Modalities of Noir Blackness:
Whiteness, Form, and the Racial Floor of the Genre in *Deep Cover*, *Clockers*, and *Devil in a Blue Dress*

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After Borde and Chaumeton, Manthia Diawara argues that "film noir is black because the characters have lost the privilege of whiteness by pursuing lifestyles that are misogynistic, cowardly, duplicitous, that exhibit themselves in an eroticization of violence."[1] This formulation suggests that the genre's classical criticism overlooked the genre's way of marking what happens when Whiteness comes apart. Noir, as posited by Eric Lott, is "a sort of whiteface dream-work of social anxieties with explicitly racial sources, condensed on film into the criminal undertakings of abjected whites."[2] Whiteness exists in noir as an integral part of noir, more than just stylistically, because the genre's formal, moral, and spatial logic was built to keep whiteness invisible by making it the floor everything else falls from. "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named," as Richard Dyer notes, "they/we function as a human norm."[3] This paper argues that *Deep Cover*, *Clockers*, and *Devil in a Blue Dress* reveal that floor by operating at different levels of noir convention. In Michael Gillespie's term, they constitute distinct "modalities of noir blackness."[4] *Deep Cover* works with voice and interiority, while *Clockers* operates at the level of form. *Devil in a Blue Dress* retools space and plot to make visible the very canonical structure it works against. Each film exposes that the genre has always worked with race at a level above just style or aesthetics, and they do this by making whiteness ubiquitous and unnameable all at once.

Charles Mills' account of the Racial Contract describes a system that is "political, moral, and epistemological," producing "an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance" through which whites "will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have

[1] Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," *African American Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 525, https://doi.org/10.2307/3041886.
[2] Eric Lott, quoted in Michael Boyce Gillespie, "Voices Inside (Everything Is Everything): Deep Cover and Modalities of Noir Blackness," in *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Duke University Press, 2016), 87.
[3] Richard Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness," in *White* (Routledge, 1997), 1.
[4] Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 84.

made."[5] Noir's classical interior monologue, moral descents into depravity or despair, and spatial wanderings inherit this epistemological domain and dramatize it without explicitly naming it, but it can be generically recognized. American narrative cinema, as Linda Williams describes, is structured by a melodramatic mode whose virtue must be recognized through "the space of innocence" and its violation, and "black and white racial melodrama may even prove central to the question of just who we mean when we say 'we' are a nation."[6] Moreover, James Naremore's "history of an idea" conception frames noir as a discursive construct sharpened in the 1990s, the very moment Diawara was surveying the "redeployment of the noir style by black filmmakers" as both inheritance and challenge.[7] Taken together, all of these claims point to a re-conceptualization of classical noir as "a racialized mode of white masculinities in crisis."[8] The films in question in this paper accentuate the substrata wherein this mode operates.

Deep Cover (dir. Bill Duke, 1992) uses interior voice to achieve this exposure. Russell Steven's (Laurence Fishburne) voiceover operates as the classical noir monologue, inheriting the moral compass of the hard-boiled tradition. The film puts this mode under racial pressure from the opening question, posed to Stevens by a white DEA agent: "Tell me, do you know the difference between a black man and a n—?"[9] Off the bat, Stevens cannot occupy this traditionally 'white' position in the noir film without performing whiteness' own taxonomy on himself. On Mills' account of "inverted epistemology," Stevens must learn to see the world wrongly in order to function within the state's authorized account of the drug war. John Hull, Stevens' alias, is forced into a "multiple servicing of his blackness: a black apostle, a black

[5] Charles W. Mills, "DETAILS," in *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 9, 18.
[6] Linda Williams, "The American Melodramatic Mode," in *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 44.
[7] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, updated ed. (University of California Press, 2008), 44.
[8] Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 84.
[9] *Deep Cover*, directed by Bill Duke (New Line Cinema, 1992), opening scene, quoted in Gillespie, *Film Blackness,* 94.

panther, a black avenger of the state," conscripted to be "a saint" in world that sees the opposite as inherently antithetical to whiteness.[10] Throughout the film, Stevens' voiceover functions as an exercise of self-knowledge bestowed unto us, the audience, as a canonical expectation. This exercise, however, is also the film's central deception. At the congressional hearing towards the end of the film, Stevens redeploys the voiceover in rebellion, resisting Agent Carver's terms. He exposes the federal apparatus through the voiceover, a device traditionally used in noir to refer only to the hero's interiority. The hard-boiled monologue, designed to obscure institutional and structural whiteness, reverses noir voice's first-person modality from being racially neutral, to inherently racial. Stevens' ostensible descent in the film rests not on his falling from a predetermined position of whiteness as a black man, but on a reinforcement of the generic convention to use whiteness as *the* standard itself.

In *Clockers*, Spike Lee builds form around the housing project rather than around its protagonist. The film opens with crime-scene photographs of dead young Black bodies over its credit sequence, the documentary register immediately announced. Strike (Mekhi Phifer) has no voiceover, and goes through no controlled descent by any standard that can be held against classical noir structure. Linda Williams' "space of innocence," which she identifies as the moral standard American melodrama recognizes and protects, finds no potency in the projects' open plazas, and the film refuses to manufacture one. Keith Harris' account of the hood film cycle helps frame the formal inheritance Lee resists. The cycle's "binary opposition of crime or community" reduced black urban life to "socially overdetermined choices or responsibilities within the black lifeworld."[11] *Clockers* refrains from narrating Strike as either gangsta or community redeemer because the form Lee constructs does not participate in such a binary.

[10] Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 101.
[11] Keith Harris, quoted in Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 93.

Strike's interiority, when it appears, is somatic rather than psychological. His chronic stomach ulcer is a characteristic noir would have expressed through voiceover, and the model train set in his apartment functions as the film's only space of fantasy, a miniature suburb he watches from the outskirts. Diawar's earlier framework would see *Clockers* as illustrative of noir's white hero descending by losing his privilege. Strike, however, has no privilege to lose in the first place, and the genre's use of descent through this racial domain cannot function. Form, then, is the modality in the film. By building it around the projects rather than around the protagonist's interior, Lee uses *Clockers* to expose noir's individualism as a racially specific way of imagining the urban subject, and the moral standard of the genre collapses for lack of a hero whose fall can be visible in that way.

Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* manipulates and uses plot and space in order to expose the historical racial organization of the genre. Easy Rawlins (Denzel Washington) is an accidental hard-boiled detective in postwar Los Angeles, a figure often seen in both classical and contemporary noir (see *Chinatown* (1974) or *The Big Sleep* (1946)). The film preserves this formal signature through its central mystery and narrative moves, but reracializes the geography it all unfolds within. Paul Arthur describes the film as "redraw[ing] the map of LA in a fashion that not only centralizes the ebullient postwar commercial and street life of black Central Avenue, it slyly inverts the political charge contained in the Chinatown Syndrome."[12] The white districts and their "bases of individual and institutional domination" become "the heart of darkness for an African-American detective," organized by "the 'color line'".[13] Justus Nieland furthers this position by highlighting the femme fatale's role in this resituation. Daphne Monet's (Jennifer Beals) racial passing makes the mulatta femme fatale the film's "site of ambivalence

[12] Paul Arthur, "Los Angeles as Scene of the Crime," *Film Comment* 32, no. 4 (July-August 1996): 26.
[13] Arthur, "Los Angeles," 26.

and indeterminacy," where noir's mystery plot maps onto the historical archive of postwar racial borders.[14] Moreover, by employing a black detective to solve a white supremacist crime, *Devil* keeps the genre intact but demonstrates a geographical and racial incongruence that was invisibilized in classical noir.

Naremore's history of noir as a 1990s critical construction makes the three films exemplary of the mode's participants' own self-reflection, the moment where the genre became aware of itself as an idea.[15] What is revealed, then, is the visibility of whiteness in all spheres of the American hard-boiled tradition. Richard Dyer's claim that "whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness in all texts of all the time" connects to a noir corollary across all three films.[16] By avoiding participation in a singular tradition of Black noir, *Deep Cover, Clockers,* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* work within distinct modalities to render the genre's whiteness as fragile and dependent. The white standard that determined a hero's descent is both nowhere and everywhere, inflecting each novel or classical noir conception with itself.

[14] Justus J. Nieland, "Race-Ing 'Noir' and Re-Placing History: The Mulatta and Memory in 'One False Move' and 'Devil in a Blue Dress,'" *The Velvet Light Trap* 43, no. 63 (1999): 63.
[15] Naremore, *More Than Night*, 37.
[16] Dyer, *White*, 12.

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