accessible to the members of the culture. However, that does not mean that

everybody uses the pattern, it is simply that it has to be available to them. Hence, once a cultural pattern is found to be intelligible and accessible to the members of the group, the last requirement is that the members feel it intensely. This cultural pattern has to hold a deep symbolic meaning (Carbaugh 1988). In Easy's case, since he is an orphan, his lack of relatives makes him establish strong bonds with certain members of the black community. As will be shown, he considers them his family. The fourth and last assumption explains how "culture is historically grounded" (Carbaugh 1990:20). Culture is not the history of a symbol, but it is grounded in historical symbolic forms and their meanings. Historically grounded in the minds of many African Americans like Easy Rawlins are their experiences of marginalization and the memories of their ancestors who suffered from slavery. The fact that Easy constantly denounces this past of oppression in his stories reveals how this thought is permanently present in his mind.

In his work on African American detective fiction, Stephen F. Soitos argues for the evidence of a distinct African American culture based on the novels of black detective writers such as Pauline Hopkins, J.E. Bruce, Rudolph Fisher, Chester Himes, Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major (1996:3). What these authors have in common is the inclusion of cultural patterns in their detective novels that not only reflect the existence of a strong African American culture in the United States, they also reveal the deep influence of such a culture in the training of the African American detectives and their outlook of the world.

Having been for many years a question of controversy whether or not African Americans have a culture of their own, renowned black critics (African and African Americans) such as Melville Herskovits, Robert Blauner, Ralph Ellison and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have found that African American traditions differ widely from white American ones. Also, they affirm that certain African heritages can indeed be found in current African American culture. The anthropologist Herskovits in his work *The New World Negro* (1966) affirms: "Music, folklore, magic, and religion on the whole, have retained more of their African character than economic life, or technology, or art, while language and social structures based on kinship and free association tend to vary through all the degrees of intensity that are noted" (qtd. in Soitos 1996:7). Herskovits considers this result to have been accomplished through a process of reinterpretation and syncretism that included "the interpretation of white cultural patterns according to African principles, [and] the amalgamation of African and American cultural patterns and sign systems" (qtd. in Soitos 1996:7). A clear example of this amalgamation, as will be further developed later in this essay, is the very figure of Easy Rawlins himself; he is a hybrid

detective who combines the traits of the white and the black sleuth, and furthermore, who moves across white and black cultural boundaries to succeed in his investigations. He is what Soitos symbolically calls a Blues detective.

Similarly, Robert Blauner in his essay “Black Culture: Myth or Reality?” (1972), argues that the development of a distinctive African American culture began with slavery itself. At that time, the black population went through a process of resistance and assimilation that later on would be expressed through language, music and dance (Soitos 1996:8). In this line of argument, Ralph Ellison (1964) also pointed the way toward a multidisciplinary cultural approach:

“American Negro culture” is expressed in a body of folklore, in the musical forms of the spirituals, the blues and the jazz; and idiomatic versions of American speech (especially in the Southern United States); a cuisine; a body of dance forms and even a dramaturgy which is generally unrecognized as such because still tied to the more folkish Negro churches. (Qtd. in Soitos 1996:8)

Without a doubt all these elements can be found in the Rawlins series. Mosley has created an Easy Rawlins who grew up in Texas and once in L.A. can quickly recognize who is or who is not a black Southerner based on his manners, his accent, or his speech.

Lastly, according to Henry Louis Gates in his work *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), language was transformed by African Americans into a unique art through “Signifyin(g).” Black difference is manifested in specific language use, incorporating oral traditions and establishing specific linguistic conventions (xxii). Gates considers this a non-Western rhetorical strategy that distinguishes the work of many African American writers. For Stephen Soitos, “Signifying is an African American language act whose characteristics include irony, humor, and circumlocution. Above all, it is a language act with a message” (1996:159). At the same time, as the critic John Cullen Gruesser highlights, Gates rejects “both a purely discursive and a strictly political and/or essential definition of African American writing in favor of one that combines both of these elements” (1999:237). This type of language made into art is known as “black vernacular” which is also, as Soitos indicates, “closely connected in cultural context to the general term ‘folklore’” (1996:11). In fact, Gates argues that his theory of Signifyin(g) is rooted in the black vernacular tradition. According to Gruesser: “It is a counterdiscursive strategy associated with the African American trickster figure [...] which ultimately derives from the Yoruba trickster and messenger of gods, Esu-Elegbara” (1999:238). In the same way, Gates considers that one of the best definitions is that of Roger D. Abrahams. For him,

“the name ‘Signifying Monkey’ shows the hero to be a trickster, ‘signifying’ being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at direction through indirection” (qtd. in Gates 1988:74). Likewise, another critic, Tommy L. Lott (1999), labels Signifyin(g) as the black vernacular that “refers primarily to the oral and paralinguistic activity of the speakers of a black dialect” (85). This black dialect (also called black English) is a definite cultural attribute used by black writers to differentiate their texts. The existence of this particular use of language in the Easy Rawlins novels reveals Mosley’s intention to imbue his work and his characters with a distinguishable African American flavor. Moreover, the use of black English certainly results in the creation of a particular black culture. This is what Mosley represents as happening in Easy’s black community: the transformation from language into culture.

Black dialect portrayed in literature can be studied under the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf’s theory which claims that “the world can’t be separated from the language used to talk about it” (qtd. in Agar 1994:66). This means that the speaker’s language shapes the way he or she sees reality. Edward Sapir, who was Whorf’s teacher and research collaborator, explains:

Human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society [...] The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits as a group [...] We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Qtd. in Agar 1994:66)

Consequently, if black dialect is considered to be part of black culture, and it is language which instinctively constructs the individual’s way of thinking, it is evident then the crucial role that black vernaculars play in the education of Easy Rawlins as an African American hero.

Additionally, Soitos points out that there are other types of African American cultural expressions that can also be regarded as black vernacular:

Black vernaculars in detective fiction are major factors in differentiating black detective texts from other detective texts. By black vernaculars I mean specific expressive arts of black Americans that form part of their culture and are derived from the folk tradition. The vernaculars most common to detective fiction are music/dance, black language, and black cuisine. (1996:37)

Mosley illustrates his portrayal of the black community in L.A. with black vernaculars such as blues and jazz, language use, food and the presence of voodoo practice and voodoo tradition. All these elements contribute to the

formation of specific cultural worldviews in Easy Rawlins' that obviously affect his understanding of the world. In fact, they are part of his development as the assimilation of a particular ideology. By ideology, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (1998) refer to the "process of cultural signification and personal formation that cannot be summed up merely as 'ruling ideas.' It also consists of training in certain practices or certain modes of self-identification" (237). If, as John Fiske (1991) points out, the individual is produced by nature and the subject is constructed by culture (qtd. in Rivkin 1998:238), the black vernaculars constitute a form of life and cultural expression that show, as Walter Mosley depicts in his series, the way by which African Americans, and Easy Rawlins specifically, are unconsciously determined by their cultural background.

But Soitos takes his approach one step further. According to him, Mosley's portrayal of African American speech and a particular vocabulary concerned with the portrayal of black American cultural practices represent the vernacular tradition in black expressive arts (1996:xii). These vernacular creations are not only limited to language. They also take into consideration other types of art originated in black folklore. Soitos develops a comprehensive explanation of how the combination of the detective formula and black vernaculars (that includes the black folk culture) produces what he labels, as mentioned before, the "Blues detective." In fact, this is also the title of his book on the study of African American detective fiction.

Basing his arguments on Keith Byerman's definition of black folklore (1994), Soitos offers a view of African American culture that is generally portrayed in the hardboiled detective novels written by black authors:

Black folk culture is used in this study in a very broad sense to mean both the history of the black masses and the primarily oral forms of expression that have developed over that history. These forms comprise blues; jazz; spirituals; sermons, toasts, the dozens; cautionary tales; trickster tales; legends; memorates; rural and urban speech patterns; folk beliefs such as voodoo, conjure, and superstition; [and the presence of] folk characters. (qtd. in Soitos 1996:11)

As will be shown, Mosley's work includes most of these cultural aspects. In this sense, Byerman's description totally fits with the way the black novelist uses the concept of black folklore to portray the influence of it in Easy's daily life. In the first four novels of the series in particular, the main cultural aspects that can be explored are Easy's peculiar way of enacting the black vernaculars (including his own insightful observations on the matter), and his appreciation of his friend Mouse's skills as a storyteller.

Almost immediately in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley establishes how the African Americans' speech patterns are different from White Americans' ones. He does it through Easy's awareness and comments on the matter but also portraying repeatedly plenty of dialogues in which black dialect is easily recognized. Indeed, the speech differences between black and standard dialects are not merely a matter of grammatical structures or particular utterances; they are in addition the result of the distinct spheres of ideological life immersed in the dynamics of language. According to Bakhtin (1981), "the linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments" (281). Linguistic differences carry underneath them the connotations of social contrast and racial distinction. Languages are socio-ideological (Bakhtin 272). Thus, as Helen Lock (2001) indicates, "despite Easy Rawlins' education, which he values, and his command of standard English, he finds it inadequate as a means of functioning verbally in the world that he inhabits" (79). Having the option to choose between the two variants of English he is acquainted with, Easy picks the black dialect to express himself. His decision signals where he stands ideologically. Easy himself explains: "I always tried to speak proper English in my life, the kind of English they taught in school, but I found over the years that I could only truly express myself in the natural, 'uneducated' dialect of my upbringing" (Mosley 1990:10). The ways in which we speak reveal our consciousness and the ways we see reality. Easy's preference symbolizes his subversion and refusal to adopt the language of those who have categorized him as inferior.

On the other hand, the fact that Easy in the previous quote uses the word "uneducated" to refer to the black Southern way of speaking English denotes how the white discourse has stereotyped what is considered good and bad English. His own interpretation situates him as the colonized subject that has learned out of experience that the right way of speaking is the white way. As Hopper argues "if speakers of a common language [English in this case] experience 'dialect differences,' these frequently become associated with social problems, especially intergroup conflict and discrimination among unequal-power groups" (1986:1). Easy is aware of the connotations associated with such dialects. The speech differences between white and black Americans reflect both social discrimination and the existence of standard and substandard variants of English. This circumstance, according to Hopper, triggers what he calls "the shibboleth schema," a set of listening habits that is understood and

shared by underdogs and favorites that frequently appear in atmospheres of intergroup hostility (1986:4). In such a context, communication becomes the domain for discriminative action. Any utterance is measured and subject to comparison. Hopper further comments how some scholars before him such as Williams and associates (1976), found in their research that speech seemed more nonstandard to listeners if the speaker was pictured as a black child, rather than a Caucasian. He states that “we do not passively listen to someone’s voice, we actively construct and reconstruct our impressions of it according to our predispositions” (Hopper 1986:4). American society has developed a consciousness of the listener, a language attitude, by which African Americans’ dialect is regarded as inferior. Ironically though, the fact is that, as Hopper explains, “in the USA, twenty years of detailed research in Black and Caucasian dialects has unearthed [that] the differences between US and UK speech are much larger than those between Blacks and Caucasians. Why are US-UK differences a minor social problem? Simply because they are not fanned by polarization or intergroup hostility” (1986:7). Racism emerges as the reason for the establishment of prejudice in the perception of different dialects of English. “It is,” Hopper concludes, “a listening-interpretation problem more than a speech difference problem” (1986:8). In view of that, it is possible to affirm that language socially constructs the individual’s subjectivity, his/her way of thinking and his/her attitude towards particular speech patterns. In this respect, as Whorf (1956) puts it, “a change in language can transform our appreciation of the cosmos” (263). Easy’s initial attempt to speak standard English thus represented a much larger change than he could have imagined. Consequently, he soon realized the impossibility of his goal. His attempt clashed with his “natural” way of expressing himself and being himself.

On a different level but also related with the representation of language as a trademark of the African American identity and its connection to black folklore, is Easy’s admiration for Mouse’s skills as a storyteller. Mosley expresses his own interest to include in the novels the oral aspects of the black tradition that he saw as a child in his black community. Moreover, as critics often indicate, the figure of the storyteller, together with the trickster or the badman, belongs unmistakably to black folklore. In this way, Easy and Mouse are characters whose abilities to tell stories, trick, or outwit established authority fit in with the concept of the black vernaculars defined previously by Byerman. As the following quote in *A Red Death* reveals, the presence of storytelling was extended among the community and deeply rooted in people’s lives as a way of diversion. Easy narrates:

People from other tables leaned away from their drinks to hear what he had to say [...] Mouse was a master storyteller [...] The men around were all laughing. Most people there were from Texas originally, but many of them didn't know Mouse. They laughed because they loved a well-told lie. And Raymond didn't mind, because he liked to make people laugh. (Mosley 1991:56-57)

“Lies” here stand for tales. For the African American community, the best liar is also the best storyteller. According to Alice Mills (2000),

The badman of African American folklore takes advantage of the retelling of his exploits in order to embellish them. In this, he resembles most closely the African trickster who above all else is a master of words. Thus, the more the badman's boasting is an obvious transfiguration of reality, the closer he is to the gods and the more his prestige increases in the eyes of his audience. Mouse willingly embraces this tradition and spreads the most incredible stories of his own virility and of the beatings he has inflicted on his rivals in love. Mouse is entirely conscious of his gift for rendering believable the highly improbable and takes lying beyond practical matters in the realm of art, a dazzling show free to all comers. He makes a thoroughly unselfish gift of this art to the community so that others too can dream and laugh. (31)

Easy identifies Mouse with the most genuine aspects of the black community. His irrational acts and behavior accompany him all the way through the novels. For this reason, another critic, Mary Young, considers that everything in this character, even his nickname which is also deceptive and also conceals the true nature of his personality, comes from traditional black folklore (1998:149).

On the other hand, the word “culture” also acquires throughout the Easy Rawlins series a broader sense related to an anthropological perspective. Undoubtedly, this is the other way Mosley illustrates the meaning of culture when representing the African American community throughout his novels. Using Rivkin and Ryan's definition, this concept refers to:

The way people behave while eating, talking with each other, becoming sexual partners, interacting at work, engaging in ritualized social behavior such as family gatherings, and the like [...] This broader definition of the term includes language and the arts, but it also includes the regularities, procedures, and rituals of human life in communities. (1998:1025)

As the epigraph of this essay quotes, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) indicates, that “the manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it” (qtd. in Rivkin 1998:1028). The weight of home background and other cultural practices learned within the community distinguish the black individual

and have a decisive influence on his or her approach to society. In this sense, the idea of community represents what Thomas Bender (1978) defines as “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds” (qtd. in Kolchin 1983:601). In other words, community turns out to be an experience rather than a place.

In this regard, my next focus of attention is to discuss Easy’s constant references to the black community in L.A. and how this constitutes a clear influence in the formation of his identity. From the very beginning of his narration in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Easy indicates how he is acquainted with many members of his Texas community: “When I opened the door I was slapped in the face by the force of Lips’ alto horn. I had been hearing Lips and Willie and Flattop since I was a boy in Houston. All of them and John and half the people in that crowded room had migrated from Houston after the war, and some before that” (Mosley 27). Not only have these people brought their customs and cultural traditions with them such as the music or the telling of stories: “He told me a few stories, the kind of tales that we called ‘lies’ back home in Texas” (Mosley 21), but they also represent an important social network of friends and acquaintances that will appear throughout the series. This explains why whenever Easy goes to investigate any place in the black neighborhoods he has contacts everywhere.

In addition, Easy also acknowledges how some of those friends in his community have been like family to him since he was orphaned. In *Black Betty* (1994), he explains: “If it hadn’t been for Martin and Odell I would have died when I was a boy. They had taken me into their homes and fed me when there was nothing but cold and hunger outside” (Mosley 52). Likewise, he also comments about John, another one of his old friends, “I’d known John for over twenty-five years, from Texas to L.A.; from speakeasy to legitimate bar” (Mosley 1994:66). Easy continuously brings up his strong relationship with the black community. Despite living in California now, he considers that certain Southern aspects remain exactly the same. In this way, it is noteworthy that in the quote below, Easy uses the term “transplanted” to emphasize the idea of preserving specific African American customs: “As I got to know L.A. over the years I found myself roaming outside my native black community, a community that had been transplanted from southern Texas and Louisiana” (Mosley 1994:37). Likewise, we see here how Easy assumes the existence of other communities in the metropolis. As he explains, for his investigations sometimes he will have to cross the color lines, that is, the cultural or physical boundaries of the city. Each community is then like a different world and Easy is aware of this. On this note, as Andrew Pepper indicates, “Mosley seems to be suggesting

that African American culture and identity has evolved not simply as a result of interaction between and among African Americans but syncretically, in relation to other influences, other cultures, other communities” (2000:130). As the novels advance, Easy does realize that there are changes taking place within the community. By 1961, after being in Los Angeles for more than 13 years, he points out for example that “Mofas was from the old days when there was a black community almost completely sealed off from whites” (Mosley 1994:107). This observation confirms that the community is now more open. Accordingly, Easy’s education is also subject to the multicultural aspects that any of the different ethnic communities brought to L.A.

Yet for now, focusing exclusively on those traits that characterize the black community, Mosley presents a series of cultural aspects with which Easy is engaged and are related with the way black men interact and understand a specific system of meanings and symbols. Carbaugh considers that cultural patterns are developed when the members of the culture feel it deeply and follow it almost unconsciously. In this way, Samuel Coale (2000) points out that however marginal as it was in comparison with the mainstream white culture, the black community also had “its own rules, cues, customs, and conceits” (180). We see for instance how when Easy goes to the typical barbershop in the Watts neighborhood, he highlights: “You had to be tough to be a barber because your place was the center of business for a certain element in the community. Gamblers, numbers runners, and all sorts of other private businessmen met in the barbershop. The barbershop was like a social club. And any social club had to have order to run smoothly” (Mosley 1990:133). The way of interacting with one another, the behavior, the tacit understanding of certain rules and certain established social expectations that Easy and the rest of the community members instinctively follow reflect the existence of a cultural African American background.

Easy’s observations about an African American lifestyle based on Southern customs constitute the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of historical, social and cultural experiences of black subjects. In *A Red Death* (1991), not only does he show, as Coale notes that “black men often congregate in bars and barbershops, in pool rooms and on the streets” (Mosley 180); he also makes a significant reference to the level of poverty of many of them:

At central and Ninety-Ninth Street a group of men sat around talking –they were halfheartedly waiting for work. It was a habit that some southerners brought with them; they’d just sit outside on a crate somewhere and wait for someone who needed manual labor to come by and shout their name. That way they could spend the afternoon with their friends, drinking from brown

paper bags and shooting dice. They might even get lucky and pick up a job worth a couple of bucks –and maybe their kids would have meat that night. (Mosley 1991:7)

It is 1953. Culture and poverty go hand in hand for many African Americans in Los Angeles. Trades of which the black men had practical control in their Southern home such as a carpenter or a mason are not open to them here. They naturally take their stand among the poor, and in the homes of the poor (Ducas 1970:374). Easy's education is deeply affected by this image of unemployment and low income among his people. According to historian Ron Eyerman, although

family incomes were increasing generally in the United States in the 1950s, black families continued not only to lag behind whites, but to worsen in comparison. Black families earned 54 percent of the median income of their white counterparts in 1950, and this increased to 57 percent in 1952, only to drop back to 52 percent in 1958. (2001:175)

These conditions coupled with the historical patterns of racial discrimination explain the disproportionate concentration of blacks in the underclass. As Walter R. Allen and Reynolds Farley (1986) indicate, in much of the country, “blacks could not attend the same schools, eat at the same restaurants, or stay at the same hotels as whites. Black Americans were also denied opportunities in education and employment and, in Southern states, their voting rights” (278). Throughout the novels, Walter Mosley strongly denounces the social and economic circumstances under which the black community lives in the 50s. Indeed he succeeds in drawing such an accurate and vivid picture of the African American way of life that we can actually understand how all these different cultural, social, political, and economic strings come together in the novels to determine the context that shapes Easy's mind. His personality, his fears, his dreams, his obsessions and certainly his existentialist perspective of life are the natural product of the African American environment he has experienced since he was a boy: “Before I found a home in Houston I was a wild boy riding the rails. No mother, no father. Just enough clothes to keep me decent and ten cents less than I needed to survive” (Mosley 1994:18). The continuous indications to his past always denote the lack of means that so deeply affected his later decision to leave Texas and live the life he currently has in Los Angeles.

In conclusion, and going back to Soitos' association between black culture and black detective fiction, this study of the Easy Rawlins' series has shown how Mosley strives to incorporate into his work a deeper understanding of the integral aspects of the African American culture; first, in the evident influence

of it in Easy Rawlins' growth as a black man, and then, in his detective work. His cultural background, as well as the presence of a relocated African American community in Los Angeles, shape his identity, his way of solving crimes, and his critical outlook of society. There is no doubt that Easy's connection with deep African American values and beliefs determine his perspective and his understanding of the world. Moreover, we can see a major representation of the art of signifying through Easy's characterization and also through Mosley's entire novelistic work itself. Not only does he recreate aspects of the black culture that otherwise would remain hidden but he also fulfills Gates' expectation on how African American writing must reflect the black vernaculars that distinguish it. It is language that keeps culture alive and makes it evolve. Here we are talking about the portrayal of the black vernaculars, the African American English dialect, the uses and circumlocution of the oral language and the black folklore. Mosley's Easy Rawlins series thus reveals the creativity of endowing old images with new meanings, subverting the traditional hardboiled conventions and creating a new discourse as part of the contemporary cultural expression of African Americans. As Mary Young, Alice Mills and Samuel Coale concur, the Easy Rawlins novels constitute a clear example of the reappropriation of the detective canon to display singular aspects of ethnicity related with the black community in the United States. According to Young, Mosley "has created a unique hero from an African American perspective through his exploration of Black culture" (1998:141); Mills points out that Easy, as a narrator, "raises complex questions about a person's duties towards his cultural community and country" (2000:23). Lastly, Coale affirms that "within the confines of the traditional formula, Mosley creates his labyrinthine and loyalty-bound black community" (2000:179). As the novels progress, Easy's allusions to his African American community either when he was in Texas or later, when a great part of it migrated to Los Angeles, are constant. Through them, Mosley enables us to see Easy's cultural attachment to a group of people to whom he often refers as "my people." He shares with them concrete cultural patterns that bind current and past cultural traditions together and, in addition, hold underneath a deep symbolic meaning of origin and belonging (Carbaugh 1988). "I always talk about down home like it really was home" (Mosley 1994:109). By far, in every case, Easy's outlook and perspectives are shaped by this cultural background.

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Author's contact: Agustin.Reyes@uv.es