Black Justice: Walter Mosley's History Writing/Righting Project in *Little Scarlet*

錢欽昭/ Chyan, Chin-Jau

淡江大學英文學系 助理教授

Department of English, Tamkang University

【摘要】

本論文旨在探討犯罪小說作者瓦特墨斯理在其作品《小紅》中如何處理種族正義的議題。墨斯理挪用白人私探小說敘事傳統，取回發言權，不但瓦解白人的凝視，亦重新聚焦種族他者的歷史與生活經驗。偵探主角置身洛杉磯華茲暴動歷史事件中，試圖尋找暴動的原因，也紀錄一段被主流社會忽略的歷史。暴動的受害者小紅無法再為自己發聲，但是偵探不斷努力重建她的生命與故事。換言之，墨斯理重新書寫了一段豐富多彩的洛杉磯黑人歷史，也為美國社會紛擾的種族關係提供洞見與未來方向。

【關鍵詞】

瓦特墨斯理、《小紅》、華茲種族暴動、黑人偵探、私探小說傳統、暴力

【Abstract】

This paper aims to examine how Walter Mosley deals with racial justice in his crime novel, *Little Scarlet*. In appropriating the language of a racially problematic genre and reclaiming the "fictional I," Mosley makes his protagonist disrupt the white gaze and calls attention to the existence and experience of the racial other, which has been excluded from and rendered demonic in mainstream American society. Situating his hero in the historical Watts race riots, Mosley tries to look for answers to the destructive violence and chronicles a different version of the history. Little Scarlet, the murder victim, is unable to speak for herself, but she is never absent in the narrative. Mosley's fictional investigation into the riots not only reconstructs a rich and complex history of black L.A. but also helps shed light on race relations in America.

【Keywords】

Walter Mosley, *Little Scarlet*, Watts race riots, black detective, private eye tradition, violence

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the L.A. riots, Rodney King, the legendary victim of the abuse of power by the LAPD, was interviewed by the L.A. Times to recall his experience of the chaos in the street: "It felt almost like we were headed to Armageddon.... It wasn't just police brutality. It was the way people were being treated over the years." The interviewer also asked the sensitive question, which must have haunted King for years: "And the video of the beating—does it seem now like watching someone else?" "No," said King, "because I remembered the pain" (Morrison "Rodney").1 It has been half a century since the Civil Rights Act was passed in the U.S. Congress, but it would be naïve to suggest that black Americans have been freed from racial injustice and the controlling gaze of white society. In a situation like King's, how does a black citizen deal with the anger, frustration, and powerlessness which have historically accompanied the majority of African Americans in their day-to-day life?[2] And how does one manage to ease the unspeakable pain, both bodily and psychic? These are the questions that Walter Mosley, one of the most high-profile black crime writers in America, has tried to address in his fiction. As the child of an interracial marriage composed of a black father from Louisiana and a white Jewish mother from Poland, Mosley has known how it feels to be marginalized. His protagonist has said that Jews understand the plight of blacks because "in Europe the Jew had been a Negro for more than a thousand years" (*Devil* 123) After gaining a degree in political science at a college in Vermont, Mosley worked as a computer programmer for ten years. He started writing when he was thirty-nine, and has distinguished himself in the realm of crime fiction

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[1] On March 3, 1991, the twenty-four year old black motorist Rodney King was stopped by the L.A. police on a dark street. He was pulled out from his car and beaten mercilessly by four white police officers. A bystander happened to videotape the incident and sent it to the media, which then intensified the already strained racial relations in the city. In the next year, when the four officers were acquitted of charges of police brutality, riots broke out in the city, leaving fifty people dead, thousands injured, and numerous properties destroyed. See Regan Morris, "L.A. Riots."

[2] While some believe that the Rodney King beating and the riots have forced the L.A. police to change its racist culture (Morris "L.A. Riots"), others voice their grave concerns about the still damaging impact of structural racism. In *The New Jim Crow* (2012), Michelle Alexander focuses on the criminal justice system, arguing that the Justice Department's War on Drugs has targeted black males, depriving them of their rights to future employment, education, housing, public benefits, and even vote. Alexander contends that America has never ended its "racial caste" but merely "redesigned" it.

with eleven novels and one short story collection to date featuring his black private eye, Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins. His popularity was in part acknowledged by Bill Clinton, who publicly named Mosley as one of his favorite authors. Since the publication of his first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley's creation of the L.A.-based detective has allowed him to probe into the racial politics of the private eye genre and color-coded justice in mainstream American society.

In *Little Scarlet*, the eighth installment of Mosley's crime series, the story begins on August 15, 1965, five days after the outbreak of the controversial Watts race riots. Watts, the place where Mosley was born, is a predominantly black neighborhood in the south central part of Los Angeles. On August 11, 1965, the arrest of the black Frey bothers by the L.A. police on the ground of drunk driving triggered a five-day violence, ending with thirty-four people dead, twenty-five of them black, more than one thousand wounded, and an estimate of forty million in property damage (Reitman and Landsberg A1). When the "acrid stench of burnt plastic" is still lingering in the street, Easy Rawlins, an unlicensed detective with an unofficial office in Watts, is approached by the white police to help them solve the murder of a young black woman—the thirty-fourth victim of the riots. Witnessing the chaos, fear, and distrust among people brought about by the tragic disturbance, Easy struggles to make sense of what has happened to his neighborhood while helping his friends and neighbors survive the hard times.

This paper aims to examine how Mosley makes use of the language of a racially problematic genre and reclaims the "fictional I," which is crucial to the generic tradition of private eye fiction. In doing so, the black protagonist not only disrupts the white gaze but also calls attention to the existence and life experience of the racial other, which has been excluded from and rendered demonic in mainstream American society. Situating his hero in the historical Watts riots, Mosley tries to look for answers to the destructive violence and chronicles a different version of the history. He also unmasks the stark reality of the southern blacks' pursuit for the illusive California dream while exposing the spatial hierarchy and dystopia cityscape of Los Angeles. The detective's investigation into violence allows us to see that the riots were caused by institutional racism and economic exploitation, the very product of systemic violence inflicted upon the so-called rioters. Although black detectives have

been known to exploit their racially produced invisibility, the eruption of the riots makes Easy hyper visible whenever he operates outside black L.A. This paper argues that Mosley gives up this deceptive invisibility in *Little Scarlet* because it is time for everyone to acknowledge and respect the existence of racial others. Little Scarlet, the murder victim, is unable to speak for herself, but she is never absent in the narrative. Mosley's history writing/righting task not only reconstructs a rich and complex history of black L.A. but also helps shed light on race relations for future America.

Racial Politics in Crime Fiction

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison argues that the images of many celebrated American literary heroes were constructed at the expense of a black population which was "manifestly unfree." Whiteness serves as the superior and dominant cultural norms while glossing over its dependency on racial others. As Morrison notes,

> These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (5)

Likewise, the fashioning of the detective hero in American crime fiction relies on the existence of the fearful and treacherous Africanist counterparts. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," one of the three classic detective stories created by Edgar Allan Poe, the pioneering detective, C. Auguste Dupin, proves his analytical power in solving a sensational murder case involving the brutal deaths of a white mother and a daughter. The perpetrator of the crime is not a human but a brute, an ape escaping from the apartment of its captor, a sailor. What is significant about the case, as Charles Rzepka points out, lies in the disturbing association of the beast with African Americans (81-83). In her study of the historical background of this short story, Elise Lemire indicates that the intrusion of the ape into the women's chamber is symbolic of the

racist fears of black-on-white rape, and the animal's subsequent attempts to "shave" itself and the mother parody the image of black barbers prevalent at Poe's time (qtd. in Rzepka 82-83).[3] Following Lemire's argument, Rzepka suggests that the story may also be reflective of the "lingering fear of slave rebellion" after the Philadelphia riot against the proposed abolition of slavery (83).

Apart from classic detective fiction, the private eye novel emerging from the 1920s has been noted for its problematic treatment of racial others. In 1920, the year Agatha Christie published her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair of Styles*, the *Black Mask* pulp magazine was founded across the Atlantic. Under the editorship of "Captain" Joseph T. Shaw from 1926, the magazine started promoting "hardboiled language" and nurturing many talented writers, notably Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, two of the most influential writers of the private eye genre.[4] During the 1920s and 1930s, America underwent tumultuous social change: monopoly capitalism paved the way for the economic boom but also heightened class conflict; Prohibition helped gangsterism flourish and organized crime was to become endemic in society; numerous families were hit hard by the Great Depression, and poverty, unemployment, and homelessness were widespread in urban streets throughout the country. As David Madden says, the private eye story illustrates "the nightmare version of the American Dream" (25-26). Living in this chaotic world, the private eye hero develops a "jaundiced view of government, power, and the law." He knows that society is evil and corrupt, but he also believes in justice and "will make it his business to do whatever is necessary to see that justice is done" (Prozini and Adrian 3). In Hammett's *Red Harvest*, the ironically named Personville[5] is the "ugly

[3] As Lemire suggests, shortly before the publication of this story in a Philadelphia periodical, where Poe served as an editor, the writer moved to the city with his young wife and her mother. The caricatures of black males portrayed as sexual predators were to be seen in the newspapers, and the way the daughter dies in the story—"stuffed up the vaginal chimney"—both exploit and provoke the racist fears (qtd. in Rzepka 82).

[4] In "A Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler explores the aesthetics of the private eye genre and speaks highly of Dashiell Hammett's use of language. Chandler suggests that the characteristics of hardboiled language—emphasis on dialogue, use of vernacular, and basic colloquial rhythm—can be traced back to Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, and even Walt Whitman (1-18).

[5] The detective says at first he didn't understand why "Personville" was called "Poisonville," but a few years later he visited this place for this case and "learned better" (Hammett *Four Great Novels* 7).

city" dominated by evil politicians, lawless gangsters, and corrupt police, and the Continental Op feels compelled to "cleanse" the town. Although at the end of the story he makes the town "all nice and clean," he also understands that the place is "ready to go to the dogs again" (181). Reflecting the social, cultural, and economic tensions of the 1920s and 1930s, the private eye story not only offers a populist attack on capitalist powers but also reveals the anxiety and preconception about racial others at a time of heightened nativism (Kennedy 225).[6]

What makes the private eye narrative appealing has a lot to do with the voice. Unlike the classic detectives in the stories of Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle whose adventures are revealed by a devoted sidekick, the private eye usually tells his own story in the first-person point of view, which embodies a unique way of observing and representing the world. When the private detective speaks, it creates an illusion of intimacy and builds up a subtle, fraternal bond between the narrator and his readers. The matter-of-fact, telling-it-like-it-is tone gives a sense of authenticity and establishes the protagonist's independence as well as isolation. As Bethany Ogdon argues, everything the reader sees in private eye fiction is filtered through the narrator's perspective, and these story tellers are invariably white, heterosexual males (qtd. in Reddy 8). In cases like *The Maltese Falcon*, which is told in the third person, Maureen Reddy points out that no "discernible distance" between the narrator and the investigator can be spotted. The narrator can be considered the detective himself "in the absence of irony" (8). Therefore, when the genre readers identify themselves with

[6] It is worth noting that in *Gumshoe America*, Sean McCann offers a complex reading of the racial politics in the private eye genre. Examining the history of hardboiled detective fiction in terms of the impact of New Deal liberalism, McCann argues that writers like Carroll John Daly and Hammett in fact make use of the genre to resist the ideal racial community imagined by the Ku Klux Klan. Daly's suggestively named protagonist, Race Williams, signifies "true essence of whiteness," but the detective's refusal to belong to any community serves to "scoff at the Klan's fraternal bonds and to pursue an uncompromising individual liberty." In Hammett's short stories, "Dead Yellow Women" and "Creeping Siamese," the author at first seems to confirm the racialist presuppositions, but "the emptiness of race" is revealed in the end in that the "ethnic coding" is used "in the service of a fantasy about class and commerce rather than one of racial solidarity" in Klan rhetoric (40-72).

the private eye hero, they are likely to be indoctrinated to share similar attitudes.[7]

The racial politics in the tradition of crime fiction is such that any crime writer of color who wants to make use of the popular genre will have to deal with the "burden of representation," a task that Henry Louis Gates Jr. considers highly challenging for all black artists (*Tradition* 64-66). Chester Himes was recognized as the first black writer who produced his crime fiction in the tradition of the private eye genre. But Himes's "Harlem Domestic" detective novels, published during the 1950s and 1960s, have provoked great controversy in his depiction of the violent protagonists as well as the moral chaos in the black ghetto. The two black police detectives, "Coffin" Ed Johnson and "Grave Digger" Jones, are noted for their cruelty when tackling black crime in Harlem. The narrative is unsettling because the law and order which the two cops represent stands for the very social establishment that oppresses their fellow black people. Whenever the two black detectives stamp out a disturbance, they reinforce the racist structure that causes all these problems. In *Blind Man with a Pistol*, the last novel of his "Harlem Domestic" series, the chaos and disorder presented in the story are so overwhelming that the generic structure of the crime narrative is collapsed. In the course of their investigation, the two detectives can neither locate the perpetrators of the brutal murders in their precinct nor punish their white superiors who are obviously involved in a cover-up. They can do nothing

[7] The private eye story's constant suspicion of racial others was further reinforced with the writers' collaboration with Hollywood. The "hardboiled film cycle," as Frank Krutnik notes, began with the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*, and was in full swing in the mid-1940s (38). Chandler had the closest tie with the studio, selling most of his novels to production companies and writing plot synopses and screenplays for them, including *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *The Lady in the Lake* (1947). Due to the popularity of the film version of *The Maltese Falcon*, directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart, few readers will notice the fact that in Hammett's original novel, Sam Spade, the prototypical tough loner private eye, was described as a "blonde Satan." The rhetoric concealed behind the description suggests that Spade is not a "typical Satan," who is likely to be dark-skinned, or even black. The racial hierarchy revealed at the beginning of the private eye novel is apparent (Reddy 6). Not surprisingly, when Hammett's the other detective, the Continental Op, sets foot in a black neighborhood in *The Dain Curse*, he complains that "the getting of reasonably accurate information [would be] twice as unlikely as it always was" (qtd. in Kennedy 226). Hammett was not alone in presenting racial others as alien and degenerate. As Frankie Bailey suggests, for a decade *Black Mask* published stories which portrayed black Americans and certain immigrant groups as pathologically violent, sexually perverse, and morally corrupt (41-43). Kennedy also observes that when the white detective transgresses the racial boundaries into what is presented as rotten black urban spaces, he is never aware of the fact that these places are virtually "symbolic repositories of white fears and fantasies" (227-67).

about the various groups of black protesters in the streets of Harlem. At the end of story, a crazy blind man gets hold of his pistol, first gunning down a black preacher who tries to "play peacemaker" and then a white supremacist cop.[8] The blind man himself is subsequently "cut down" by the police's reinforcements (191).

Critics have various responses to Himes's stories. For Claire Wells, it seems that Himes was "publicly taking revenge on his blackness" and presented a "psychotic reaction to systematized racial self-hatred" (211). Andrew Peppers, however, argues that in the fictional world of Himes, crime and violence are "symptomatic of a much deeper racial malaise"; and his writing strategies make him free from being pigeon-holed as a black writer who offers only one-dimensional victims of racism or positive role models (213). Exploring Himes's earlier belief in class solidarity and the "interracial populist brotherhood" offered by New Deal liberalism, Sean McCann points out that the author employed the genre to resist against the emerging emphasis on racial difference and the "question of identity" along with the rise of the Civil Rights movement. The harrowing portrayal of Harlem is a "fantastic image of society-as-open-market," where almost everyone is "reduced to the brute struggle for survival or advantage." The two black cops serve as "heroic defenders of implausible ideals," and the law in the story mainly "obscures" violence instead of purifying it (250-93). As a black writer making use of the private eye genre, Walter Mosley is well aware of the legacy of his predecessor: "Even though Chester Himes wrote crime, I'm entering the genre in a different way" (Duncan 197). If we consider Himes's grotesque portrait of Harlem an extreme kind of social protest, where signs of reconciliation are nowhere to be found and even the protagonists loses their agency, Walter Mosley has taken a different approach in his color-coded crime series.

A Black Perspective, a Black History

Mosley's ambition to reconstruct an alternative black history is evident in that when his protagonist first gives utterance in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first

[8] The portrayal of the black preacher is likely to be associated with Martin Luther King Jr, who was assassinated just one year before the publication of this novel. In an interview Himes expressed his disappointment at racial justice in America, and he believed that possibly "organized revolution with violence" was the only way to make the white people "back down" (Fabre and Skinner 102).

installment of the series, the detective reverses the white gaze simply by saying: "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar" (3). Critics have noted that the opening of Mosley's first novel is significant because it consciously alludes to Raymond Chandler's classic private eye novel, *Farewell, My Lovely* (Berger 284; Kennedy 231). In the novel, the legendary L.A.-based detective Philip Marlowe sees a pale white man go inside a black bar "in one of the mixed blocks over Central Avenue, the blocks that are *not yet* all negro" (7; emphasis added). The man catches Marlowe's attention with his enormous size and outlandish suit, and later the detective joins the man inside the bar. The intrusion of two white men causes a sudden stillness, and Marlowe says: "Eyes looked at us, chestnut coloured eyes, set in faces that ranged from grey to deep black. Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead alien silence of another race" (10). While black population was increasing rapidly in the 1940s and 1950s, the above scene is one of the few occasions for Chandler's hero to show up in black L.A. In Chandler's story, the black bar is presented as an exoticized space, and it is of no consequence as to the rest of Marlowe's investigation. In Mosley's version of this black versus white encounter, the suggestively named white gangster, DeWitt Albright, also enters into a black bar in L.A. But this time he is carefully examined by Easy, who is a resident of Watts and a frequenter of the place:

> I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks…. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948. (9)

Positioning his protagonist in the heart of the L.A. neighborhood that has already become negro, Mosley not only takes over the narrative voice of the private eye story but also proclaims the legitimacy of his black hero's life and experience in the city. Albright's excessive whiteness is associated with power and dominance at first, but

Easy is able to overcome this "thrill of fear" and returns the white gaze. As a World War II veteran, his experience of racial segregation in the U.S. army as well as hand-to-hand combat with white German soldiers has helped him prepare for trouble and potential threats—he had "killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just afraid to die" as he was (*Devil* 3).

Being a migrant from the sharecropping farm of Houston, Texas to Watts, L.A., Easy Rawlins, like millions of his fellow black people, becomes part of the Great Migration from the south to look forward to a better future. But it turns out that California is not the promised land black Americans dream of. "People told stories of how you could eat fruit right off the trees and get enough work to retire one day," says Easy, "The stories were true for the most part but the truth wasn't like the dream. Life was still hard in L.A. and if you worked every day you still found yourself on the bottom" (*Devil* 26-26). When Langston Hughes, one of the vital cultural leaders of the Harlem Renaissance movement, first visited the city in 1932, he was surprised that "ordinary Black folks lived in huge houses with 'miles of yards,' and prosperity seemed to reign in spite of the Depression." But after his failed attempts to work within the studio system, he concluded that "so far as Negroes are concerned, [Hollywood] might just as well be controlled by Hitler" (qtd. in Davis 42). Similarly, in *Little Scarlet*, what appears to be a generous offer of space for the black underclass becomes another form of racial containment. As Easy notes,

> Los Angeles ghettos were different from any other poor black neighborhood I had ever seen. The avenues and boulevards were wide and well paved. Even the poorest streets had houses with lawns and running water to keep the grass green…. But the people there were still penned in, excluded, underrepresented in everything from Congress to the movie screens, from country clubs to colleges. (218)

The illusive promise of freedom and prosperity becomes exclusion and economic exploitation. Mosley's rendition of black urban experience not only exposes the harsh reality behind the glittering attractions of the California dream but also highlights the spatial hierarchy of L.A. As Kennedy notes, by placing his hero "in a continuum of

black diaspora experiences" and charting this unfulfilled desire of southern blacks in the northern city, Mosley keeps a painstaking account of black history while offering his critique of the overall social-political hostility toward blacks (229).

What distinguishes Easy from his white predecessors lies in his sense of communal responsibility. While Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, or Lew Archer are cynical loners who trust no one and constantly feel suspicious of the comfort of hearth and home, Easy's life is deeply integrated into the fabric of his community. As the series develops, Easy has adopted a mulatto girl and a Latino boy, formed a relationship with a black woman from the Caribbean, worked as a janitor in the local high school, and struggled to hold onto his properties in the neighborhood. Easy never introduces himself as a private investigator; instead, he calls himself a man "who trades in favors" (*Six* 155). In *Little Scarlet*, the detective tells his partner, Bonnie, that he has to help his people in Watts because the pain they feel appeals to him: "If you come from down in Watts or Fifth Ward or Harlem, every soul you come upon has been threatened and beaten and jailed…And so when you see some man stopped by the cops and some poor mother cryin' for his release it speaks to you… because you been there before. And everybody around you has been there before" (48). Easy's sympathy and understanding also extend to other marginalized and socially dispossessed. When an angry black man wants to reclaim his shoes from Theodore Steinman, a German immigrant who also lost his shoe repair shop due to the riots, Easy stands up to protect his aged neighbor from the threats. "It came to me then that my side job of trading favors had become more geographic than it was racial," says Easy, "I felt responsible for Theodore because he lived in my adopted neighborhood, not because of the color of his skin" (*Scarlet* 200).

Mosley's crime fiction is sometimes referred to as "historical mystery" because the narrative is set against a backdrop of important social, cultural, and political events in history. Paranoia and fear brought by McCarthyist persecution in the 1950s loom large in *A Red Death*, where Easy is blackmailed by the IRS to look into a Polish Resistance fighter, who is suspected by the FBI to be a Communist. In *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, a worried mother in the neighborhood goes to Easy for her missing son, a member of the militant Urban Revolutionary Party, and a full spectrum of black people's attitudes towards Civil Rights movement is explored. The eye-catching,

color-coded titles of the series also keep reminding readers of the importance of racial justice in mainstream American society.[9] However, some critics have doubts over the effectiveness of Mosley's writing strategy. For example, Lee Horsley questions if the "pastness" of the novels provides a safe distance for the majority of (white) readers to temporarily identify with the black hero (221-22). It is true that Mosley's fiction is set in the past, and the narrative has to reach a certain kind of closure at the end, but this by no means suggests that Mosley creates a nostalgic space and makes it "easy" for his readers to satisfy their voyeuristic desire for the black ghetto life. Tzvetan Todorov argues that a detective story "carries not one but two stories": the narrative of crime committed by the perpetrator and the narrative of the investigation conducted by the investigator (44). Daylanne English further indicates that in Mosley's fiction, apart from the dual narrative timelines suggested by Todorov, readers face at least two additional timelines and stories due to Mosley's "juxtaposition of the modern and the contemporary," and it turns out that the contemporary looks a lot like the modern. His fiction both "describes and inscribes present-day injustice and discontent" (722). The "past" Watts Race Riots in 1965 in effect offers a parallel to L.A. in the not-so-distant 1992, where the brutal beating of Rodney King and the subsequent release of the four white police officers triggered another devastating riot in the city. Through the "past" narrative, Mosley not only reminds readers of the repeated tragedies in history but also makes them contemplate the cause of such tragedies.

Whose Violence? Violence to Whom?

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek looks into the nature of violence and asserts that violence takes three forms. The first kind of violence is subjective violence, which is exercised by an identifiable agent and is the most visible to the public. Then there are two kinds of objective violence. One is symbolic violence, which is embodied in language and its various ideological forms. The other kind of objective violence is called systemic violence, that is, the disastrous and tragic outcomes of the "smooth functioning of our economic and political systems."

[9] In Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, almost every installment is color-coded, among them *Black Betty* (1994), *Cinnamon Kiss* (2005), and *Blonde Faith* (2007).

Systemic violence may be invisible, but it needs to be taken into serious consideration if we want to "make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence" (2). For Žižek, while subjective violence is visible and thus considered a disturbance of normality, people tend to neglect the fact that objective violence is innate to this ordinary state of things (2). In *Little Scarlet*, Mosley strives to make us see that subjective violence—race riots—is resulted from racial injustice and economic oppression, exactly the product of objective violence inflicted on the so-called rioters. In the beginning of *Little Scarlet*, a white police detective, Melvin Suggs, visits Easy in the latter's unofficial office in Watts. Suggs tells Easy that at the height of the riots, a white man was dragged out from his car and beaten by an angry mob. The man escaped into a nearby building, where a young black woman, Nola Payne, nicknamed "Little Scarlet," was later found dead by her senile auntie, Geneva Landry. The seventy-year-old woman was so distraught that she kept screaming. To prevent another eruption of disturbance, the police took Landry away from her apartment and secluded her in the hospital. After visiting Landry, Easy sympathizes with the grieving woman and feels angry at the police's treatment. He is aware that Gerald Jordan, the Deputy Commissioner of the police, just wants to "put a lid" on the boiling emotions of the black residents, but he has his own reasons for taking the job. "I don't want no fee whatsoever," says Easy to Jordan, "I'll do this thing but not for you. I'll do it for the people I care about" (30). Easy thus carries out his investigation not only of the murder of Little Scarlet but also of the causes of such violence as well as its consequences.[10]

When the white principal of Sojourner Truth Senior High School, the place where Easy holds his day job as a janitor, is appalled by the destruction of her school, she asks the detective: "Why would people want to burn and destroy their own community" (78)? For the aged lady, what the rioters have done is meaningless and hurtful. She bears good will to the residents of Watts, but, nonetheless, she is insensitive to the systemic violence inherent in the society she lives in and devotes

[10] The relationship between the private eye and the police has been complex from the beginning. While the Continental Op both competes and cooperates with the detective-sergeant, O'Gar, in his investigation, Marlowe is constantly threatened and abused by the police. But none of them shares Easy's carefully-kept distance from the law because of his being black as well as his lack of a license.

herself to. As Žižek notes, violence like this takes the more subtle forms of oppression which maintain relations of domination and subordination (9). In the novel, the invisible violence that sustains the functioning of social and economic life is the very idea of law and order that the principal believes in. And Gerald Jordan, Deputy Commissioner of the police, is the embodiment of the state-sanctioned law and order. After the riots broke out, Jordan appeared on TV to accuse the rioters of looting and destroying for their own "immoral desires" (22). When Easy first meets Jordan, the latter makes it clear that they demand Easy's assistance but would not admit in public such demand. Then Jordan gives Easy a smile. "I liked him. I liked him the way a slave learns to love his master or a prisoner develops an affinity with his warden," says Easy, "Gerald Jordan was the white man in charge. He was the closest I had ever come to the source of our problems" (23). Easy even fantasizes about the eradication of Jordan: "I wondered if I killed him right then, would the problems of my people become that much lighter?" (23) But Easy soon realizes the impracticality of his fantasy, and he is never a man who resorts to bloodshed to solve his problem.

The identification of the perpetrator usually constitutes the highlight of the crime narrative. Unlike most of the classic crime stories, however, Easy's uncovering of Little Scarlet's murder is far from offering a satisfying and comfortable closure. Although Easy locates the perpetrator of Little Scarlet, he exposes a much wider, larger, and intangible web of systemic violence that covers almost every black resident of Watts. The detective learns that the missing white man, Peter Rhone, had an affair with Little Scarlet. In the heat of the riots, he drove to Watts and tried to get his girlfriend out of there, but was beaten by the mob and had to take refuge in her apartment instead. Little Scarlet took care of him, and asked a friend to help him leave Watts at midnight. But her romantic involvement with Peter was witnessed by a hobo, Harold, who harbors a hatred for any black woman dating a white man. After Peter left, he sneaked into Nola's room and strangled her to death. Easy also learns that Harold is likely to be the suspect of a dozen more murders of black women for years. Ironically, while Easy tries to get Harold, Gerald Jordan wants to lay the blame on Peter Rhone so that the general public might be pacified into thinking that the police could, after all, "maintain the balance of justice" (25). Easy also learns that the reason why Harold cannot tolerate interracial relationship lies in his family history. Harold's

mother, Jocelyn Ostenberg, is a light-skinned mulatto who passes for white. When the dark-skinned Harold was born, her mulatto husband felt ashamed and abandoned them. Jocelyn told everyone in her neighborhood that Harold was the child of her black housemaid, Honey May, and later remarried to a white man. Harold left the house at the age of twelve and started his life on the street. Although Harold's crime against innocent women is to be condemned, by now Easy's rage against him is mixed with understanding. Both Harold's resentment at black women dating white men and Jocelyn's racial self-hatred are resulted from the influence of systemic violence, the domination of mainstream social and cultural values. After confronting Jocelyn about her denial of her own son, Easy associates the woman's experience with the eruption of the riots:

> I didn't hate her for hating herself. If everybody in the world despises and hates you, sees your features as ugly and simian, makes jokes about your ways of talking, calls you stupid and beneath contempt; if you have no history, no heroes, and no future where a hero might lead, then you might begin to hate yourself, your face and features, your parents, and even your child. It could all happen and you would never even know it. And then one hot summer's night you just erupt and go burning and shooting and nobody seems to know why. (255-56)

Unfortunately, Easy cannot find Harold in time. Harold kills Jocelyn and looks for shelter at Honey May's place. Although the black maid has nursed Harold since he was born, she could not stand watching him hurt any more black women. So Honey May puts poison in the food prepared for him and takes his life by her own hand.[11]

The Watts race riots have wreaked havoc, but in a way the historical event has also strengthened the interconnectedness among black Americans, shaping and

[11] In the tradition of private eye fiction, Easy wants to exert his "private justice" by killing Harold to avenge those innocent young black girls and to protect his own family and friends: "I was a soldier, not some citizen or bystander. I had to go out now and find Harold and make sure that he couldn't get at anybody else ever again" (278). But committing subject violence to retaliate against the product of systemic violence is counterproductive. This may also help explain why Easy can restrain himself from getting rid of Jordan, "the source of our problems."

sustaining an "imaginary community." In his discussion of Louis Farrakhan, leader of Nation of Islam, Henry Louis Gates Jr. talks about the idea of "imagined communities," the concept of nations defined by the political theorist Benedict Anderson, and argues that if there is such thing as a black nation, it is "even more imaginary than most": "We know that thirty-six million sepia Americans do not a collective make, but in our minds we sometimes insist upon it" (*Thirteen* 123-54). As Easy tries to explain to the principle of the Sojourner Truth High School about the significance of the riots, he says: "This riot was sayin' it out loud for the first time. That's all. Now it's said nothing will ever be the same. That's good for us, no matter what we lost." The lady looks back at Easy in awe as if she is "seeing" him for the first time (78). When a nurse in the hospital asks Easy if he is related to Little Scarlet, the detective instinctively replies "yes." "I didn't feel I was lying," says Easy, "Over the past few days, I came to feel a new connection between myself and the people caught up in the throes of violence. It was as if I had adopted Nola Payne as my blood sister" (34). Easy not only feels connected to Little Scarlet but also feels responsible for all those Watts residents whose lives are changed by the riots. Mosley is not alone in his feelings about the riots. In his memoir, *Colored People*, Gates recalls having the peculiar experience when first learning about the news of the Watts riots as a young camper:

> Watching myself being watched by the white campers, I experienced that strange combinations of power and powerlessness that you feel when the actions of another black person affect your own life, simply because you both are black. I realized that the actions of people I did not know had become *my responsibility* as surely as if the black folk in Watts had been my relatives in Piedmont, just twenty or so miles away. (150; emphasis added)

While Mosley does not try to justify the destruction of property and life, he suggests that we may look for constructive and redemptive values in the riots.[12] Now that

[12] In *City of Quartz*, the urban sociologist Mike Davis also points out that the Watts riots encouraged unity and vigor in South Central L.A., producing a "local version of the Black Arts Movement" in poetry, fiction, theater, and cinema (67-68).

black people were expressing their anger at deep-seated injustice which was rarely challenged before, American society has to take notice of their protest. What is more important is that the riots may help black Americans form tighter and closer relationship and reinforce their responsibility for each other.

Recognizing the Racial Other

Black and other ethnic detectives have been known to take advantage of their racially produced invisibility. In other words, they know how to make strategic use of social and cultural stereotypes imposed upon them. Equipped with the Du Boisian awareness of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others," they can manipulate people's perceptions of them and thus detect without being detected. For example, Tamara Hayle, the black female private eye created by Valerie Wilson Wesley, is good at turning stereotypical docility and passiveness into agency: "I do my work best when people are limited by their own expectations. I smile a lot. Flash my toothiest grin…. I love it when they realize that all the while I was bowing and scraping I was steadily kicking ass" (*Devil's Gonna Get Him* 29). Easy is familiar with the trick, too. He has reflected on his experience of working as a detective and says: "Nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible; people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me, something that wasn't real" (135). Easy also knows how to switch smoothly between proper English, "the kind of English they taught in school," and his "natural, uneducated dialect" (10). In *Little Scarlet*, however, Easy cannot apply this "strategic invisibility" to his investigation of Nola Payne's death. On the contrary, due to the eruption of the riots, the detective becomes hyper visible whenever he leaves Watts. For the general public and the police, a black man is synonymous with an immediate or potential threat outside black L.A., and thus needs to be disciplined and contained. During the course of Easy's investigation, he is repeatedly stopped by the police—either walking or driving—as soon as he gets near the white neighborhood. Even a white waitress of a café that Easy used to frequent is too frightened to take his order. "On the one hand Margie [the waitress] had ignored my existence, and on the other I scared her to death," says the detective, "And even while she feared me she still didn't know me" (122-23). To negotiate the rugged territory of the city, Easy has to stand up firmly for

his belief. When Gerald Jordan wants to close the case quickly by having Peter Rhone as the scapegoat, he sends three squad cars with fully armed policemen to Watts to arrest Easy. Jordan thinks Easy may be intimidated into giving up on his investigation, but the detective remains defiant under the brutality of the law: "They dropped me on the floor but I didn't feel it. I had become the soul of resistance. I could stay like that for years, I believed. No one would ever defeat me again. They'd have to kill me" (231). Being "stymied" by Easy's resolve, Jordan gives in to the detective's determination, and the latter earns himself more time to pursue Harold. Easy's resolution to fight back against racist oppression is reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's monumental battle with Mr. Covey, the "slave breaker," in his *Narrative*: "I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me" (43). After the combat, Douglass was never whipped again for the rest of his service to Mr. Covey. For Easy, his courage and disobedience against the law even win him an unusual "gift" from Jordan, an investigator's license: "So the next time you're out there hustling, nobody will be able to say you have no right to be there" (303).

The fact that Easy Rawlins cannot employ his deceptive invisibility makes his job in *Little Scarlet* even harder because he has to carry out his investigation under white law. When people like Gerald Jordan are forced to see him and recognize all he stands for, his "visibility" helps us acknowledge and expect the existence of racial others. In fact, readers are also constantly reminded of the racial other through Little Scarlet's absence. In the story, when Easy first meets Little Scarlet, the latter has already become a defaced corpse lying on a silver table in a hospital morgue. Easy could have pretended to help the police about this case, but he "made the mistake" of looking at her face. It is Little Scarlet's damaged face that speaks to the detective's conscience and responsibility. Through incessant calls, interviews, stakeouts, and confrontations with either blacks or whites, Easy gradually pieces together Little Scarlet's life before her death and comes to know who she was as a living human being. Nola Payne was called Little Scarlet because of her red hair; she left Mississippi to work as a switchboard operator in Watts, and would call her only relative in L.A., Geneva Landry, everyday at sunset; she was smart, hardworking, and caring—she saved Peter Rhone from the mob at the night of her murder. The

detective's reconstruction of Nola Payne's life has turned her from a lifeless body into a living person, larger than life, and along the way Little Scarlet as a human being is imposed on readers' mind. Although Nola Payne is unable to speak for herself, her life story is never absent in the narrative. Through the detective's investigation into violence and careful reconstruction of Little Scarlet's life, Mosley not only chronicles a unique black history but also throws new light on racial relations for the future.

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