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Ambiguity of a Woman Trickster in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*

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Abstract

Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) revises the traditional hard-boiled genre according to a societal system based on racial inequity in the United States. African American hard-boiled authors present African American communities amid a continuous sociocultural and political divide underscored by systemic racism perpetuated by institutional powers. Resulting in Du Boisian double consciousness and internalization, the narrative comments on these internal and external behavioral factors as it follows Daphne Monet, a passing femme fatale. This chapter casts Daphne in the role of a woman trickster, a rare sight in patriarchal mythologies, and comments on the African American hard-boiled decision of writing back to African folklore and African American ancestral heritage dating back to times of enslavement of African peoples in the Americas. The essay implements Umberto Eco's theory of interpretation to emphasize various roles of and the relationship between the sender and receiver of a literary text and discusses the woman trickster's adapted qualities to fit the twentieth-century hard-boiled narrative.

Keywords

Interpretation, hard-boiled fiction, Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, trickster, feminist literary discourse

The African/American Sociocultural Divide

In her introduction to *Shades of Black: Crime and Mystery Stories by African-American Writers*, Eleanor Taylor Bland notes that the development of extended family is "the most significant contribution" African American writers have made to mystery fiction. Bland likewise compliments Black writers adding "a new depth and dimension to members of the opposite sex. Women write about caring and compassionate men who are also strong and self-sufficient. Men write about women who are independent and intelligent and also affectionate, giving, and accurately strong" (1-2). Classical detective fiction has primarily aimed at entertainment with its whodunit stories and puzzle-typical plot where the committed crime is the central plot point to be solved by the main character, the detective, and the end marks the final resolution of the mystery. In African American crime fiction, ethnicity and race relations in the United States seep through the stories to uncover the impact of systemic racism and associated omnipresent race and class conflicts that the figure of the detective can never resolve or diminish. The portrayal of living conditions in American capitalist

society includes the close-knit relationship between crime and socioeconomic inequity which results in conflicts leading to criminal behavior.

For mystery writers, and specifically for hard-boiled fiction writers, including Chester B. Himes and Walter Mosley, the social – or, what Stephen Soitos calls vernacular – criticism does not translate into abandoning traditional detective formulas of American crime fiction, be it the fast-paced nature of the novels, the dangerous and violent environment of the underground organized crime or the lonesome figure of the protagonist. Rather, Black American crime fiction incorporates these relations and aids the progression of African American culture "not only in reinterpretations of its past but in preparation for its future" (Soitos xiii). As Soitos argues, vernacular criticism develops "critical vocabulary based not on Euro-Americentric models but on African American and Afrocentric worldview" (xii). Vernacular theory further writes back to the notion that African Americans have had "no real culture of their own" and demonstrates "ways in which average rural and urban African American people transformed the dominant folk and cultural formulas, indicating their own cultural survival and triumph over oppression" (xii).

In hard-boiled fiction, the tension between an individual and society translates into the notion that everyone is guilty. The qualities of an individual hero commonly exhibited by the protagonist cease and are replaced by complexities of internalization resulting in amoral behavior of even sympathetic characters. African American crime fiction presents individuals who create a fraction in the system by crossing established conventions of institutional powers, and whose relationship with the police is antagonistic due to the rigidity of the establishment. Revealing society as dominated by whiteness, Black American detective novels shift from plot to character. In order to criticize race-related discrimination, the genre builds upon its characters' awareness of their Blackness and applies popular cultural forms to African American experience (Gray 489). In sociopolitical terms of the United States, the Black characters' dubious and oftentimes unsettling behavior has sparked conversations among the Black American intellectual movement about whether violent portrayals and crime-ridden lifestyles of especially Black men do not only perpetuate the stereotypical American vision based on racial discrimination. However, the versatility of presenting various character types supports Soitos' thought of abandoning Euro-Americentric ways of thinking while keeping in mind the role institutionalized forces play in the characters' forming and upholding criminal conditions in the urban and rural parts of the US. Moreover, this notion also draws upon Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s elaboration on Black rhetorical systems and literary traditions:

> I have liberally borrowed related examples from Western critical arguments . . . to argue, implicitly, that the central questions asked in Western critical discourse have been asked, and answered, in other textual traditions as well. The Eurocentric bias presupposed in the ways terms such as canon, literary theory, or comparative literature have been utilized is a culturally hegemonic bias . . . that the study of literature could best do without. Europeans

> and Americans neither invented literature and its theory nor have a monopoly on its development. (xiv)

One instance of what Soitos calls "textual exploration connected to sociohistorical and socioreligious value systems" (Soitos xii) ties to the vernacular rhetorical tradition of Signifyin(g) which Gates connects to individual moments of self-reflexiveness (Gates xxi) and which can be traced to the African/American cultural divide.

One archetypal figure originating in African folklore and navigating the African American lore and literature from the times of slavery is the trickster who appears either as one of the mythical gods who, originating from oral tribal cultures, rebelled against his family and was banished to live on earth, or more often as an animal. As a shapeshifter and boundary-crosser, the trickster passes between worlds of contradictions, blurring the lines between life and death, godly and ungodly, moral and amoral, and serves as a messenger between the human and the divine world. However, when the path between heaven and earth gets blocked, tricksters change their messenger role and become thieves, stealing from the gods what humans need on earth to survive (Hyde). Whether stealing fire as Prometheus, plums as Coyote, or cattle as Hermes, the first theft of a trickster bears meaning only once the stolen item appears in an altered context, highlighting its previous worth and defining what it is by realizing what it is not. In trickster tales, thieving epitomizes the birth of meaning (Hyde 64). As Robert D. Pelton writes, misunderstanding a trickster largely depends on the trickster's embodiment of vivid and subtle language "through which he links animality and ritual transformation, shapes culture by means of sex and laughter, ties cosmic process to personal history" (Pelton).

Among the tricksters originating from West African folktales, we can identify Anansi of the Ashanti from Ghana representing the trickster's foolery; Esu Elegbara of the Fon from Togo and Benin concerned mainly with sexuality and language; Eshu of the Yoruba from Benin, Nigeria, and Togo responsible mainly for the disturbance of social peace; or Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon from Mali experienced in rebellion and banishment. Each of these tricksters' characteristics overlap and react to each ethnic group's religious practices; in African tribal religions there is a common belief that in nature and the universe alike, there is a celestial power available to use to those who have the ability to master it in regard to people, divinities, ghosts, or ancestral spirits (Lawson). In reaction to European missionaries as early as 1805, new ways of thinking and living combined with old customs of the ethnic groups to create adapted traditions; a parallel later exhibited during slavery when enslaved Africans transported through the transatlantic slave trade from the coastal West African territories combined African cultures together with customs of white settlers on the American continent.

Hence, the African/American cultural divide resulted in many practices and behavioral patterns inherited by descendants of enslaved African peoples in America, including double consciousness, or, what W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* described as an act of looking at oneself through the eyes of others. As a psychological concept, Du Bois specified double consciousness as possessing a national, American identity while being Black. The concept of a minority ethnic group internalizing xenophobic, exclusionist values draws upon assessing one's intellectual abilities and physical attributes by a majority's standards. In American terms, the trickster figure was the enslaved person outwitting their master, being thus titled a "trickster hero" by folklorist Roger D. Abrahams and challenging the prevailing trickster paradigm of West African customs. It was another instance of blending cultures and transporting African epic performance lore into American association with tricksters and European ties to epic heroes (Rutledge 2). Rutledge ties the social hierarchical origins to Antiquity and states that "this Great Chain of Being . . . was believed to range from God and the angels down to humans, in descending order from whiteness to blackness, then to animals, and finally to the demonic beings anchored by Satan" (3). The intersections of European focus on the epic and American racial divide posed a new environment for the slave-era trickster to navigate the new role as a messenger, shapeshifter, master of disguise, and thief.

What Gates described as a "Blackness of the tongue" has served as Black people's coding since the times of slavery to engage in "private yet communal cultural rituals" (xix). These verbal tactics which derive from African trickster mythologies and which slaves transferred from African traditions have developed into an African American literary tradition where two prominent trickster figures, called Esu Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, appear. The slaves shared many characteristics with Esu, the divine Yoruba trickster, and the Signifying Monkey, Esu's successor, and took advantage of their masters' unfamiliarity with their oral customs, manipulating them through deceit, theft, shapeshifting, and double-voiced narrative. While Esu possesses two mouths and functions as a symbol of a double-voiced tradition and interpretation, the Monkey "serves as the trope in which several other black rhetorical tropes [are encoded]" (xxi). Pre-world myths about Esu transported to the New World connect him to the Signifying Monkey's exaggerated Black vernacular. While retaining Esu's traditional features from African folklore, the slaves turned to the Signifying Monkey as their liberator controlling and dwelling at the crossroads where they found themselves (Gates 31).

Gates compares practicing the method of Signifyin(g) to finding oneself in a hall of mirrors:

> the sign itself appears to be doubled . . . and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent . . . a "sound-image" [without] the sound. (44)

The unsteadiness that arises from one signifier disappears when these signifiers multiply; the duality generated by two and more signifiers is a natural occurrence. In Standard American English (SAE), the word "signification" bears a homonymous meaning to the word in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), reflecting two outwardly identical concepts. However, the collision between two paralleling universes, American and African American, determined by meaning of words or definitions, becomes notable when only one person confronts the linguistic elements of SAE and AAVE that may be both familiar and alien to them. Identities of the signifiers and the feeling of otherness connect to the sign they decide to assess in their signifying practices. Deciding to criticize the generally accepted meaning of a sign that the mainstream culture bestowed upon it through SAE, the signifiers underline how Blackness and AAVE represent the other in the central political climate (45).

Interpretations of Gendered Trickster Tradition

The canonical trickster figure operates in patriarchal mythologies, and it thus follows the establishment of male actors as dominant, whether their presence is centered or marginal. While Lewis Hyde notes that in certain situations, women characters with a considerable share of power in tribal cultures do resemble tricksters, such as the female Coyote, the origins in Native American lore are attributed to matrilineal and matrilocal cultures. Further, the male-centric portrayal of the trickster derives from the trickster lore not focusing on procreation, and the character traits are thus attributed to the sex which does not give birth (Hyde). Because lust is not the driving force of the female Coyote, the equivalent mythological positioning of women characters in the role of mothers incites the notion that the sexual nature of the trickster contrasts the traditional women's roles which then oppose tricksters' "on-the-road and opportunistic sexuality," consequences of which are "clearly more serious for women than for men" (Hyde). In her 2018 study on Afghano-Persian women tricksters, Margaret A. Mills asks the question of why certain folktale characters who deceive are or are not labeled as tricksters, and notes that due to the comparative trickster theory having not implemented sufficient tools to think about women tricksters, "the existing theoretical literature on tricksters and tricksterism up to the late 1990s continued to be virtually devoid of considerations of women's tricks or women tricksters" (34). Hyde admits that there is no lack of women employing tricks, but only a few of these can pride themselves on the "elaborated career of deceit that tricksters have" (8).

The division between women in myth who are skilled in the art of deception and women tricksters employing traits attributed to mainly male actors potentially rests

on the structure of established storytelling and consequent limits of semantic interpretation. On the one hand, Maria Tatar explains the absence of women tricksters as follows:

> [It] is also possible that the female trickster has carried out her own stealth operation, functioning in furtive ways and covering her tracks to ensure that her powers remain undetected. Perhaps she has survived and endured simply by becoming invisible and flying beneath the radar that we use to understand our cultural stories. And now, in cultures that grant women the kind of mobility and subversive agency unknown in earlier ages, she can join up with the more visible postmodern female counterparts that appear in cultural production today. (40)

This correlates with the growth of ethnic literatures and blurring the boundaries in American canonical literary tradition. Just as Bland commended African American crime fiction authors for giving the opposite sex an unexplored authority in their texts as senders, semantic theories centered on the reader – or, receiver – assume that meaning of each signifier depends on the interpretative choice of the receiver (Eco 53). While Tatar's reasoning of women adopting the role of the trickster results from women being granted an agenda in modern American storytelling to establish societal non-conforming characteristics of the mythical figure, I argue that another possible hypothesis for the development of the woman trickster is based on Umberto Eco's interpretative (im)balance between the author–sender and reader-receiver dichotomy.

While especially works of fiction are open to numerous interpretations and signs are identified by their capacity to induce a thought in the receiver's consciousness, Eco adds that it is important to study interpretation according to both the receiver's point of reference and the sender's semiotic signifiers (56). The critical debate on interpretation focused largely on deciphering the sender's intent and the textual meaning regardless of the sender's aim. The Renaissance intellectual movement mapped the hermeneutical textual possibility of limitless or unspecified interpretations; with the Renaissance model in mind, this hermeneutic-symbolical reading can either invoke a limitless number of signifiers as formulated by the sender, or infinite interpretive meanings that the sender has ignored (Eco 60). For that reason, trickster discourse in a more contemporary setting of the twentieth-century United States adapts the trickster figure working cross-culturally to showcase varying types of both cultural and individual survival. While some of the most successful women writers, including Toni Morrison or Louise Erdrich, introduced a range of women tricksters, thus structuring their stories accordingly as a part of feminist literary criticism, the theory of interpretation indicates that textual signifiers do not necessarily need to change to recognize women tricksters in a non-traditional trickster setting.

In an African American male-oriented hard-boiled genre, the most notably recognized female character is that of the femme fatale. The femme fatale figure has been tied to the dark forces of nature as she abandoned traditional romance and passive

domesticity, and instead chose to apply her sexuality to homicidal plots in the service of greed. Mark Jancovich mirrors the 1940s and 50s sexual, social, and ideological unrest in the US and the European economic crisis by commenting on women's positioning at the center of means of production during the war. Jancovich further argues that the femme fatale's inclusion in literature and film served to vilify women in the working force as an attempt to restore the pre-war patriarchal system with women returning to their role as stay-at-home wives and mothers. The femme fatale's refusal to comply with societal expectations aligned with the imagery of menacing women driven by uncontrolled sexual appetites. In works of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett, the independent femme fatale becomes active and vicious, losing the capacity to love as she abandoned her role as a mother figure, and likewise becomes sexually promiscuous, driven by lust and sexual aggression, which consequently generates her tendency to immoral, monstrous, and corrupt behavior. In hard-boiled fiction, the femme fatale is closely tied to what Jancovich describes as the "dark forces of nature" which supports Bernard F. Dick's conclusion that "the western had long freed the villain from the obligatory black hat. Her emancipation, however, has more to do with ambiguity than equality. To appear less monolinear and capable of nonlethal moods, she frequently wears white. If she appears in black, her innocence is even more dubious" (158).

While this positions clothing of the female villain as one of the cornerstones of the femme fatale vilification, the correlation between white color signifying virtue and black evil showcases one instance of African American crime fiction authors' revision, counterbalancing this dichotomy of white-male-oriented texts. In her theoretical approach to intertextuality, Linda Hutcheon writes of a "de-hierarchizing impulse, a desire to challenge the explicitly and implicitly negative cultural evaluation of things like post-modernism, parody, and now, adaptation, which are seen as secondary and inferior" (39). In her study, Hutcheon focuses on adaptation studies and how the original source material and its multiple adapted versions exist not vertically but laterally (46-8). While Hutcheon's theory aims primarily at diverse media and genres, in the context of this article, we may look at the transfer not of stories but of traditional and/or stereotypical portrayals of women characters specifically between Black and white authors of hard-boiled fiction. While the inclusion of the femme fatale character in works of Chester B. Himes, including *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), or Walter Mosley, notably *The Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), remains largely unchanged from the typical hard-boiled tradition, the plot reflections on the impact of systemic racism on socioeconomic and political conditions of Black characters also effect the somewhat antagonistic portrayal of women characters who could be classified as femmes fatales. Despite being labeled equally as destructive, deceitful, and monstrous as her white counterpart, the African American femme fatale further discloses the legacy of standardized gendered racism Black American women have been subjected to since the period of colonization.

Suren Lalvani further adds that when lust, promiscuity and violence are associated with the Black femme fatale, her masculine and aggressive features tie to the nineteenth-century European image of the "exotic woman of color" who "represented uninhibited sexuality to be enjoyed by Western men" (Lalvani). The Black hard-boiled continuation with this stereotype not only culminates in detailed testament of the Black woman symbolizing the image of the other who is "trapped in the double bind of a colonial discourse which either objectifies her for a narcissistic gaze or views her as potentially threatening to the western male psyche" (Lalvani). Therefore, Dick's notion of predictability of the white femme fatale wearing black sustains the ongoing commonality of separating the two colors as antitheses. However, it elevates the concept in the racialized context of Black hard-boiled fiction where the characteristics of both the customarily white femme fatale and the tribal male folk trickster intersect in the depiction of a deceiving, boundary-crossing, sexually active, shapeshifting, and signifying African American woman trickster.

Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* can be viewed as an example of intertextuality as the novel translates the African American memory exhibited in other genres, including spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative or sentimental novel, and simultaneously signifies upon mainstream tropes of the hard-boiled genre. What Hutcheon calls transcoding, or a change of frame and thus context of a duplicate narrative form narrated from a different point of view (166), is demonstrated on the central woman character of the novel named Daphne Monet. Daphne is presented as the femme fatale; a white woman with a daring and mysterious aura involved in a few romantic relationships who seduces Easy Rawlins, a Black detective amateur and a former war veteran hired to find her. Amidst the 1940s urban anxieties of Los Angeles, Mosley introduces Daphne's character when Easy examines a black and white photograph given to him by Mr. Albright, a white associate of Daphne's fiancé, as we find out that the case of a missing "pretty young white woman" with "light hair coming down over her bare shoulders and high cheekbones and eyes that might have been blue" would be "worth looking [into] if you could get her to smile at you that way" (Mosley 25). Daphne ultimately reveals herself to Easy, withholds information, deceives him, and is depicted as a thieving seductress on whose accord Easy finds himself among numerous crime endeavors including multiple murders.

At the same time, Daphne is revealed to be passing, and the concealment of her true identity and race lead to the ultimate solidification of her othering and resulting exile from the Black Watts community. As Daphne's relationship with Easy progresses, Daphne exhibits both animal-like and masculine behavior which leads Easy to question Daphne's true intentions. Interpreting Daphne solely as the femme fatale may be limiting towards other semiotic readings because, as John W. Roberts argues, construing western mythic traditions as universal "turns out to be extremely narrow

and ethnocentric, especially . . . in the American context" (qtd. in Smith 4). Considering the mythical role of the trickster as a destroyer and creator of the world, the figure focuses on the transformation of cultures whether the cultural values or prosperity are endangered internally or externally. Traditional tricksters bring moments of fundamental change, and the supernatural and imaginary elements in trickster stories serve as a presentation of an artificial world to examine if the new world of artifice can combine with the old one and survive.

Daphne's role as a trickster is highlighted as her ghostly absence permeates the first eleven chapters which aids her ambiguity and dwelling at crossroads, able to remain hidden and calculating. Positioning Daphne at the center of the narrative, just as the novel's title itself, demonstrates her role as a trickster who challenges the established social and political order and its limitations. One of the trickster's skills is imitation; as Lewis Hyde notes, while each animal has an inborn knowledge, a way of being in the world and has its nature, way of hunting and satisfying their hunger, the trickster, on the other hand, does not possess this way, nature, or knowledge common to communal species such as herds, flocks, or schools (Hyde). Following the trickster's path of having no way and thus being able to skillfully copy others and adapt to changing environments, Daphne conforms to white supremacy to get fairer treatment in American society and even get away with murder. As a passing woman, she tricks Easy before even meeting him, and her most guarded secret remains hidden from him till the end of the novel. With other people telling Easy that Daphne is white, he never doubts her race despite strong evidence laid in front of him, including one of Albright's first depictions of her when he tells Easy that "Daphne has a predilection for the company of Negroes. She likes jazz and pigs' feet and dark meat, if you know what I mean" (26). Easy can only think of how he knows Albright's implications but does not like to hear it. His subconscious avoidance of the truth is confirmed when Daphne calls on his landline, using a fake French accent. While he contemplates how it does not sound French exactly, he later addresses her as "the French girl" (95) to the extent that even his friend Odell criticizes him of "[m]essin' with French white girls, who ain't French" (104). At that point, Daphne has lost her accent, however, Easy's initial reluctance to trust his instincts becomes an even greater example of Daphne's mastery of disguise when Easy reveals he served in France where French girls wore simple blue dresses (96). His familiarity with French culture is exemplified upon his reminiscence of the time in the army and of dancing figures portrayed on paintings reminding him of "waltzing men and women . . . dressed like courtiers of the French court" (121). Consequently, Daphne possessing no way as the trickster here shows the signature trickster paradox; her alienation from society as a passing woman, suggested at this point, makes her first uncomfortable to be found which makes her then comfortable in every place she chooses to travel to.

Despite Easy being capable of revealing Daphne's fabricated identity, his lust for Daphne overshadows his better judgment and his own forming of a newly acquired identity as a detective. The femme fatale is introduced by Albright's statement of her being "not bad to look at but [being] hell to find" (Mosley 26) which draws upon the United States' portrayal of the figure reacting to her sexual nuances in the 1940s and 50s to emphasize the undercurrents of sexual, social, and ideological unrest. Daphne's ability to deceive is complemented by her disappearance after she steals a suitcase full of money from her fiancé, white businessman Todd Carter who Albright works for. While the view of the independent and thus dangerous woman served as an attempt to overturn the failing patriarchal order in European countries, in the US, the antagonistic nature of the trope had been affiliated with the domestic rather than the public sphere and classified the femme fatale as greedy and selfish by refusing to "subordinate her personal concerns" and not joining the war (Honey qtd. in Jancovich 13). The femme fatale's refusal to comply with societal expectations aligned with the imagery of menacing women filled with greed and uncontrolled sexual appetites. Through the femme fatale stereotype, society confirmed the woman's dishonest nature and thus the inferiority in her social standing due to immoral, monstrous actions.

Misogynoir and the Double-Voiced Discourse

Jeanne Rosier Smith extrapolates Yoruba trickster Esu Elegbara's tales to the life journey of "la mestiza," a woman of mixed racial or ethnic ancestry who is blessed by Esu on her choice of path:

> The new mestiza copes with her tricksterlike position "by developing a tolerance for contradiction, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else." (Anzaldúa qtd. in Smith 25)

The connection between the trickster and Daphne as a passing woman of mixed cultural heritage suggests what bell hooks calls the trickster's duty, albeit negative, of "destroying dualism and therefore obliterating systems of domination" (qtd. in Smith 27). From Albright's first mention of Daphne, it is clear how normalized sexism and sexual ideologies in American society in the 1940s are, supported by the hard-boiled femme fatale portrayal, and it positions Daphne, a Black woman passing for white, as the woman figure who will cross gender, race, and class boundaries as a characteristic notion for any representation of people from a minority. Daphne is expected to challenge this two-fold combination of racism and sexism – or, misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey in 2010 – directed at Black women. While the trickster's role as a destroyer works in some narratives, the hard-boiled setting of Mosley's novel reverses even this somewhat positive outlook on the interrogation of the distribution of institutional power based on one's ethnicity. Daphne's pretended

whiteness shields her throughout the story till the end, even after she admits to Easy she is passing: "I'm not Daphne. My given name is Ruby Hanks. . . . I'm different than you because I'm two people. I'm her and me" (Mosley 208). She further confesses that her maternal half-brother Frank killed her father due to sexual abuse Daphne was subjected to. These events lead to her existence as a wanderer on the crossroads between the two opposite worlds and thus her own narrative voices. Unlike a traditional detective story involving crime, a police force, a detective, and a solution where the story must incite a major interest in finding the solution (Soitos 16), in the hard-boiled setting, a certain ambiguity and nihilism as prerequisites will always be preserved based on the real implication of an unjust and irredeemable world that will never change.

Gerald Vizenor argues that because the trickster is a figure created by the tribe and not by an individual author, the tribal trickster is a communal sign shared between listeners and readers (Vizenor 187), making the story a communal experience by linking a variety of viewpoints. Mosley's intent as the sender is to comment not only on the explicit racial divide but to further disclose an individual double consciousness within the Black American communities and diverse strategies of many characters. Consequently, the characters cope with this internalization in different ways but overall there is a general inner conflict of each individual character that stems from the psychological divide between how a person is perceived by the society they live in and how they decide to operate with these external projections, whether they employ or defy them. Easy's friend Mouse summarizes this issue of internalization of two-ness that Daphne possesses: "She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin' her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can't have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he thinks she is" (Mosley 209).

The sender's interpretative intent is unequivocal; Daphne's two-ness is the burden of her passing and her freedom. Before meeting Easy, Daphne was a traveler, and there has never been a possibility for her exposure. Her freedom has been secured by benefiting from the illusion of her white privilege, of constant vigilance and observation. Recognizing underprivileged conditions that she would be met with as being both Black by the white society and a light-skinned mulatta within the Black community, passing as white has served Daphne's boundary-crossing and shapeshifting identity. While the teachings of Du Bois comprised of evaluating American ideologies regarding race, class, and nation, and of intertwined social, economic, and cultural patterns that have shaped the US system, his acknowledgement of Black women's suffering was that of a revolution. Their roles in private and public spheres presented Black women with unique circumstances due to managing oppressive attitudes that race, class, and nation exhibited (Collins 42).

Similarly to Du Bois, hooks' thought of women tricksters destroying dualism reflects the trickster's inclination to challenge the established order. Daphne manages to kill Matthew Teran, a man formerly running for mayor and a pedophile keeping a neglected Mexican boy as a sex slave. When Easy asks if she killed Teran, she replies: "'I pulled the trigger, he died. But he killed himself really. . . . He had his hands in that little boy's drawers and he laughed.' Daphne snorted. I don't know if it was a laugh or a sound of disgust. 'And so I killed him'" (Mosley 207). In the strongly patriarchal social system, Daphne defies presuppositions about male power and validates the notion that traditional tricksters have been identified as male by default due to them operating within the rigid value system based on male and female stereotypes alike. As a trickster in the nonmythic genre of crime fiction, Daphne as the central woman character can be compared to Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander. Unlike Daphne, Lisbeth in Larsson's Millennium trilogy intentionally embarks on a revenge mission to kill rapists and murderers of women and thus becomes what Maria Tatar calls "a crusader for social justice" (50). Both characters' murders directed at sexual abusers do indicate a certain cultural shift, one "that acknowledges women's mobility and access to skills traditionally coded as masculine" (52). Just as Lisbeth, in her confession to Easy about killing Teran, Daphne attains a level of composure, a combination of the cool calculating trickster spirit combined with her survival instincts as a victim of sexual violence.

As Mills notes, "while the male trickster is categorically mobile, women's 'proper' space . . . was culturally understood to be the stable and secure interior of households, not the . . . road" (48). Nonetheless, with the reinvention of new identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the woman trickster can and oftentimes does exit the communal domestic space and suddenly navigates the spaces strictly limited to men. Daphne's survival in the high-risk environment through continuous movement shows her resilience and the role of a survivor and a cheater of death which in the novel is interchangeably understood and negatively perceived by Easy as her personifying the devil. While at first Easy overlooks Daphne's complicity, his first-person narration subjectively constructs Daphne as the villain as his infatuation with her ceases. White femme fatales have been habitually categorized into two roles, as phantoms of male desire and fright, or as symbols of power entailing social commentary on unlimited female power whose lust is driven by a greater, ambiguous motivation (Grossman 19). It is thus the two-fold interpretative decision reliant on the receiver's semiotic judgment that, by considering feminist literary criticism, positions Daphne's verbal and physical belligerence to fit the "agent of evil" trope of other femme fatales and their intent to murder and defraud. Propelled as the typical femme fatale and corresponding to gendered fantasies, Daphne's intricate backstory gets deluged by the central story of Easy's own development. According to the theory of interpretation, Daphne's ambiguous portrayal illustrates the critical interpretative

debate of how to first classify what the sender as the author aims to reveal and second what the text indicates separate from the sender's intention; the text itself is therefore fragmented into its textual cohesion and information the receiver retrieves based on their individual suppositions (Eco 59).

The sender's revision of the femme fatale in the novel avoids the common divisive hostility between the femme fatale and other female characters since Daphne interacts almost solely with men. Employing the motif of the fatal woman as a self-governing and psychologically driven antagonist with an equivocal set of morals eventually ends with the continuation of Daphne's independent nature. Although the end suggests Daphne escaped to refrain from further confrontations, her exit more likely proposes the need of agents of the patriarchy to classify her as deviant. When Daphne first meets Easy, she adjusts her trickery to feminine stereotypes by appearing innocent and smiling "like a child" (Mosley 98). Categorizing herself as "just a girl" (97) further leads to Easy infantilizing her, which offers Daphne leverage in Easy's certainty of her white woman's purity. As the first example of her shapeshifting abilities, her femme fatale nature is at first concealed. In a matter of seconds, Daphne is capable of switching to her other identity of the femme fatale when she and Easy find her former boyfriend Richard dead in his house. It is she who acts coolly and efficiently – something more expected of Easy as the war veteran – when she tells him to "go to sleep and treat it like a dream. . . . That's a dead man, Mr. Rawlins. He's dead and gone. You just go home and forget what you saw" (101). She does not need to play a child in front of Easy anymore; despite being shocked that Richard died, there is no remorse preventing her from giving Easy direct orders. Daphne's behavior is unpredictable; she suddenly changes from a childlike-looking virtuous woman into one of mystery and temperament with salacious manners when she kisses Easy unprompted and explicitly suggests that under different circumstances, she would let him "eat this little white girl up" (101); the moment marks her transformation from a girl into a woman lacking morals and control, resembling a trickster unable to resist the temptation to satisfy her hunger.

Easy identifies Daphne as a "chameleon lizard" who changes "for her man" (187) and observes her capacity to change her demeanor further reflects in her later behavior, which is conventionally perceived as masculine. Daphne's double-voiced narrative lies in her Signifyin(g); Daphne within the narrative becomes the sender, verbalizing a thought in a specific way with the other person as a receiver being deceived and offered a limitless amount of meanings. With Easy as the narrative voice, stereotypical male projections about female desire become one of *Devil*'s central plot aspects. Furthermore, as a shapeshifter and boundary-crosser, Daphne is likewise compared to a man in her effortless embodiment of conventional mannerism of both genders when she "[urinates] so loud that it [reminds Easy] more of a man" (Mosley 186).

Tied to her skillful imitation, she further exhibits shamelessness and explicitly expresses her sexual desires. She does not wait for Easy's consent when she grabs his penis and asks if it hurts him to love her. Daphne's shameless speech is the first sign of her appetites, the neediness and greed that drive a trickster's belly. Easy notes how shameful Daphne's words make him feel when she holds him around the testicles, looking straight into his face while stroking his "erection up and down" (Mosley 186). When she stands over the tub and looks down on Easy, she tells him: "If my pussy was like a man's thing it'd be as big as your head" (186). This time, it is not Easy who views Daphne as a man, it is Daphne herself. Her deliberate behavior mixed with vulgarity proves the multiple identities that hide behind her two-ness. Because words are the trickster's medium, the trickster becomes the embodiment of a fluid, flexible, and politically radical narrative form. If we see Daphne's femininity and masculinity as interacting languages within the novel, it represents the release of diverse voices from what Smith calls "the hegemony of a single and unitary language" (Smith 12). Smith further notes how "tricksters can parody languages and worldviews because of their liminal cultural position. Their location outside the rigid social structures gives them a privileged perspective. A feminine language lives on the boundary and overthrows the hierarchies. The female voice laughs in the face of authority" (12).

Daphne challenges the binary and the established order including individual and communal identity. As the woman trickster, she is adjusted to the stereotypes of femininity and manages to pretend to be white, and look innocent, shy, and childlike. She is aware that being perceived as a girl would spark protectiveness in Easy, which is how she masks her secrets. Daphne's amorality manifests itself in stealing money from a dead man. She decides never to be seen again, and thus reveals the possibility of her trickster nature as a restless traveler, belonging to both worlds and not fitting in either. Despite her actions leading to the death of multiple people, Easy lets her go in the end with no repercussions and neither regards her complicity despite his strict classification of Daphne as the devil. Hence, to Easy, this villainous nature does not tie her to the murders. Due to exerting socially inappropriate behavior, Easy labelling Daphne as evil in the end is not deemed surprising. Despite Easy dealing with racism and racist hate crimes against him and the African American Watts community, he is still protected by established sociocultural norms of the patriarchy.

Nonetheless, according to Hyde, "the Devil and the trickster are not the same thing, though they have regularly been confused" (Hyde). Misinterpreting one for the other may aim at constructing trickster figures as homogenous entities, when in fact it is the ambiguity of tricksters' amorality that sets them apart from the devil. Furthermore, the uncertainty of Daphne's persona is emphasized by her femme fatale traits

that lead to even lesser clarity about her character. Daphne's refusal to abide by societal rules by passing shows her daring nature. Daphne's two-ness lies in not distinguishing between life and death; she appears in between one world known for its opportunities, and another known for irreversibly taking them. This chaos that Daphne inflicts upon Easy prevents him to see her as a potential perpetrator. Easy feels alive when he is with Daphne, at the same time, his thoughts of death further point to Daphne's trickster traits and her effortless traveling between opposing layers of one's being. In twentieth-century hard-boiled fiction, Daphne displays how trickery commonly associated with male characters, and the femme fatale trope usually associated with white women characters, pose political resistance and a change in constructing trickster character traits in a postcolonial narrative.

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