

“I’m Her and I’m Me”:

Race, Power, and Sexual Violence in Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*

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English

Things are often not what they seem in Walter Mosley’s 1990 hardboiled mystery novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Set in 1948 Los Angeles, the text focuses on the main character of Easy Rawlins, a Black war veteran recently fired from his job at a defense plant and in need of money to pay his beloved house’s mortgage. Easy’s life is turned upside down when he is approached by a white man offering a large sum of cash in exchange for information on the location of Daphne Monet, a blonde, white woman known to frequent Black jazz clubs. As the novel progresses, secrets are revealed, identities are uncovered, murder mysteries are solved, and Mosley successfully sets Easy Rawlins up for another 14 books. Questions related to race and power often circulate amongst the scholarship of Mosley’s novel as Easy must navigate racism, violence, and corruption in his newfound line of work. These questions of race and power are certainly of importance and have generated productive discussions of the different power dynamics at play in *Devil*; however, there is a significant lack of scholarly criticism on another major power dynamic throughout the novel—sexual abuse. Examining sexual abuse as a racialized form of power within the context of *Devil* allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Mosley’s characters and their motivations, particularly those of Daphne and Easy.

Race and Power in *Devil in a Blue Dress*: A Review

The subject of sexual abuse lingers around the scholarship on power dynamics in *Devil*, but it is never directly addressed. That is not to say, however, that the many different power dynamics at play in Mosley's novel are lost on scholars. Klara Szymańko details in her essay, "Oppressive Faces of Whiteness in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*," the ways that Easy must navigate the many faces of whiteness that seep into the infrastructures of property relations, economic exploitation, labor relations, and the legal system throughout the novel. Despite her keen awareness of how Easy is stifled by the racial power dynamics at play, Szymańko excludes from her analysis any mention of the recurring sexual abuse that takes place. Marilyn Wesley briefly addresses the issue of sexual abuse in her essay "Power and Knowledge in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*." Similar to Szymańko's argument on how Easy must navigate different oppressive faces of whiteness, Wesley asserts that Mosley's protagonist must also contend with different meanings of violence. Wesley acknowledges the sexual violence that takes place in *Devil*, but never fully considers it as anything more than a plot device. In "Private Knowledge, Public Space: Investigation and Navigation in *Devil in a Blue Dress*," Mark Berrettini discusses Daphne's racial and sexual background more extensively than other scholars in his analysis of the film adaptation of the novel. Berrettini, however, is more interested in the popular tropes of the femme fatale and tragic mulatta that Daphne is packaged in rather than the impact of her sexual trauma. Chris Ruíz-Velasco interestingly discusses the threat of sexual violence in his essay "'Lost in These Damn White Halls': Power and Masculinity in Walter Mosley's Fiction." Ruíz-Velasco, however, only looks at the scene where DeWitt Albright "appears with the glorious savagery of an avenging angel" (141) when Easy is surrounded by a group of teenage boys arguing that Albright's heroism quickly turns into a sexually sadistic demonstration of

power. There is no mention of the more explicit scenes of sexual abuse that take place within the text.

Roger Berger talks more directly about the role of sexuality in Mosley's novel, but in the context of how it deviates from the traditional detective story formula in his essay "'The Black Dick': Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L.A. Novels of Walter Mosley." Berger notes that while detective fiction is often a space "marked by a lack of overt sexual activity, especially on the part of the detective himself" (288), Easy's overactive libido presents a direct pushback to the traditional form of the genre. Berger then analyzes the way sexuality is racialized in Mosley's work, noting that "Mosley includes so much Black male sexual activity that he seems to invoke the stereotype of the Black male's voracious sexual appetite, a stereotype that pervades contemporary scholarship on race" (288). While Berger offers a compelling examination into the way that Easy's sexuality teeters on the line between resistance of traditional detective fiction form and reinscription of harmful racial stereotypes, there is no acknowledgement of the sexual abuse and violence that takes place in *Devil*.

In a piece written thirty years after the June 1990 publication date of *Devil*, Mosley reflects on his initial vision to "tell a story about Los Angeles that highlight Black life and the Black contribution to culture within a mirror-darkly that partially reflected the American experience within a shadowy landscape of national shame" ("Thirty Years Later"). While Mosley certainly captures the dark underbelly of Los Angeles, he also set out to inspire a sense of hope in depicting how his characters continuously flourish, fail, and rise. Relevant to the purposes of this argument, however, is Mosley's note that "Easy encountered dozens of major and minor characters representing so many aspects and characteristics of Black and other nonwhite lives that the rest of America seems, pretty much, unaware of" ("Thirty Years Later").

The major and minor characters that are subjected to sexual abuse in *Devil* bring about an awareness that combats ignorance among the majority. The existing scholarship on race and power in *Devil* provides a solid foundation to examine the recurring instances of sexual violence that appear in the novel.

Proximity to Whiteness and Matthew Teran's Abuse

Easy's first encounter with sexual abuse in the novel is an unfiltered look into the dark underworld of child sex trafficking. Upon his release from the police station, Easy took great care to walk, not run, to John's bar as he "knew that a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered" (Mosley 122). This scene serves as a reminder of the racial power dynamics that are already at work in Easy's reality as a Black man in 1948 America. As he walks, a Cadillac pulls up beside him, offering him money, a ride, and an answer as to why he was taken into police custody earlier that day. Hesitant to accept the suspicious generosity, the driver establishes not only the threat of violence, but the threat of unimaginable power, stating that if his boss "wanted to hurt you you'd already be dead" (Mosley 124). Easy, at the point of exhaustion, climbs into the back of the vehicle and waiting for him is Matthew Teran, a recent mayoral candidate dropout, who inquires about Daphne Monet's whereabouts. Easy's senses are overcome by the odors that were "sweet like perfume and sour, an odor of the body that I recognized but could put no name to" (Mosley 124). In alignment with Szymański's argument of the inextricable link between whiteness and death, Easy is arguably smelling the stench of death and decay that accompanies Teran. Described as possessing uncanny features that resemble swollen, open wounds on his face, Teran's physical appearance suggests that his depravity is overflowing from the inside out. This depravity solidifies when Teran reveals the small child who is hidden in the storage area of the car: "A small boy climbed over the seat. He was wearing

soiled briefs and dirty white socks. His skin was brown and his thick straight hair was black. The almond-shaped eyes spoke of China but this was a Mexican boy” (Mosley 124). The inclusion of the child’s race adds to the layers of power dynamics at play in this scene. Teran, a white man of wealth and social power, shamelessly demonstrates his capacity for manipulation and evil over the child and Easy, two non-white individuals.

In relation to the boy, however, Easy exercises a kind of violence that is reserved for those who are neither perpetrator or victim—the violence enacted by the bystander. Chelsea Mainwaring, Fiona Gabbert, and Adrian Scott review of the available literature concerned with the role of key variables that facilitate or inhibit bystander intervention in their essay, “A Systematic Review Exploring Variables Related to Bystander Intervention in Sexual Violence Contexts.” Mainwaring et al. note that sexual violence prevention efforts are categorized as either primary, direct, secondary, and tertiary (1728). Direct intervention is what Easy avoids when the child is first revealed: “The sight of that poor child and the odors made me cringe. I tried not to think about what I was seeing because I couldn’t do anything about it—at least not right then” (Mosley 125). Despite his horror, Easy resolves that, in terms of direct intervention, he is powerless and leaves the child behind in Teran’s predatory clutches.

While it can be argued that Easy is in no position to be accusing a powerful white man of child sex trafficking, Szymańko offers an interesting read on how proximity to whiteness can impact the actions of a person of color. In her discussion of Easy’s second-generation Italian American boss, Benny Giacomo, Szymańko argues:

In light of Giacomo’s peripheral status within the domain of whiteness, his hostility towards African American workers may be underlain not only by a stereotypical perception of Black people, but also by the fragility of his own social status and reverse

power dynamics that to some extent psychologically compensate for his own marginalization as an Italian American working class man. (Szymański 268)

Giacomo's own whiteness being constantly in flux fuels his need to exercise perceived racial superiority over people of color. Szymański emphasizes how those who gain any proximity to whiteness, like Giacomo, will nevertheless still feel the "the fragility of his own social status and reverse power dynamics" (268). In this scene, Easy is essentially closer to whiteness than the boy is. When Teran decides that their conversation is done, he tells his driver to take "Mr. Rawlins" where he wants to go. Only a few chapters prior, Easy was demanding Giacomo address him with respect as "Mr. Rawlins" (Mosley 112). Easy's proximity to whiteness is emphasized when Teran hands the ivory horn to Easy so that he can relay his destination's address to the driver. Holding the horn near his face, Easy is once again physically encompassed by the smells of "sweet oils and sour bodies" (Mosley 126)—the smell of death and whiteness. In this situation, Easy is not on the receiving end of Teran's violence and consequently has the option to walk away from the scene. Whiteness in *Devil* represents both danger and protection depending on the circumstance. While Easy is less threatened by Teran's whiteness, the boy is completely dominated by it. Easy's own self-preservation and lack of any real control in this situation, despite his proximity to whiteness, is a way to understand his abandonment of the boy.

It is important to note, however, that in terms of bystander intervention, Easy does engage with tertiary prevention later on in the novel: "interventions occurring after the event, such as supporting the victim or punishing the perpetrator. One of the main tertiary prevention measures is the involvement of the criminal justice system" (Mainwaring et al. 1728). In this case, Easy acts as a stand-in for the systemically racist and corrupt criminal justice system that is depicted throughout the novel and safely rehomes the boy. Despite Easy's initial hesitation to

directly intervene for overlapping reasons related to power dynamics, tertiary prevention is “particularly important in the context of SV [sexual violence], as the quality and amount of social support a victim receives plays an important role in their recovery” (Mainwaring et al. 1728). Once the threat of Teran is eliminated later on in the novel, Easy is able to provide the boy with a safe home and, hopefully, a path to recovery.

Daphne’s Double Life

Easy’s second encounter with sexual abuse is told in a whimsical, dreamlike manner. Daphne’s story of her childhood begins with her asking Easy if he has ever been to a zoo to which he echoes the similar sentiment of helplessness first displayed in the scene with Teran and the boy: “No reason t’see animals in cages far as I can see. They cain’t help me and I cain’t do nuthin’ fo’ them neither” (Mosley 237). She ominously asserts that people can learn from zoo animals and then recounts her first experience at the zoo where she remembered thinking that it “smelled like death” (Mosley 237) in the monkey house. Similar to Easy in Teran’s car, the odor of death and, by relation, whiteness pervade the environment where living beings are caged and abused. As Daphne continues with her story, Easy once again feels unnerved in a similar way that he experienced in Teran’s car right before the boy was revealed, “Daphne had grabbed on to my hand, she was so excited. I found myself worried; but I couldn’t really tell what bothered me” (Mosley 238). It is then that Daphne recounts her experience of being sexually assaulted by her father for the first time after they had witnessed two zebras mate.

The choice on Mosley’s part to use the black and white striped zebra as the focal point of this story not only foreshadows Daphne’s true racial identity, but incorporates a racialized element to the sexual power dynamic at play. Daphne’s father’s race is never disclosed in the novel; however, they were able to be alone together in public without drawing attention, so it can

be assumed that he is white. Daphne's proximity to whiteness is enhanced only when she is publicly with her father, and this allows for the abuse behind car doors to take place. When they are alone, Daphne's father establishes a power dynamic that weaponizes his age, strength, race, and gender against Daphne. In the car, Daphne is no longer white passing. Her father distances her from whiteness and in turn, any privilege and protection that might have afforded her. Daphne's biracial identity in this situation is used against her, rendering her vulnerable to the racialized power dynamic of sexual abuse.

The lasting effect of Daphne's sexual trauma is evident in how she navigates her adult life and relationships. As a child, Daphne was conditioned to identify with only one half of her racial background rather than existing as a biracial individual. As she entered adulthood, this trait of switching from one race to another is evident in her romantic relationships:

Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man. If he was a mild white man who was afraid to complain to the waiter she'd pull his head to her bosom and pat him. If he was a poor black man who had soaked up pain and a rage for a lifetime, she washed his wounds with a rough rag and licked the blood till it stanchied. (Mosley 231)

This passage locates the way in which Daphne's father severely skews Daphne's perception of race and intimate relationships. As Easy notes in his narration above, Daphne molds herself to fit perfectly with the man she is with. As a child, Daphne's sexual abuse at the hands of her father forced her race to be in a constant state of flux as she was white when she was with him publicly and Black when she was with him privately. Now, Daphne is stuck in this cycle of behaving in ways that, according to Easy, correlate with the race of her partner. In Marilyn Wesley's discussion of the novel, she asserts that through the enigmatic character of Daphne, "Mosley reworks the recurrent motif of the 'tragic mulatto' through the hardboiled convention of the

ambiguous woman” (111). The figure of the literary tragic mulatto is described by Emily Clark as almost always a woman who is always doomed by her racial liminality (260). Navigating romantic relationships with white or Black men poses their own unique set of challenges that come in the shape of the law or racial hierarchy as “sex, love and marriage are almost always at the heart of the narrative variations in the genre and are often connected to a dramatic revelation that leads to tragedy” (Clark 260). While Daphne exhibits traits specific to the literary tragic mulatto, the sympathy that she elicits is not entirely centered around her lack of racial identification; rather, her experience as a survivor of incestuous sexual abuse is where most, if not all, of the tragedy lies. In this sense, Wesley’s discussion of Daphne as a reworked version of the tragic mulatto trope is fitting. However, instead of addressing the different ways in which Daphne’s past experiences manifest in her adult life, Wesley pins the character as a suggestion of the “power released through violations of the various social and sexual taboos she represents” (111).

Wesley goes on to argue that through Daphne’s “masculine characteristics” (111), she both transgresses the status quo and represents a way for Easy to modify his own identities as a Black man. What Wesley—and most scholars—ignore in their discussion of Daphne is that her qualities that seemingly transgress the status quo are more likely the result of the sexual abuse she endured as a child. In the essay, “‘Finding My Worth as a Sexual Being’: A Qualitative Gender Analysis of Sexual Self-Concept and Coping in Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse,” the authors discuss how a coping mechanism adopted by many survivors of childhood sexual abuse is sexual over-investment (Guyon et al. 9). Daphne’s sexual over-investment is on full display when she and Easy stay at Primo’s rental property. After affectionately bathing Easy who has just recounted the overwhelming stress he feels, Daphne “shrugged off her yellow dress in

one long stretch, then tossed it into the water over me and pulled down her pants. She sat on the toilet and urinated so loudly that it reminded me more of a man” (Mosley 229). Daphne’s masculine characteristics that Wesley notes become increasingly obvious as the scene progresses. Daphne goes so far as to compare her vagina to a penis that would be bigger than Easy’s head (Mosley 229). Guyon et al. address this kind of behavior in victims of childhood sexual abuse as a way to feel loved, soothed, and take back control (9). Even Easy takes note of the undertone of her course, sexually explicit language:

I never liked it when women talked like that. I felt it was masculine. But, beneath her bold language, Daphne seemed to be asking for something. And all I wanted was to reach as far down in my soul as I could find it. (Mosley 229)

It is apparent, at least to Easy, that Daphne’s words and actions are an attempt to cover up an unfulfilled need or want. Perhaps, as Guyon et al. study suggests, Daphne’s hypersexualization of herself is a way to experience affection and control rather than a disruption of femininity within the novel. Sexual dominance is also another method that many abuse victims employ to reinstate a sense of control (Guyon et al. 10). Easy and Daphne engage in an all night sexcapade that involves a 3 A.M. tryst against a rough tree. The following morning, their conversation suggests the power and control Daphne feels through their sexual relations:

She grabbed my penis. “Does it hurt for you to love me, Easy?”

“Yeah.”

Her grip tightened. “I love it when you hurt, Easy. For us.” (Mosley 230)

Daphne’s pleasure in inflicting sexual pain on Easy is compatible with behaviors exhibited by other abuse victims in Guyon et al.’s study. Some participants expressed that gentleness was a trigger for them because they were so accustomed to violence (Guyon et al. 10). The only way

for one participant to combat this particular trigger was to “assert his masculinity and superiority, which allowed him to preserve a facade so that his partner could not access his vulnerable self” (Guyon et al. 10). Similar to the stories in this study, Daphne employs a number of coping mechanisms in her romantic relationships.

Brenda Daly provides a helpful analysis of the common effects of father-daughter childhood sexual abuse during the adolescent years in her discussion of Hadley Irwin’s *Abby, My Love*. Daly notes that “In severe cases of sexual abuse, which often begin in early childhood as Abby’s does, psychological splitting may occur to such an extent that neither personality is aware of the other” (6). In Daphne’s case, her biracial identity exacerbates her psychological splitting. In her final interaction with Easy, Daphne perfectly captures the internal divide she experiences as a result of her sexual abuse trauma:

‘I’m not Daphne. My given name is Ruby Hanks and I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I’m different than you because I’m two people. I’m her *and* I’m me. I never went to that zoo, she did. She was there and that’s where she lost her father. I had a different father. He came home and fell in my bed about as many times as he fell in my mother’s. He did that until one night Frank killed him.’ (Mosley 251)

This passage highlights how Daphne’s two identities function on a few different levels. Ruby is a Black little girl whose father continuously sexually assaults her and Daphne is a white woman whose father loved her too much. Only now, in Daphne’s last moments in the novel, does she verbalize the reality of her double life and recognize the ways that she compartmentalizes the sexual abuse she endured. Her two identities allow her to navigate a racist world and, in certain ways, escape her past. Daphne’s final conversation with Easy, however, highlights the hope that Mosley intended for his characters. As they talk, Daphne warns Easy not to touch her. Moments

prior, it is revealed that Daphne kills Teran as he is actively sexually assaulting the boy. Relocating the child to her apartment, Daphne's last words to Easy are, "Do something about the boy" (Mosley 252). This final depiction of Daphne as a woman who breaks the silence around the reality of her sexual trauma; establishes physical boundaries between herself and a man; rescues a victim of sexual abuse; and puts an end to the cycle of abuse perpetuated by Teran inspires hope for her future. Easy does as Daphne says and takes care of the child, placing him in the care of Primo who "was a father at heart" (Mosley 255). The joint effort between Easy and Daphne to rescue this abused child symbolizes not only a deconstruction of the racialized sexual abuse narratives in the novel, but a personal reclamation story for Daphne.

DeWitt Albright's Demonstration of Power

The use of sexual acts as a means of control is arguably the most apparent through DeWitt Albright's encounter with the teenage boys in Santa Monica. The beginning of the chapter establishes a racialized sexual power dynamic that places Easy at the will of the white people around him. Barbara Moskowitz, a white girl of about seventeen years, approaches Easy who is waiting for Albright. In the literal sense, Easy's proximity to whiteness—Barbara—is what compromises his safety in this situation. The group of young white boys that Barbara is with begin harassing Easy for simply being in the same vicinity as Barbara, who they view as belonging to them, "We don't need ya talking to *our* women" (Mosley 99, emphasis mine). The boys lay claim to Barbara as their property that Easy, a Black man, has no right to interact with. Albright makes his appearance when Easy's back is against the rail of the boardwalk and he is surrounded by the group of boys. Suddenly, Easy's proximity to whiteness—which places him in a dangerous situation earlier—becomes the thing that saves him from an imminent attack. Armed with a pistol and thirst for blood, Albright "appears with the glorious savagery of an avenging

angel” (Ruíz-Velasco 141). Yet, what seemingly begins as an act of protection quickly shifts to a threat of sexual violence. As Ruíz-Velasco notes, Albright’s encounter with the boys carries a “sexually charged undercurrent,” (141) beginning with Albright’s declaration to Easy’s main antagonist “I want you to die for me” (Mosley 100). The long running connection between death and orgasm, Ruíz-Velasco argues, is suggested in Albright’s language (141). Albright continues to use sexually violent language in his interaction with the white boys and threatens to castrate them with his pistol. Albright goes so far as to suggest that he would feel “proud and happy if [Easy] was to lower himself to fuck [his] sister *and* [his] mother” (Mosley 101), emphasizing Easy’s sexual superiority over Albright’s own family members.

However, Albright’s status as Easy’s equalizer with the boys is short-lived. Albright quickly assumes power over not only the group of teenagers, but Easy as well. In his essay “Screaming ‘Black’ Murder: Crime Fiction and the Construction of Ethnic Identities,” Axel Stähler states that Albright “embodies a subliminal cold and cruel violence...Albright turns into an existential threat to Easy. He can escape this threat only by becoming himself active and, in various ways, guilty” (51). Initially, doing exactly as Stähler describes, Easy escapes the threat of Albright by going along with Albright’s torment of the group of boys. When Albright asks whether or not he should shoot out one of the boys’ eyes, Easy lets the question linger long enough for three of the boys to start crying. Albright places the decision to shoot in Easy’s hands, suggesting that the pair have an equal amount of power in this situation. Yet, when Easy states ““if he’s not sorry for bullying me then I think you should kill him”” (Mosley 101), it is Albright who continues the interrogation of how sorry the boy is. This culminates into Albright’s demand that, to prove how sorry he is, the boy must perform oral sex on Easy. In this moment, the power imbalance is evident—Albright is in complete control over the boys and Easy. As the targets at the end of

Albright's pistol, the boys have no choice but to comply with his demands and, in turn, become potential victims of sexual violence. Similarly Easy, who moments before appeared to hold the same amount of power as Albright, is placed in an equally compromised position as the boys. In his narration, Easy states: "The boy started crying outright when Albright said that. I was pretty confident that he was just joking, in a sick kind of way, but my heart quailed along with the footballer" (Mosley 102). This passage emphasizes the fear that Easy shares with the boy as both are being forced into a sexual act that neither consent to. Whereas the boy has no choice due to Albright's pistol—another phallic representation of sexual dominance—Easy's lack of choice is derived from Albright's whiteness. Easy is aware of the way this threat of sexual violence is racialized when he thinks to himself afterwards:

I wasn't afraid; I was angry, angry at the way he humiliated that boy. I didn't care about the boy's feelings, I cared that if Albright could do something like that to one of his own then I knew he could do the same, and much worse, to me. But if he wanted to shoot me he'd just have to do it because I wasn't going down on my knees for him or for anybody else. (Mosley 103)

This passage reiterates the racialized element of sexual abuse in Mosley's novel and how it is the ultimate method of control and demonstration of power. Albright's domination of the white boy signals to Easy that a white man with a gun can control everyone around him—even his "friend."

Conclusion

Literary narratives have the ability to not only mirror reality, but shape societal perceptions in situations related to sexual violence in particular. In 2011, Ashley Hunt survived a sexual assault that profoundly impacted her life. A decade later, she decided to address her attacker through a letter, reflecting on the emotional challenges she faced and the happiness she

felt was taken from her. In the letter, Ashley reveals the trauma's lasting effects, discusses her journey through anger, despair, and forgiveness, and highlights the transformative power of love. When discussing her desire to move through her trauma, she locates the power struggle that is familiar to many victims of sexually violent crimes: “I used to think that by not forgiving you it gave me power over you. But I was wrong. My anger and rage had a purpose when it did but at the end of the day, it is and was, still just rage and anger” (Psychology Today). She shares how she was able to reclaim her sense of autonomy and power through her establishment of a company aiding survivors of sexual violence, emphasizing the importance of empathy in reducing sexual assaults. Ashley expresses gratitude for her survival and the newfound beauty in her life, signaling a shift from rage to love in the next chapter of her journey.

Crime fiction and *Devil* especially, depict a kind of restorative justice by the novel's end—good has defeated evil, the bad guys are gone. What happens, though, to those who are left in the aftermath of senseless violence? For Mosley's characters who are victims of sexual assault, there is a hopeful future of recovery. Despite the occlusion of the survivor stories in the scholarship on *Devil*, individuals like Ashley call attention to the necessity of sharing experiences of sexual violence as a means of healing and prevention. Ignoring incidents of sexual violence in Mosley's novel not only prohibits a comprehensive character analysis of race and power in the text, but also hinders a full acknowledgement of the impact sexual violence has on real survivors. Recognition of the role that sexual violence plays in the lives of survivors is imperative in both literary and real contexts.

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