

BLACK COMMUNITY IN *DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS*

Brandon Milton  
<http://brandonio21.com>  
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When one group of people is being oppressed by another group, the oppressed will often band together, despite all intra-relational conflicts, in order to overcome the oppressors. This is exactly the course of action taken by black Americans in the mid twentieth century during their fight for civil rights. Segregated by post-war heterogeneous America<sup>1</sup> and oppressed by modern white supremacy<sup>2</sup>, black Americans needed to come together. From a political standpoint, specialized groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were very much necessary for the overcoming of oppression. However, the fight for civil rights was not only performed politically, but also socially, where blacks treated one another as family, united under a common goal. This idea of a black community is explored in Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, where the main character, Easy Rawlins, interacts with others according to their position within or outside of this community.

The sense of community that African-Americans felt with each other during the mid-twentieth century was expressed both at home and in public.<sup>3</sup> The first instance of Easy embracing this sense of community is during his questioning of African-Americans in an illegal all-black bar. While asking individuals if they've "seen a girl named Dalia or Delilah or something like that"<sup>4</sup>, Rawlins is content with the answers provided to him the first time. This, of course, almost causes Rawlins to miss out on important information due to his lack of repeated interrogation. It is not simply in Rawlins' nature to lack pursuit, either, as seen in his immediate questioning of DeWitt Albright and his deliberate questioning of other bar owners when asking about Frank Green. Thus, the lack of intense questioning may be due to the trust that Rawlins places in fellow members of the black community, where he trusts that other black people will provide him with an honest and accurate answer the first time around.

The same sense of community is shown after Rawlins' got the information he needed from his

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1 Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions* (California: University of California Press, 2010), 29.

2 Daniel Widener, Lecture. 28 September 2015.

3 Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West* (United States: Duke University Press, 2010), 25.

4 *Devil in a Blue Dress*, directed by Carl Franklin (1995; Los Angeles, CA: TriStar Pictures, 1996), DVD.

favorite bartender, Joppy. Although Rawlins was only able to get to the information he needed by means of smashing Joppy's loved marble counter top, there was never any personal harm done. Further, during the questioning, Joppy repeats things such as “I'm your friend” and “I figured I could help you”<sup>5</sup>, showing that the sense of community is shared between them, two black Americans struggling to make a living in white-minded America. The bond between the two men is further emphasized when Rawlins walks out of the bar, shedding a tear and shaking his head, reflecting on the harsh interrogation he was forced to give to a fellow member of the black community.

This sense of black community is not only emphasized by Rawlins, but also other members of the black community. For example, upon returning to his home, Rawlins is warned about “a man” who is going to attack him.<sup>6</sup> Given the fact that the neighbor warning Rawlins has been caught several times attempting to cut down the neighborhood's trees, it is safe to say that the neighbor and Rawlins are not on the best of terms. However, since both Rawlins and his neighbor have a sense of community with one another, the neighbor felt the urge to warn and Rawlins felt the urge to heed the warning, resulting in a delay that saved Rawlins' life. It may be argued, however, that since the attacker was also black, that the neighbor was acting as a friend rather than a fellow black community member. However, as Manning Marable asserts, there are different sub-communities within the larger black community<sup>7</sup>. Thus, it is entirely possible that Rawlins and his neighbor were united under the same sub-community, one involving a lack of meaningless violence, against the particular sub-community that the attacker, Frank Green, belonged to.

The most important example of black community is found in the interactions between Daphne and Rawlins. When Rawlins first meets Daphne in person, their entire conversation is driven by business, where Rawlins is curiously interrogating Daphne about her motives and the motives of the

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5 *Devil in a Blue Dress*, directed by Carl Franklin (1995; Los Angeles, CA: TriStar Pictures, 1996), DVD.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 12.

mysterious Frank Green. Rawlins even chooses not to give into Daphne's sexual temptations. He then drives Daphne to Hollywood Hills, where he is abandoned by Daphne<sup>8</sup>. This gives Rawlins the perfect reason to despise Daphne, as she is seemingly only using him. Everything seems to turn around, however, once Daphne reveals to Rawlins that her mother was creole. Rawlins and Mouse then risk their lives in order to save Daphne, a fellow member of the black community, from her white abusers. This rescue, of course, is no longer driven by the motives of avoiding Albright's punishments that were previously driving Rawlins' hunt for Daphne. It may be argued, however, that Daphne's promised \$7,000 reward coerced Rawlins and Mouse into killing Albright and his goons in order to save Daphne. However, the careful way in which Rawlins helps Daphne to the car and offers her his jacket suggests that this is more than a simple business transaction. Rawlins saved and protected Daphne because of the newfound community between them.

Upon returning home, Rawlins is greeted by the essence of the black community, where within it, everyone gets along, acknowledging that the problem lies outside the community. This community causes Rawlins to act kindly toward those within it, and hostile to those who are not. Further, those who have a sense of community with Rawlins also act kindly toward him, while those who do not, namely the white community, act in a hostile fashion. Just as the idea of a black community influenced the characters of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the idea of community was a primary contributor to the success of the civil rights movement.

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8 *Devil in a Blue Dress*, directed by Carl Franklin (1995; Los Angeles, CA: TriStar Pictures, 1996), DVD.

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