

# Reflections on the “Ownership Society” in Recent Black Fiction

David Witzling

According to Naomi Klein, George W. Bush “came to office determined to take [neoliberal rhetoric and policies] even further” than they had been taken under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the eighties by “[targeting] minority communities—traditionally out of the Republican Party’s reach—for easy homeownership. ‘Under 50 percent of African Americans and Hispanic Americans own a home,’ Bush observed in 2002. ‘That’s just too few.’” This appeal to minorities was an attempt to spread the values of what Bush called “the ownership society” throughout the early years of his presidency. As Klein explains, the rhetoric of the “ownership society” reiterated earlier neoliberal efforts to make working-class voters believe that they have a “stake” in a *laissez-faire* capitalist economy by identifying themselves as owners. For the Bush administration, this rhetoric reflected the specific policy goals of replacing Social Security with private investment accounts and supporting the subprime mortgage industry.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the collapse of the subprime market and with some evidence that this collapse has hurt African American homebuyers disproportionately, it is tempting to accuse the Bush administration of a cynical attempt to extract the limited resources of minority communities. Such efforts would further enrich established private interests and, consciously or not, also further empower what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness.”<sup>2</sup> Whether Bush’s call to extend the prerogatives of the “ownership society” to members of minority communities was sincere or cynical, this call is worth noting because it acknowledges the failure of supposedly colorblind policies under previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic, to address the wealth gap between white and minority citizens.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the notion that property rights are universal and, in the words of one economist, “the guardian of every other right”—a notion that underwrites the zealous passion of many members of the conservative movement but that is also a widely accepted axiom among many mainstream economists and political scientists—the Bush administra-

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tion acknowledged the racialization of wealth even as it reiterated a supposedly colorblind policy.<sup>4</sup>

The rhetoric of the “ownership society” is an instructive example of the way in which the financialization of the US economy over the last several decades has become coextensive with a financialization of society and culture, at least since the boom of the mid- to late nineties. Sociologist Randy Martin describes what he calls the “financialization of daily life” in recent decades as a “merger of business and life cycles, as a means for the acquisition of self.” The “refusal or inability to take up [the] new social contract” created by this process, he argues, has “violent,” “punishing effects.”<sup>5</sup> Financialization, then, is a mode of subjection whose coercive nature is masked by its rhetorical emphasis on individual opportunity and property rights. The Bush administration’s promotion of the “ownership society” may have had a coercive purpose, but it at least had the virtue of acknowledging that minority communities have generally been excluded from the public rhetoric celebrating and promoting financialization. As the Bush administration recognized, if the equation between capitalism and freedom is a fundamental and transhistorical truth, a conservative political administration ought at least to make an effort to persuade individuals and interest groups that have failed to see the light.

There is also widespread evidence that Black writers and intellectuals, with some exceptions, have not embraced the free-market ethos or the devotion to property rights promoted by the conservative movement and Republican governments.<sup>6</sup> Within literary studies, there is substantial consensus that the fundamental dependence of US capitalism on the exploitation of African American labor has been a central subject of the African American literary tradition. This tradition also critiques the racialization of African Americans as pathologized subordinates whose failures and limitations prove that they do not live up to the personal freedom and property rights nominally granted to them by their US citizenship. In recent years a more specific interest in the intersection of the racialization of Black subjects, histories of slavery and its aftermath, and the ongoing evolution of global capitalism on the part of Lorraine Hansberry, Grace Hong, and others has emerged; this line of thought has confirmed and extended Houston Baker’s now-classic argument that the blues and blues-inflected literary narrative attempt to articulate psychologically and politically empowering responses to economic exploitation on the part of postbellum Black subjects.<sup>7</sup> Kenneth W. Warren has recently criticized the emphasis African American studies has placed on the role of slavery in the formation of contemporary social and political identities for people of African descent in the United States on the grounds that this way of imagining contemporary Black communities obscures contemporary economic dislocations through a perverse nostalgia for a coherent, but historically contingent, racial formation that no longer reflects lived experience.

As Warren has suggested, the premise that contemporary Black identity

is constituted by the traumatic repetition of the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of legal or quasi-legal forms of oppression is so pervasive in contemporary literary and academic circles that its relevance to contemporary Black populations outside the elite spheres of universities and literary journals has gone largely unquestioned by novelists as well as scholars. He critiques Toni Morrison, in particular, for inviting a kind of nostalgia for a more oppressive past by suggesting that this past fostered a sense of racial unity.<sup>8</sup> However, recent scholarship on African American racial formations and capitalism addresses Warren's reservations in two ways. First, such scholarship rests on the premise that contemporary readers will recognize that the critique of the relationship between exchange and subjectivity, which occurs in earlier African American literature as well as in contemporary African American literature that privileges historiography, provides frameworks through which those readers can productively work through their own relationships to contemporary political economy. Second, this work begins to recast the notions of trauma, haunting, and historical recovery that are central to African American studies in terms of the specific and concrete histories of transactions and contracts that are truly present in the lives of contemporary individuals of African descent.

King, for example, documents the frequency with which Black authors have challenged the stereotype of the Black thief and attempted to mark the incalculable and probably unrecoverable damage caused by the theft of Black lives and labor under slavery and Jim Crow. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is one of King's central examples, suggesting the close relationship between her interest in authors' conscious social commentary on theft and Abdul JanMohamed's work on the "death-bound-subjectivity" he unearths in Wright's work.<sup>9</sup> Wright ties the terroristic subjection of Black men under Jim Crow to social conditions in contemporary northern cities of the 1930s and '40s, where there was limited support for Black political economic equality. I would suggest that for both King and JanMohamed, this linkage, serves implicitly—if not explicitly enough—to explain how the political economic structures as well as the racialized structures of feeling that defined Black existence under slavery and Jim Crow continue to inhabit the political economy of impoverished minority communities after 1965, in spite of the real socioeconomic changes occurring in this period.<sup>10</sup>

Walter Mosley and Michael Thomas, the novelists considered at length in the present study, build on the anticapitalist critique that is an enduring feature of the Black literary tradition. Furthermore, in choosing near-contemporary or contemporary settings and concerns, both consciously critique the mainstream culture's recent promotion of financial thinking as a mode of entry into the bourgeoisie and the zealous defense by conservatives of individual property rights as the basis of all freedoms. As they consciously represent and critique the resurgence of property rights and the financialization of US culture, and because they do so in near-contemporary settings, Mosley and Thomas should be

of interest to readers in multiple disciplines, particularly those interested in the interplay of Black identities based in historical experiences of traumatizing oppression and deprivation with contemporary economic discourses that reiterate the false promises of equal economic opportunity and the transcendence of race.

Subsequent sections of this article will focus respectively on Mosley's ongoing Easy Rawlins series (whose first novel was published in 1990) and Thomas's *Man Gone Down* (2007). The Easy Rawlins novels take place in Los Angeles between 1948 and 1967 and purposely link forms of economic subjection that are particular to the post-Civil Rights era to earlier phases of Black cultural and political-economic history. *Man Gone Down* is one of few recent African American novels whose settings are contemporary and that directly examine how the cultures created by deregulation and consumer finance are transforming Black identity. With respect to the ideological polemics encoded in the Right's repeated valorizations of ownership, two countervailing components of these novelists' representations of contemporary capitalism merit significant attention. On one hand, they emphatically demonstrate that the history of economic deprivation endured by African Americans has continued to prevent most African Americans from acquiring substantive economic security through individual lifetimes, let alone wealth that can be invested as capital and/or passed down across generations. This phenomenon, well documented by historians and social scientists, challenges a naïve faith in the justice of a colorblind marketplace.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, these writers engage with the tenets of classic liberal political economy and the logic of finance in ways that challenge the premise frequently claimed or assumed by Black intellectuals and scholars of Black literature that Black history and literary tradition are best seen through the prism of left-progressive values, which are not universally shared by historical or present-day Black communities.<sup>12</sup>

Both Mosley and Thomas are aware of the communitarian and anticapitalist ethos promoted by prominent Black intellectuals and often associated with Toni Morrison's work; her preeminence, I would suggest, is an important factor influencing both writers' treatments of Black identity formation. Yet while both reiterate that ethos, they also invite serious attention to the ways in which their characters' lives are inevitably inhabited by the rhetoric and ideology of ownership. In emphasizing the actual, albeit limited, freedoms of the contemporary Black middle class, and also the discourse of classic liberal political economy as a mode of subjection as well as empowerment, Mosley's and Thomas's work provides a useful supplement to scholarship that focuses on the way in which Black writers have allegorized the oppressive history of capitalism and its role in the racialization and subordination of the Black population.<sup>13</sup>

These novelists introduce characters whose development as individuals and whose investment in the Black community are inseparable from their statuses as owners, creditors, wage earners, and debtors. Such characters acquiesce willingly to certain limitations on their freedom, imposed by financial capitalism,

even as they repeatedly discover the damage capitalism continues to do to their lives and to the Black community. Although these novelists imagine ownership, credit, and debt as sources of continued subjection in their own right and means of perpetuating specifically racialized forms of social and economic subordination as well, their Black characters achieve personal security as well as community preservation only by compromising with the capitalist ideology that has historically subordinated them. The "ownership society" slogan in fact masks the complexity and abstraction of the already highly financialized national marketplace through a trope that suggests the possession of "real" property in the sense of real estate or productive capital. The novelists in this study challenge the falsely nostalgic comfort that the conservative movement finds in the vision of a class- and race-free nation of individual owners by articulating a pervasive anxiety over individual and collective financial debt. In contemporary society, ownership of one's labor, financial wealth, or real property is rarely a simple matter of physical possession or legal title but rather a complex and ongoing set of financial and professional relations. As these writers demonstrate, participation in the US economy as wage earners and mortgage holders may not lead to personal economic security for Black subjects. Even if it does, such participation also entails uncomfortable and potentially destructive compromises with dominant notions of ownership and exchange that undermine any communitarian ethos that could help sustain Black communities.

Like much "New Historicist" literary scholarship, my readings of Mosley and Thomas attempt to show that their novels can be read most productively in the light of conscious attention to the sociohistorical contexts in which they were produced. In this case, this entails examining the changing economic conditions for Black communities since the 1980s and also the changing rhetoric concerning the relationship between American racial formations and the supposed universality of classic liberal political economy. Discussion of the economy has been something of a national obsession since the crisis of 2008, and it is probably self-evident to most readers that a discourse of "Wall Street" and finance has grown in influence over the last several decades. For many New Historicists, it is important to remember Michel Foucault's notion that all histories are what he frequently called "histories of the present": this concept precludes the possibility of a truly objective or disinterested historiography but empowers the scholar to write a historical narrative that emphasizes the intersections between contemporary and past social structures. The "history of the present" that I believe Mosley and Thomas are both self-consciously writing represents a still-racialized community that has undergone significant sociopolitical transformation and that faces new iterations of racialized subjection in the period since 1965.

This specific history of the present enables, in turn, a cogent response to the newest iterations of claims that racial formations no longer determine the lives of minority subjects. Such claims are uttered not only by the conservative ad-

vocates of “ownership” but also by liberal academic literary critics such as Warren and the Americanist Walter Benn Michaels, who has argued vociferously that the attention scholars pay to racial formations detracts from the goal of economic justice.<sup>14</sup> Mosley and Thomas actually challenge the left-progressivist goals of many scholar-activists by suggesting that Black communities are still invested in a liberalism that is historically tied to their racialized subordination. Yet they also challenge those who insist on race-blindness as a goal or as a new reality by maintaining that understanding the racialization of wealth and of individualism is necessary for African Americans who continue to cultivate personal autonomy in pursuit of the fulfilling life that is supposedly made possible by only liberalism and property-based capitalism.

One of my purposes in comparing *Man Gone Down* to Mosley’s historical novels is to provoke further study of the reasons that post-Civil Rights era Black writers have so often turned toward fictionalized historiography rather than toward representations of contemporary Black communities. By accounting for the presence of a history of specifically economic transactions in his representations of the traumas of Black history, Mosley evinces intense engagement with contemporary economic concerns and with the emergent class divide in contemporary Black communities. Thus his work challenges Warren’s premise that Toni Morrison’s historicism is typical of recent writing by African Americans. A comparison of Morrison’s work to Mosley’s also suggests that Morrison herself is more engaged with contemporary political economy than Warren acknowledges. Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is the most famous example of the “contemporary narrative of slavery” or “neo-slave narrative,” the genre that has been central to post-Civil Rights era Black literary expression. Critics have widely noted that one of the purposes of this genre is to contest the distinction between past and present in order to represent a contemporary Black subjectivity that remains “haunted” by its past. As Arlene Keizer rightly points out, this genre overlaps with narratives whose settings are contemporary but that reflect on the ways in which the present is haunted by the history of enslavement.<sup>15</sup> The Easy Rawlins series bears out Keizer’s point in representing its characters’ attempts to participate in the post-World War II economic boom. The section of the article on Mosley will demonstrate that the questions of identity and subjectivity with which he and other Black historical novelists such as Morrison engage cannot be separated from matters of contemporary political economy. Mosley purposefully allegorizes contemporary Black economic concerns in his historical fiction in order to describe the relevance of histories of racialized economic oppression to contemporary African Americans’ participation in the national economy. His central characters attempt to achieve the economic security that is central to the bourgeois dream while also behaving in ways that benefit the Black community as a whole and that serve a general objective of economic fairness.

The narrator and protagonist of Thomas’s *Man Gone Down*, an unnamed

African American man who struggles to attain economic security for his mixed-race family during the early 2000s, is involved in a struggle similar to that of Mosley's characters. As Warren observes, this novel focuses on the conflict between the narrator's invocation of a Black identity, conditioned by historical forms of racial oppression, and the petit-bourgeois goals he adopts as a partner in an interracial marriage with three children.<sup>16</sup> Although he has benefited from post-Civil Rights era attempts to promote social and economic equality, his fragile connection to Black communities and to the ideal of economic fairness exemplifies a new, historically distinct social crisis that has only begun to be articulated by Black writers. Unemployed and facing substantial consumer debt, he spends the four-day period covered in the novel trying to find money for a lease for a new apartment and private-school tuition for his children in gentrified Brooklyn. He is keenly aware that his economic situation and his ambivalence toward his participation in the culture of urban gentrification cannot, in themselves, be attributed to his race (as the struggles of Mosley's characters definitively are), but his sense of racial identification nevertheless structures his affective experience of his situation.

Echoing the ambivalent attitudes toward ownership portrayed by Mosley, Thomas suggests that the imposition of financial thinking on Black individuals is another manifestation of a now-classic form of racialized liberalism. Insofar as Black individuals accept this imposition at all, it remains a compromised form of psychological subjection even when it does enable the individual to attain economic advantages. By appropriating the universalizing concepts of economic freedom and opportunity that the political right has generally claimed as its own and by associating this discourse with communal historical experience, both Mosley and Thomas combat the colorblind rhetoric of eighties and nineties conservatism and neoliberalism, rhetoric that undermines the Black community by dividing it into an emergent middle class and a pathologized "underclass" without defining either group by race as such. Moreover, by emphasizing that the ideology of economic freedom was central to chattel slavery and to post-emancipation forms of racial subjugation, they suggest that past socioeconomic oppression inhabits contemporary economic arrangements. Contemporary government policies and private financial practices that are underwritten by a supposed economic freedom may perpetuate this subjugation, even if they are administered in a colorblind manner.

## **Easy Rawlins and Contemporary Class Politics**

Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, whose individual plots concern Easy's investigations of grisly crimes, also charts his ambivalent experiences as an industrial laborer, home owner, landlord, tax cheat, janitor, and licensed private investigator and sets these experiences against the backdrop of Black social his-

tory. As several critics have argued, Mosley is interested in the correspondences between the novels' historical settings and contemporary political and economic concerns. This point is suggested at the beginning of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), the first novel in the series, when the protagonist worries about being unable to meet his mortgage payments after losing a job at a munitions plant.<sup>17</sup> Mosley responds to coded representations of the Black poor as irresponsible state wards in the Reagan and Clinton eras by focusing on a protagonist who embraces the American ideals of economic independence and wealth generation. Moreover, by setting the novel at a relatively recent historical moment, Mosley is able to present a desire for economic security that takes forms very familiar to readers while also signifyin(g) on contemporary narratives of slavery like *Beloved* and linking Easy's situation to more extreme conditions of economic subjection than even he faces.

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy's desire to hold on to his mortgaged house is the reason he reluctantly agrees to gather information for DeWitt Albright, a powerful white underworld figure. A central conceit of the series is that various white patrons, who are either in the private sector or are affiliated with Los Angeles' white-dominated civic institutions, will remunerate Easy for using his intimate knowledge of the Black community on their behalf. While narrating the meeting with Albright, Easy laments the burdens of being a homeowner. He explains that when he "was a poor man, and landless," friends would readily give him a meal or shelter, "but when I got a mortgage I found that I needed more than just friendship. Mr. Albright wasn't a friend but he had what I needed."<sup>18</sup> Easy finds that property ownership forces him to participate in the white social world and that it correspondingly generates new obligations to others; these factors undermine the satisfaction and security that wealth is meant to provide. In this example, it is clear to him that employers such as Albright have neither his personal interests nor those of his community at heart, but he must contract with them anyway if he is to retain short-term financial solvency—let alone achieve the long-term economic security, personal freedom, and power to help friends and community members that he seeks. Over and over, Easy finds that new economic arrangements will solve his short-term problems but will also force him into new debts or to cause harm to others. If Easy may be understood as representative of post-World War II Black males, this pattern affirms that American capitalist markets in labor and real estate not only fail to enable such individuals to attain long-term security but also force them to succeed only at one another's expense. This challenges the common notion, embraced by both Black and white liberals, that when individuals move into the Black middle class they help the entire Black community.

As the plot of *Devil in a Blue Dress* unfolds, the character Albright both demonstrates and says explicitly that involvement in capitalism is a kind of subjection rather than the achievement of liberty that its defenders generally

claim. At one point in the story, Easy, who believes he has finished the work he agreed to perform for Albright, comes home to find that Albright has broken into his house. This act symbolizes the precariousness of Easy's membership in the ownership class. Suspicious that Easy possesses more information than he has provided, Albright insists that Easy must continue to help him find a missing woman, to which Easy responds:

"You don't think I did my job? Shit, I give you the money back."

"Too late for that, Mr. Rawlins. You take my money and you belong to me."

"I don't belong to anybody."

"We all owe out something, Easy. When you owe out then you're in debt and when you're in debt then you can't be your own man. That's capitalism."<sup>19</sup>

Albright makes the chilling suggestion that when African American citizens participate in the modern national economy, they are subject to the same economic ideologies and frequently the same white supremacy that enabled American chattel slavery to develop.

Furthermore, Albright's assertion that everyone at all involved in twentieth-century capitalism is a debtor ties Easy's personal dilemma and the ongoing alienation of African Americans from the national economy not only to the history of slavery but also to the contemporary process of financialization. Mosley evokes the Marxist claim that the owner of capital will inevitably exploit the laborer by extracting as much labor value as possible from him. However, as Albright claims that merely by agreeing to employment Easy owes him an ongoing debt, Easy faces a different dilemma than that of being paid a wage that is too low. He is instead faced with a world in which others, without his consent, are ubiquitously and perpetually revising the terms of obligations that he may or may not have agreed to in the first place, a situation that hints at contemporary experiences of credit-card and mortgage debt. Albright, for his part, acts as a banker raising the interest rate on a consumer's debt, whose claim that the consumer has an obligation to pay masks his use of the consumer's contract to help the bank service its own debts. "We all owe out something," as Albright puts it, so we might as well get used to paying in perpetuity. Mosley suggests that even if a labor contract or mortgage helps a Black individual personally, it also helps Albright and others like him perpetuate income inequalities between America's racialized communities and even the persistent structural racism that pervades US society.

Critics have generally concluded that Mosley's values are consistent with those of other contemporary writers such as Morrison who assert the presentness of an oppressive past in the Black imaginary in order to challenge dominant

narratives of US history.<sup>20</sup> I would add that they signify on narratives of slavery such as *Beloved* in a very specific way: they represent the African American past and reiterate the trauma of the economics of slavery to direct attention much more thoroughly to the emergence of a post-Civil Rights era subjectivity that echoes and comments on the conservative movement's discourse of colorblind economic opportunity.<sup>21</sup> When Mosley describes Easy's recognition that consumer debt is a form of subjection whose psychological and material effects are akin to those of slavery and whose forms are descended from the economic system of which slavery was a part, he anticipates the later arguments of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best. Each contends that in the decades immediately following emancipation, the notion that freedmen owed an ongoing debt to the United States for their freedom was inscribed in law and literature as a fundamental component of American Black subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> It follows from Hartman's and Best's work that gendered stereotypes of Black male and female irresponsibility, which were used to promote the dismantling of the Great Society welfare state, reiterate inscriptions of debt obligation into the new forms Black subjectivity takes in the contemporary moment.<sup>23</sup>

Another of the conceits of the series is that a compulsion to stay close to the violent criminal underworld represented by his best friend Raymond "Mouse" Alexander at once enables Easy to be successful as an investigator and undercuts his ability to occupy fully the identity of the responsible working-class or bourgeois man.<sup>24</sup> The rhetoric of Easy's narration entails the pathologizing of Mouse's violent tendencies. In *A Red Death* (1991), for example, Easy will call Mouse "a killer" and observe that although "Mouse was the truest friend I ever had . . . if there is such a thing as true evil he was that too."<sup>25</sup> This universalizing and absolute rhetoric of morality is undercut by comments and events that force Easy's and the reader's attention to the connection between the two men's propensity for violence (Easy will readily fight and he is brutalized frequently, even though he is against murder) and the subordinate and criminal identity imposed on them as Black males. *Gone Fishin'*, the first novel Mosley wrote about Easy and Mouse, takes place primarily in Texas in 1939, and intimates that Easy's father abandoned him and was possibly killed by a group of white men after he protested being underpaid for work at a slaughterhouse. Easy thinks about and dreams about his father as Mouse involves him indirectly in the act of killing his own (Mouse's) stepfather, who had abused both Mouse and Mouse's mother.

A conflict between invocations of universalizing moral rhetoric and the imperative to articulate the complex role of violence in post-Jim Crow Black male subjectivity is thus revealed to be central to Easy's characterization. No longer shaped by abandoned forms of juridical and economic racial subordination, his success as a citizen or businessman depends, it would seem, on his adoption of a language and a mode of consciousness that forces him to detach his professional experiences under Los Angeles' regime of racial liberalism from his own

personal memory of Jim Crow–dominated Louisiana and Texas. Mosley implies that this imperative to speak and think in a way that denies the relevance of personal and collective memories to a subject's present political economic situation determines that the subject will experience his or her new economic or political freedoms as forms of self-alienation.

Easy and Mouse are inversions of each other's choices *vis-à-vis* participation in social, economic, and political integration into national society. As such, the two characters also suggest the way in which Black subjectivity, as described by JanMohamed, adapts itself in the political economic milieu of the limited liberalization of racialized labor and financial markets represented by Civil Rights–era Los Angeles. JanMohamed insists that African Americans under both chattel slavery and Jim Crow were reduced by the terroristic threat of death to a condition he calls "bare life," which entails near-absolute powerlessness and the knowledge that without acquiescence to the tyrannical order imposed by white masters, actual death may occur at any moment.<sup>26</sup> For Negro men in Mosley's novels, the choice between actual death and "bare life" is replaced by a choice between the constant compromises with figures who remind one of one's racialized subordination as a second-class citizen (Easy's choice) and actions that will be perceived as—and may truly be—pathological (Mouse's choice).

Unlike the choice of either "bare life" or death, both of these choices may enable a combination of short-term physical and economic survival and opportunities for further cultivation of agency and psychic freedom. However, neither empowers the subject to reconcile death-bound impulses that survive from more absolute forms of enslavement with the normative subject formations expected of the participant in a national and still white-dominated society. Nor do these choices diminish the power of stereotypes that prefigure contemporary urban Black men as sociopaths and criminals, regardless of which choice they make at a given moment. It follows that all of the "progress" that Easy makes toward economic security and integration into the national society and culture comes at the expense of his sense of autonomy. Insofar as Easy's, or any Black individual's, racialization gives her or him only the choice between an identity as a lesser human being and second-class citizen and the desire for a raceless liberal subjectivity that is scarcely attainable for anyone who has already been racially "othered," that individual can never attain the functionally secure bourgeois identity that some non-Black Americans might.

Over the course of the series, Easy's income and wealth fluctuate a great deal as he performs a variety of jobs and as he gains and loses property. These fluctuations in wealth suggest that changes in hiring and lending practices after World War II are not simply manifestations of a covert white supremacy that continues to oppress African Americans uniformly. On the other hand, Mosley also uses Easy's changing status to suggest a sense of economic insecurity that traverses boundaries of wealth and status in the Black community. This pre-

carious state is due in part to such phenomena as the wealth gap between Black and white Americans and the alienation of Black members of the professional-managerial classes from both the white bourgeoisie and from poor and working-class Black communities. In *A Red Death* (1991) and *White Butterfly* (1992), which take place during the early to mid-fifties, Easy owns the title to his home and has also been able to buy several rental properties as an investor, but in the next novel, *Black Betty* (1994), which takes place in 1961, he is no longer “flush with the income from apartment buildings I owned” because he had “stretched [himself] pretty thin trying to make it in the real estate game.”<sup>27</sup> In *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), which takes place in 1963, Easy has abandoned his informal job of doing “favors,” or investigations, in order to become a legitimate “working-man,” the head custodian at a local public school, figuring that a regular wage will be the best way for him to provide for his adoptive children. By 1965, when *Little Scarlet* (2004) takes place, he retains his job at the school but has opened an office from which he has resumed the business of “favors” and information gathering. As a result of help he gives to the police in solving a crime they believe to be connected to the Watts riots, he is issued a license as an official private investigator and, by the next novel, *Cinnamon Kiss* (2005), he has given up the custodian position to be a full-time private investigator. In *Blonde Faith* (2007), which ends with Easy’s apparent death, Easy remains a licensed professional but he is also struggling desperately to keep himself afloat economically.<sup>28</sup>

The post-Watts novels, which have been published since 2004, are particularly significant with regard to recent economic discourse. They suggest that membership in the professional-managerial class—which is made literal in Easy’s receipt of the first private investigator’s license issued to a Negro in Los Angeles—has substituted for an actual opportunity to attain the economic security Easy had sought for himself and his community early in the series. As the owner of an official license to do knowledge-based labor who also remains poor, Easy comes to represent both sides of the class divide between the emergent Black bourgeoisie and impoverished urban Black communities. This implies that a critical struggle with the discourse of economic opportunity inhabits lives on both sides of that divide, while also suggesting that some scholars and voices in the popular press overstate the case that the Black community has fractured.<sup>29</sup>

In the earlier example from *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley uses the villain Albright as a prototype for advocates of the colorblind and universalist “ownership society.” Albright is a distinctive figure in the novel because he is willing to hire Easy as an investigator at all. This act distinguishes him from the majority of white characters, who openly treat Easy as an inferior due to his race. Albright’s savvy in hiring a Black worker for his knowledge rather than his body thus symbolizes what counts in the national imaginary as progress for African Americans: individuals advancing in wealth and status by taking new positions in an integrated economy and polity. As we have seen, Albright’s comments that

Easy "belongs" to him and that all individuals involved in capitalism are debtors rhetorically link Easy's situation as a laborer to the contemporary obsession with finance as well as to the economics of slavery. In claiming that ownership of and debt to others are universal features of capitalism, Albright also complicates the assumption common among Black intellectuals that contemporary economic exchanges between Blacks and whites continue to be shaped by the history of chattel slavery both affectively and economically. Figures such as Albright help certain Black individuals advance while enforcing in their rhetoric the notion that the same economic conditions govern Black and white individuals. If we see Easy as a representative of the contemporary Black professional, one of the central dilemmas he faces is that of negotiating for his labor and for his material property in the language of universally applicable economic truths while continuing to believe that history contradicts those supposed truths.

*Little Scarlet*, the 2004 novel that links Easy's acquisition of a professional license to the Watts riots, is particularly important to Mosley's representation of economic opportunity. Since it was published during the period of Bush's "ownership society" speeches and also the early years after September 11, 2001, the novel invites a comparison between the ideological demands of public political rhetoric in those years and Easy's compromises with white-dominated institutional authorities. Easy empathizes with the rioters, but he agrees to help the police solve a murder of a Negro girl that may have been racially motivated because, like the white establishment figures who contact him, he is against further violence. His treatment by the police illustrates some genuine markers of change. For example, the deputy commissioner issues Easy a letter stating that he is acting on police business, and so, for the first time, he is able to challenge the harassment he faces when his investigation takes him into white-dominated areas of Los Angeles. Easy speaks defiantly to the policemen who contact him in order to make this happen, and so one of Mosley's lessons is that, regardless of the destruction caused by the riots, they truly did embolden African Americans to leverage the impulse toward defiance into genuine social and economic gains. This point is driven home again at the end of the novel when Easy obtains his official license.

Easy's example suggests that before Watts, knowledge-based Black labor would be dismissed as illegitimate, but that after Watts, Black individuals with strong mental acumen can use their skills as leverage to enter a legitimate professional sphere, the persistence of death-bound subjectivity notwithstanding. Although participation in the ideology of the American marketplace may entail an acquiescence that is at odds with the moral imperative to resist white domination, such entreaties to the Black community as Bush's "ownership society" speech entail a limited acknowledgment of the history of Black resistance. Mosley illustrates these points by inviting comparisons between Easy and supporting characters who succeed professionally or economically. Also in *Little Scarlet*,

Jackson Blue, an intellectually brilliant but morally compromised Black man who has been involved in various hustles throughout the series, gets a job with a computer company. This plot twist further cements the connection Mosley draws between Watts and Black professionalization. By *Blonde Faith*, Jackson and his girlfriend Jewelle, who has been quietly making money as a real-estate investor for many years, own an expensive home in a newly integrated neighborhood.

The other major character who attains some economic success is Mouse. In the context of the theme of Black professionalization that emerges in the later novels of the series, Mouse's characterization suggests that in a racist national imaginary the category of successful Black businessman is always equated with that of the outlaw. Like the similar personae of gangsta rappers that were also invented in Los Angeles during the late eighties and early nineties, Mouse is a new iteration of the "badman" character type who, in Jonathan Munby's words, "[embodies] the most ruthless and dysfunctional aspects of what passes as *legitimate*" in American capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

Another way in which the series responds to the contemporary rhetoric of colorblind economic opportunity is in its emphasis on what Easy repeatedly calls a "down home" practice of bartering favors, a practice whose purpose is to balance the competing ideals of communitarian group well-being and individual rights. Mosley represents the practical impossibility of keeping this system of compassionate barter alive as a tragic consequence of African Americans' psychological and social integration into the mainstream American economy. Easy's Black-centered communitarian ethos is challenged not only by external social forces but also by the way in which he thinks in an economic discourse that favors individual desires and rights. An example from *Blonde Faith* illustrates Easy's ongoing belief that compassionate barter is good for the general social welfare. Easy needs to talk to someone who works at a fish market operated by a white man whom Easy had once helped to exonerate from accusations of kidnapping and raping a Black girl. When the man Easy had helped asks why he has not received a bill, Easy explains, "Down where I come from we trade favors" and suggests that "maybe every month or so [he] could drop by" the fish market for "a couple of sand dabs for frying."<sup>31</sup>

In *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy introduces this system to a white gangster who could lead him to clues in a case, but this time he suggests that it is largely consistent with the values of white capitalists. He explains that "one thing [he] learned down home was that sometimes men can trade off their losses and come out with a profit."<sup>32</sup> While it seems clear that Mosley prefers Easy's ideal of compassionate barter to the unchecked profit motive that drives American capitalism, the very places in the novels that emphasize the difference between "down home" habits and those of the legitimate white business community also serve to establish two basic premises of classic liberal political economy: that a sense

of property rights is natural and, as a consequence, that a system of exchange based on private property is also natural.

Easy never abandons his compassionate ethos. Yet he repeatedly faces decisions about whether to pursue means of earning money that will enable him and his adopted children to survive, but whose social costs will undercut his good intentions. At the end of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, he is able to keep \$10,000 of stolen money that no one involved in the novel's plot remains alive to claim. No one will suffer because Easy keeps this money, but Easy still benefits from others' exploitative acts—a point driven home by the violent deaths of many minor characters associated with the novel's plot. In *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy attempts to solve a series of murders because he fears losing his legitimate job as a "workingman" since the police suspect him of the crimes. This novel ends with Easy having preserved his job and his "patchwork family" and having entered the most serious romantic relationship of his life, but his gains are undercut by the possibility that he has caused Mouse's death. His responsibility for the suffering of others, however partial or indirect, undermines his attempts to differentiate his mode of being from Mouse's as well as his attempts to differentiate legitimate and fair participation in the marketplace from acts of implicitly violent exploitation.

While Mosley certainly gives credit to the compassionate ethos Easy attempts to uphold, he is just as interested in the seemingly inevitable moments when Easy's attempts to trade for compassion are superseded if not co-opted by the profit motive. Part of the drama of these stories lies in the fact that small-scale attempts to hold onto limited capital in order to stave off poverty will still cause others to suffer. Easy emphatically expresses his uncomfortable recognition of this problem in *Cinnamon Kiss*, which takes place in 1966. Here, his adopted daughter Feather suffers from a deadly disease that might be cured if Easy sends her to an expensive clinic. Easy is willing to abandon his ethics in order to save his daughter's life as he contemplates taking part in a high-stakes robbery with Mouse. He observes that "the people" in Watts "had heart disease and high blood pressure, cancer of every type, and deep self-loathing for being forced to their knees on a daily basis" but, because of his daughter's situation, "[he] didn't have time to care."<sup>33</sup> Mosley in this way suggests that the communitarian impulse, which drives Easy to save the life of his adopted daughter, is entangled in decisions that lead some individuals to be better off at the expense of others. Easy's impulse to put love for his daughter before generalized compassion and before generalized ethical standards is represented as natural. Although Mosley may also suggest that the absence of publicly funded healthcare forces Easy into an unnecessary moral dilemma, he still gives substantial dramatic weight to Easy's claim to a personal investment in his family that does not extend to the broader community.

"If I died saving Feather," Easy says later in the novel, "then it was a good

trade.”<sup>34</sup> Yet when his girlfriend Bonnie has an affair with a wealthy man who is able to gain Feather entry into the clinic, Feather lives, but Easy is unable to forgive Bonnie and ends their relationship. In *Blonde Faith*, Easy resumes his long-abandoned drinking habit, and the novel ends with Easy having driven over a cliff while drinking. Mosley suggests that Easy has not recovered from the desperation the events in *Cinnamon Kiss* caused him. In suggesting that Easy trades his life for that of his daughter, Mosley once again rhetorically links the exchange of human lives to the legitimate exchange of commodities. This time, however, this rhetoric indicates the extent to which the belief in private, individual ownership has penetrated the thinking of even those who would benefit most from, for example, a government-sponsored healthcare system, preventing them from idealizing a socialist society. Mosley has referred to Easy as a tragic figure, and it seems that his acceptance that the life of his family needs to be imagined as an exchange is central to his tragedy.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Man Gone Down* and the Financialization of Black Consciousness**

Kenneth Warren may be right to suggest that novelists such as Morrison who work primarily in historical fiction turn to the imagination of a Black community united against overt white supremacy because they are unable to imagine traversing socioeconomic borders that divide African American culture today. I would argue, however, that the representation and evocation of slavery and pre-Civil Rights era oppression in Black historical fiction are not, as Warren insists, a kind of nostalgia that obscures contemporary socioeconomic concerns. Instead, such representations have served as a necessary, if hardly ideal, way for both fiction writers and scholars to wrestle with the class divisions that have evolved in African American society and with the intersection of Black middle class and white liberal resistance to late capitalism over the course of the post-Civil Rights era. It is possible that such historical settings enable them to portray a complex of attitudes that genuinely represents contemporary Black experience across socioeconomic borders, given that the class divide truly does separate Black subjectivity into divergent forms. Mosley’s historical novels suggest that this class-traversing complex of attitudes includes both the desire to take advantage of a theoretical equality of opportunity and a continuing resistance to white domination. This complex of attitudes also includes a sense of intertwined financial and affective vulnerability that reflects the precarious position of a group whose relative wealth and status separate it both from the majority of African Americans and from bourgeois and wealthy whites who continue to benefit from their possessive investment in whiteness. These attitudes are echoed in Michael Thomas’s *Man Gone Down* and other recent novels that relate the concerns of Black historical fiction to the financialization of contemporary American society.

*Man Gone Down* provides a perceptive portrait of an anticapitalist ambiva-

lence regarding the politics of urban gentrification that inhabits contemporary public culture and that has surfaced, somewhat less perceptively, in a number of recent novels such as Nathan McCall's *Them* (also 2007). Such novels tend to lament the way in which gentrification displaces working-class and poor communities of racial minorities and to chart the persistence of racialized behavior in the mixed-race communities that gentrification begets. In the cases of McCall and Thomas, Black male protagonists' ambivalent participation in the culture and economics of their gentrified neighborhoods is tightly correlated with their immersion in the financial economy. As McCall's protagonist Barlowe Reed observes white homebuyers occupying his neighborhood, he attempts to buy the house he has been renting from his white landlord. Through these efforts, his attitude toward money and finance changes. One of the first things the reader learns about Barlowe is that he "hated paying taxes," but as he commits himself to buying a house and to preserving a Black presence in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward, the reader sees him negotiating with an obviously racist supervisor for a raise and, later, "trying to crack the mystery of stocks and bonds" while reading the paper.<sup>36</sup>

*Man Gone Down* takes place over four days in August 2002, the period of Bush's "ownership society" push. Thomas's unnamed narrator, an aspiring writer who is married to a white woman with whom he has three children, is both much more enmeshed in the financial economy and much more reluctant to adopt its values than McCall's Barlowe. Whereas Barlowe has \$138 in a savings account and knows that "with his shaky credit, no mortgage banker in his right mind would extend him a loan," Thomas's narrator recalls the moment of "quick and silent" "transition," when "savings turned into debt" as he and his wife "sat at the kitchen table . . . with the credit card statements and Marta's new lease and the boys' tuition bills." Whereas Barlowe tries to enter the ownership class without reservations, the unnamed narrator finds it difficult to meet his wife's insistence that he devise a "plan" to find the money for a new lease and for the children's tuition payments because he believes that capitalist values and Black identity are incompatible. At one point in the story, the narrator recalls that after turning on the television several months after 9/11, he heard a media pundit "posit[ing] the same tired argument promoting *Black entrepreneurship*: Money. Power." If not a conscious reference to the "ownership society" program, this passage nevertheless evokes the way conservatives during the Bush administration attempted to attract minorities to their values and programs as part of a perceived imperative to foster unified national sentiment in the wake of 9/11. In response to the pundit, the narrator asks himself rhetorically "If you and yours have been exploited for capital, then why, in turn, would you covet that capital?"<sup>37</sup> The question reiterates attitudes taught him by his mother and his academic mentor, a fictional scholar of Black religion at CUNY. By giving the narrator this background, Thomas associates his anticapitalist sentiments with

an authentically Black political tradition. Regardless of whether the views this tradition teaches are correct in the abstract, the narrator's affective and intellectual identity as a Black man inhibits his ability to function pragmatically in the public political economy and that of his own interracial household.

McCall's novel suggests that the involvement of African Americans in the culture and economies of consumer finance might turn out to be benign. The novel ends with Barlowe buying a house from Mr. Smith, a longtime Black neighbor who is willing to "cut [Barlowe] some slack" because he is Black. Both Mr. Smith and Barlowe are empowered by the balance they find between commitment to mutual support as Black men and acceptance of the basic values and institutions of financial capitalism. Mr. Smith and his wife should be able to "live real comfortable off [their] pensions and the money [they] make from sellin' this house" and Barlowe will be part of an ongoing Black presence in the Old Fourth Ward.<sup>38</sup> Thomas is more critical of the psychological and social effects of financialization and more interested in the cognitive dissonance and outright suffering experienced by his narrator even in the absence of overt political and economic oppression. However, in spite of Thomas's meticulous characterization of his narrator's ambivalence, both novelists chart the processes by which their characters adopt the discourses of finance that have become prevalent in the national public culture and attempt to find ways to reconcile those discourses with a seemingly incompatible Black cultural identity.

The narrative of *Man Gone Down* juxtaposes long passages recounting the narrator's memories of his family and his education with sections that set the contemporary scene of a wealthy and gentrified New York City and that follow the narrator's attempts to secure the money he needs. The narrator turns to memory and meditation—focusing on his Boston youth and his education as a "talented" Black individual—as a means of making sense of his current sociocultural existence in an interracial family and his current economic situation. He muses on being "damaged" by his parents' poverty and alcoholism and his father's abandonment and on being a "social experiment" in a post-Civil Rights era educational system devoted to erasing the history of racial oppression through meritocratic advancement of individual Black students like himself. This personal history suggestively links him to the collective transformation of Black communities in northern cities; in this way, Thomas evokes but also critiques the prevalent tradition in Black fiction of allegorizing contemporary economic thought and conditions by historicizing the Black past. His dilemma seems to be that his sense of racial identity, shaped by his parents' and educators' sense of the enduring collective oppression of African Americans by white Americans, is largely irrelevant to the individual economic problems he must solve during the four days when the novel takes place. Yet his current life—his marriage to Claire and his alienated participation in the culture of gentrified Brooklyn—seems to offer him no acceptable identity to take on. The absence of

a sense of identity weakens his willingness and ability to adopt and implement the sort of plan for economic recovery that Claire has demanded.

The narrator's recollection of the moment he and his wife discovered they were in debt while poring over credit-card statements provokes a series of older memories, including those of his father's multiple attempts to invest money in friends' ventures "that most people could tell [were] preselected for failure." He recalls, too, that, although his mother "never tried to hide the fact that [they], as a family, were preselected for failure, [his father] did."<sup>39</sup> Through the notion of "preselection," this passage ruefully juxtaposes the way in which the issuers of credit cards present debt to consumers as a privilege and an opportunity to close the racial wealth gap that is a source of anxiety for the narrator. The rhetoric of "preselection" also recalls the logic of racial determinism that the supposedly colorblind economy, created by deregulation, is supposed to have erased. By acknowledging that most observers would be able to see that his father's investment plans were foolish, the narrator adopts the basic logic of the consumer finance industry and suggests that his father was a singularly bad credit risk. To him, this belief overrules his mother's correct intimation that the father's failures were also the results of general conditions facing Black workers and investors, structural racism in US society, and covert white supremacist policies. The narrator has felt the sense of shame that accrues to individual failure in the marketplace even as he also knows that the racialized structure of American political economy made it difficult, if not impossible, for his father to succeed. The figure of "preselection," as used here, intimates that regardless of the intention of the bankers and regardless of the colorblindness of the algorithms that determine who is "preselected" for credit at a given moment, such "purely economic" decisions are indeed dependent on the history of racial hierarchy that created the economic conditions in which contemporary Black families live.

Further, the novel suggests that this point holds true not only for families in the seventies—the period between the Civil Rights Movement and deregulation when the narrator was a child—but also for families such as the narrator's own in the early 2000s. By linking these specific historical moments, Thomas extends the history of African Americans' ambivalent adoption of the logic of personal economic responsibility, which we have seen in Mosley's work, in two ways. First, *Man Gone Down* reiterates Mosley's suggestions that the dynamic tension between the adoption of a classic liberal form of property rights and the communitarian values fostered within Black communities (represented in the novel by both the narrator's mother and his former academic mentor) has been an enduring element of Black identity. Second, the insistence of novelists and scholars that the African American past continues to inhabit the present is further legitimated by Thomas's attention to how Black subjectivity has evolved throughout the dismantling of the overtly racialized, pre-Civil Rights political economy. Unemployed and beset by consumer debt, the narrator faces a cultur-

ally distinct form of anxiety as he recalls the interrelated problems of economic failure, family dysfunction, and racial oppression in his own childhood household. The novel suggests that this will be the case for any man in the narrator's position, regardless of whether or not the financial system has purged itself of openly racist acts such as providing different rates for mortgages for Black home buyers (a point discussed in the novel by one of the narrator's high-school friends as one of the many racial factors that hurt the Black community in the eighties).

As the narrator walks through Brooklyn, he remarks frequently on his alienation from white residents, who talk nonchalantly about the reputations of their children's private schools and who sometimes make the narrator aware of his racial difference. In one notable passage, he describes being stared at by white people at a food shop as if he does not belong, lamenting that "it's strange that it should require an imagination to understand that I like olive oil and the bargain prices on Bulgarian feta too."<sup>40</sup> While painful, such moments of visible and palpable racialism may be trivial politically; no one objects to the narrator's right to reside in the neighborhood, shop at the store, or earn the wages necessary to purchase that olive oil. Yet this possibility only underscores the poignancy of other passages that, for example, describe the narrator's mother moving him from a house to a variety of small apartments in impoverished neighborhoods around Boston after his father leaves. In those passages about the narrator's childhood, there are no visible manifestations of racism. Moreover, while he and his mother experience poverty, the narrator is taking part in Boston's busing program, attending integrated schools, and being rewarded for his merit as a promising Black student. If it made sense for the narrator's mother to equate her poverty with racial oppression during the seventies, then it makes sense psychologically—if not in terms of his political economic behavior—for the narrator to associate his financial obligations, his reluctance to accept those obligations as personal responsibilities, and his alienation from the complacent racialism of white neighbors with the history of oppression. This occurs in spite of all signs that he lives under different and better conditions than those traditionally faced by African Americans.

The narrator finds the money to meet his immediate needs and the novel ends with him rejoining his family. Yet through the final moments of the novel, he continues to react to and contemplate his circumstances rather than to make choices that he can look back on with self-respect. He solves his immediate financial problems by cheating on the last shot of a golf game to which he has been invited by Marco, the Italian American corporate lawyer with whom he has been residing while looking for a new apartment. The other men—all white—who are betting on this game are risking only their disposable income, whereas the narrator has been put in the awkward situation of having to hide that he is broke and bet money he does not actually possess.

Rather than presenting this plot thread as a moral dilemma for the narrator,

Thomas uses it to illustrate the absurd incongruity between the virtual social equality shared by all contemporary Americans and the wealth inequality that is both self-evident and ignored. By accepting the presence of a Black man at a private and expensive golf club on Long Island's North Shore and by demanding that he participate in the social conventions of the event, namely betting money that he does not actually possess, the other men subtly coerce the narrator into behaving as an owner. It would certainly be more of a betrayal to Claire, his wife, if he were to lose the game legitimately than to win it illegitimately, and the same might be true for the white men in this scene who wish to feel, it seems, that Black men are members of their club, part of their society, and equal participants in their political economy. The narrator, aware of these new forms of publicly unspeakable racial dynamics, is therefore no more and no less melancholy or empowered after the game than before. Instead, he has implicitly found that the objections to contemporary capitalism and its social and psychological effects that he has voiced in the narrative space of the novel have been repressed once again from the space of public social activity and, implicitly, from the national political economy.

In one of the novel's final scenes, right before the narrator buys a bus ticket to rejoin his family, Gavin, an Irish American who is the narrator's closest friend, voices what has become a common sentiment in American public culture in recent years: the feeling that the banking and consumer finance industries hide responsibility for practices that hurt many consumers behind the complexity and abstract nature of the financial system. As he and the narrator sit on the steps of a Manhattan post office looking at skyscrapers that presumably house corporate headquarters and legal firms, Gavin exclaims, "*Who's responsible, goddamit! I demand transparency! I demand accountability! . . . I want answers—one-to-one ratios, you slippery fuckers!*"<sup>41</sup> Gavin is suspicious that the financial industry uses the complexity of its transactions to take advantage of the public, but he seems self-aware that shouting abstract terms such as "transparency" and "accountability" is futile because he, like most members of the public, has little understanding of how contemporary finance works. Although Gavin is the speaker, this speech illustrates the specific way in which both the practices of financial institutions and the culture of financialization have informed the narrator's own melancholic response to his situation in the novel. Because the machinations of these institutions remain invisible, he cannot know empirically whether he has been exploited.

As a character from a working-class Irish American family who has had a similar family experience and a near-identical educational experience to that of the narrator, Gavin represents Thomas's recognition that the critique of a political economy based on individual ownership, which has frequently been articulated by Black writers in the past, is today relevant not only to Blacks who are newly invited to participate in the financial economy but also to popula-

tions such as Irish Americans that have participated in white privilege as ethnic others. More broadly, this critique extends to anyone who feels disempowered by the complexity of the contemporary economy. Mosley has similarly argued that Black American historical experience has better prepared Black Americans than white Americans to address the forms of contemporary economic subjection that, under corporate capitalism, face the whole population.<sup>42</sup> One sort of cultural work performed by both Mosley's argument and Thomas's novel is that of marking situations faced by Black subjects as being no longer racialized or no longer solely determined by race. These moves acknowledge the imperative to understand post-Civil Rights era changes in racial formations and the inadequacy of extant conceptualizations of racial identity to do so. Yet if Thomas is representative of the current moment in Black literary production, it would seem that novelists have begun to associate the diminishing need to define one's social and political identity through an imagined Black community with a despondency over the possibility that participation in the latest iteration of the national economy could produce any meaningful freedom.

Thomas may be singularly interested in the despondency that the contemporary financial economy can provoke, but other Black writers are evincing a similar interest in rethinking the history of Black identity overtly in terms of American financial power. After temporarily shelving the Rawlins series, Mosley began publishing a series of crime novels set in New York in 2008 and later about Leonid McGill, a Black private investigator who is married to a white wife and who is trying to atone for a criminal career.<sup>43</sup> Mosley has characterized McGill in an interview as "a direct reflection of America today: a country that's been going in the wrong direction for so many years who's decided that they're going to try to do right by themselves and the rest of the world."<sup>44</sup> McGill has been marketed as a successor to Rawlins, and McGill's relationship to a semi-visible power structure consisting of power brokers close to the city's government, the mob, and supposedly legitimate financiers closely parallels Easy Rawlins's relationship to powerful institutions. The primary difference is that in New York in 2008, McGill's relative powerlessness before these interests is not determined by his racial background.

Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), a fictionalized account of free Blacks who themselves owned slaves in Virginia, is an important post-2000 contribution to the contemporary narrative of slavery. Whereas that genre analyzes the crisis in Black subjectivity created by the transformation of people into property, Jones reimagines such transformations in specifically financial terms. The central character, Henry Townsend, is aware of the potential market value of any action he might perform as a slave; this enables him to curry favor with his owner, who later serves as a patron who sells him land and slaves. The adoption of the social trappings and the values of property ownership make it seem natural to Henry that he can justly own slaves, a situation that subtly mir-

rors the way in which entry into the contemporary bourgeoisie might implicate contemporary African Americans in exploitative practices.<sup>45</sup>

By relating the economics of slavery and of the pre-Civil Rights era to contemporary life, the writers covered in this study respond to the contemporary conservative ideology that both promotes and tries to simplify the financialization of civil society. The contemporary narratives of slavery by Morrison and Jones that I have mentioned only briefly serve an important role in this literary project. They challenge the fantasy of a return to a natural marketplace, before the advent of large-scale managed national economies in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, wherein equal individuals could all cultivate their personal freedom by exerting their natural rights to property. Instead, these narratives remind anyone paying attention that the historical period conservatives associate with such equality of opportunity was the period of chattel slavery. Strongly suggesting that Black communities continue to feel excluded from conversations about the economic opportunities created by contemporary public policy, Mosley and Thomas imply that resistance to the logic of individualistic economic freedom unites African Americans across divisions in socioeconomic class. Also, although generally pessimistic about the possibility of progressive change in the contemporary moment, recent Black novels with recent or contemporary settings suggest strongly that modes of resistance to *laissez-faire* capitalism that have formed in Black communities and Black intellectual circles over time remain important means of challenging the fundamentally exploitative nature of contemporary financial arrangements. Such resistance remains necessary regardless of whether contemporary capitalism is colorblind or still bound invisibly to racialized forms of oppression.

## NOTES

1. Naomi Klein, "Disowned by the Ownership Society," *The Nation*, February 18, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/article/disowned-ownership-society>.

2. Kai Wright, "The Subprime Swindle: How the Mortgage Industry Stole Black America's Hard-Won Wealth," *The Nation*, July 14, 2008, 11–22; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

3. Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall argue that Ronald Reagan consistently employed nominally colorblind but powerfully coded rhetoric to intimate that the federal welfare system taxed wealth that belonged to the white working class and shifted that wealth to implicitly undeserving Black communities. See Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

4. James W. Ely Jr., *The Guardian of Every Other Right: A Constitutional History of Property Rights*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5. Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 3, 10. See also Steve Fraser, *Every Man a Speculator: A History of Wall Street in American Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

6. Surveying a variety of Black political ideological positions, Michael C. Dawson finds that Black political theorists generally "embrace more firmly communalism or holistic ap-

proaches, even in individualistically oriented ideologies such as the radical egalitarian versions of liberalism,” than the mainstream American thinkers espousing related positions. See Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 22. A voluminous body of scholarship and criticism that openly espouses communitarian positions not only claims that American capitalism has persistently failed to serve the interests of Black Americans but also suggests an affinity between Black culture and leftist politics. The examples are too numerous to cite comprehensively, but include Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: South End, 2000); Ahmed Shawki, *Black Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006); Nihil Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

7. Loyalie King, *Race, Theft, and Ethics: Property Matters in African American Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color, Feminism, and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). See also Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

8. See the chapter “The Future of the Past” in Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature? A Vernacular Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Cultural histories of African American subjectivity that rely on the premise Warren critiques include Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* and Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*.

9. Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

10. Regarding periodization, JanMohamed argues that “one feature that links” the antebellum and postbellum periods “is the reliance of both societies on the threat of death and the systematic use of lynching to coerce subject population” (*The Death-Bound-Subject*, 5). Suspicious of such moves, Warren contends that the designation “African American literature” is suitable primarily for works produced during the period between emancipation and 1965—that is, the period during which the legal status of African Americans was overtly racialized. Warren’s description of the relationship between the changing political economic constructions of race and the historiographic turn in African American fiction usefully complicates work on African American history and historiographic fiction that posits a transhistorical African American identity. However, if, as I am arguing, a history of transactions and contracts remains present in any individual or community’s current economic situation, then the historiography and historiographic fiction that Warren criticizes still do the sort of political work that Warren has claimed for pre-1960s Black writers, particularly Ralph Ellison. Also, in equating “African American” identity wholly with pre-1965 political and juridical formations, Warren discounts the disparity between such formations and a perceived sense of cultural belonging that is a common feature of historiographic and literary recreations of the past. This phenomenon is not peculiar to post-1965 US cultural nationalisms and multiculturalism, and it bears mention that national traditions and the notion of a Western “canon” are based in similarly nostalgic (re)creations of earlier periods onto which cultural unity is projected. Historiographic fiction such as Morrison’s may not do the cultural and political work that progressive scholar-activists wish literary fiction to do, but it is my contention that such writing addresses the relationship between contemporary socioeconomic formations and the African American past more purposefully and usefully than Warren acknowledges.

11. Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Conley and Shapiro each point out that evidence of rising incomes among African Americans has obscured the difficulty of securing what Shapiro calls “transformative

assets"—that is, family wealth that will enable a household to purchase a home and education to be used by the following generation. Substantial scholarship documents the role of housing discrimination in producing and reinforcing this "wealth gap" in the mid- to late twentieth century. See, for example, David M. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Property in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

12. James Kyung-Jin Lee's excellent critique of multiculturalism's failure to address persistent economic oppression of communities of color provides a good case in point. As Lee argues, post-Civil Rights era US society enables individuals to cross cultural and economic boundaries as an act of "triage" that entails the abandonment of impoverished communities. One of Lee's central examples is Cudjoe, the protagonist of John Edgar Wideman's novel *Philadelphia Fire*, an African American male whose failure to write a book about the bombing of the house occupied by the MOVE organization emblemizes the ambivalence of formally educated and middle-class people of color toward collective action on behalf of the poor urban communities that these individuals are leaving behind. Lee does not equate his own self-consciously progressive ideological aims with the authentic identity of the communities of color he examines, but neither does he provide textual and historical considerations of how and why communities of color persist in investing affectively in liberalism and capitalism and occasionally reiterate the classic liberal notion that individualism is based in natural property rights. See James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), especially "Introduction" and chapter 4.

13. Grace Hong's reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a paradigmatic example of this approach. As Hong argues, the troubled Breedlove family's inability to find power or autonomy in attachments to the space where they live and the objects they possess signals both a sense of threatened dispossession that threatens modern Black communities and a more fundamental problem with the propertization of objects as a means of cultivating or granting social status. Hong is almost certainly correct that Morrison is critical of the American ideology of competition among individuals for property, a point that many critics of *Beloved*, her most influential and well-known novel, have noted. However, she does not explore the ontological crisis this position creates in Morrison's fiction, wherein the sense that exchange and propertization are destructive faces the equally pervasive sense that exchange and propertization are fundamental conditions of US life. Although Morrison's fiction is beyond the purview of this study, I suggest that Mosley and Thomas knowingly address a problem of contemporary subjectivity and political economy that she has repeatedly attempted to work out within her historically framed narratives. For a reading of Morrison's *Beloved* that wrestles with Morrison's interest in Civil Rights era and post-Civil Rights era capitalism, see Dean Franco, "What We Talk about When We Talk about *Beloved*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 2 (2006): 415-439. Although not overtly concerned with modes of exchange, James Berger, "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report," *PMLA* 111, no. 3 (1996): 408-420, provides a relevant reading as well.

14. Walter Benn Michaels, "Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 303-311.

15. Prominent scholarship on the role of representations of slavery in contemporary Black literature includes Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). "Contemporary narratives of slavery" is Keizer's preferred term.

16. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*, 130-131.

17. Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (New York: Washington Square, 1990; reprinted 2002). For representative criticism, see Owen E. Brady and Derek C. Maus, "Introduction,"

*Finding a Way Home: A Critical Assessment of Walter Mosley's Fiction*, ed. Owen E. Brady and Derek C. Maus (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), ix–xxiv; Daylanne K. English, “The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 772–796; Elisabeth V. Ford, “Miscounts, Loopholes, and Flashbacks: Strategic Evasion in Walter Mosley’s Detective Fiction,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 4 (2005): 1074–1090.

18. Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 66.

19. *Ibid.*, 147–148.

20. Daylanne English places particular emphasis on this point. It bears mention that her essay and Elisabeth Ford’s are concerned with placing Mosley’s work in the mainstream of Black literary concerns with historicity in contrast to critics who interpret him primarily in terms of the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction.

21. I draw on Houston Baker’s use of the term the “economics of slavery” in the discussion that follows. For Baker, the “economics of slavery” comprise both the literal economics of slavery before emancipation and a more symbolic and traumatic sense that the history of enslavement continues to structure the Black imaginary and Black economic life long into the twentieth century. See Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, especially pp. 23–31.

22. Stephen Michael Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

23. See Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004) and Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) for analysis of the manipulation of gendered stereotypes of Black identity, particularly that of the “welfare queen,” in debates over welfare policy between the Johnson administration and Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare reform.

24. Easy’s friendship with Mouse has been analyzed primarily in terms of Mosley’s representations of cultural authenticity and resistance to white domination. See Roger A. Berger, “‘The Black Dick’: Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L.A. Novels of Walter Mosley,” *African American Review* 31, no. 2 (1997): 281–294 for an interpretation of Mouse as a figure of cultural authenticity and see Ford, “Miscounts, Loopholes, and Flashbacks” for a refutation.

25. Walter Mosley, *A Red Death* (New York: Washington Square, 1991; reprinted 2002), 57, 102.

26. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, 8–10.

27. Walter Mosley, *Black Betty* (New York: Washington Square, 1994; reprinted 2002), 51; Walter Mosley, *White Butterfly* (New York: Washington Square, 1992; reprinted 2002).

28. Walter Mosley, *A Little Yellow Dog* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Walter Mosley, *Little Scarlett* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004); Walter Mosley, *Cinnamon Kiss* (New York: Grand Central, 2005; reprinted 2008); Walter Mosley, *Blonde Faith* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007).

29. For recent examples that attempt to make a strong case that current conceptions of Black racial solidarity are outmoded, see Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*; Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

30. Jonathan Munby, *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 20.

31. Mosley, *Blonde Faith*, 194.

32. Mosley, *A Little Yellow Dog*, 273.

33. Mosley, *Cinnamon Kiss*, 28.

34. *Ibid.*, 199.

35. Robert C. Hahn, “PW Talks with Walter Mosley: The End of Easy?,” *Publishers Weekly*, December 31, 2007, 25.

36. Nathan McCall, *Them* (New York: Atria, 2007), 3, 240.

37. Ibid., 25; Michael Thomas, *Man Gone Down* (New York: Black Cat, 2007), 67, 109, 109.
38. McCall, *Them*, 297.
39. Thomas, *Man Gone Down*, 77; *ibid.*
40. Ibid., 101.
41. Ibid., 403–404.
42. Walter Mosley, *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000; reprinted 2006), 46–48.
43. Walter Mosley, *The Long Fall* (New York: Riverhead, 2009); Walter Mosley, *Known to Evil* (New York: Riverhead, 2010).
44. Marcus Gilmer, "Interview. Walter Mosley," in *Conversations with Walter Mosley*, ed. Owen E. Brady (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 201.
45. Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003).