

The Dark City: *Film Noir's* African-American Urban Landscape and Back Alley Life

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The sudden reappearance of *film noir* in recent years has prompted extensive theorizing into its sensibilities. Film noir's perceived importance marks a critical understanding of its significance as a popular cultural text and portrayal of reality, society, culture and urban life. *Noir* is becoming understood less as a local wartime phenomenon set in the 1930's and 1940's, and more as a social and cultural commentary about anxieties relating to race relations, American ethnic urban identity, and cultural assimilation.¹ *Noir's* significance rests beyond its conventional formal traits of hard-boiled detective themes, voice-over narration, dark visual style, decaying urban streets, and femmes fatales. In discussing current film criticism Joan Copjec notes that "*film noir* is...a political critique of American society, as a warning about the disastrous social issue of a felt mutation in the structure of power."²

Noir's style, visual codes, themes of injustice, urban despair, and "dark" voice therefore, all "speak" about the social and cultural mood within a particular era.

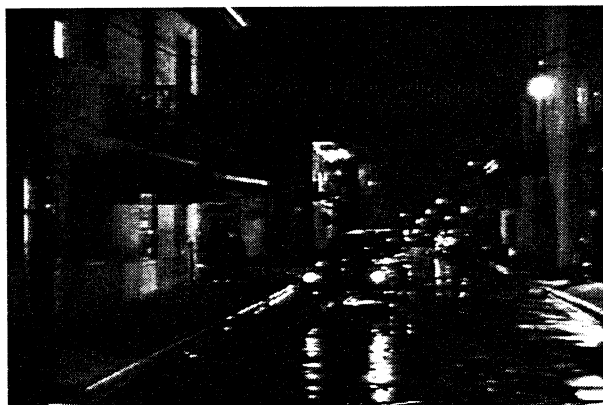


Fig. 1. Opening still from *Panic in the Streets*, 1950.

The destitute, unlit and squalid areas of its urban landscape are a critical part of its visual style, and the setting through which *noir's* compromised anti-hero negotiates a dark, tumultuous, urban terrain in search of the "truth". The representation of this mythic, gritty, and hopeless world is not only a vision of a fallen American dream, but a historical reference to a perceived reality of ethnic urban enclaves and the urban identities of the people of color who inhabit them. *Noir* is preoccupied with society's marginalized ethnic communities and its latent voice speaks about the interconnected racial and sexual tensions that relate to Asian, Latino and African-American identities.³ *Noir's* suppressed ethnicity bares the tone of race relations in American cities and confirms the growing fear and hatred of minority urban presence. Its tropes of "blackness" paint a dark portrait of

urban reality and stand as a "metaphor for its white characters' moral transgression"⁴ Shohat and Stam note the following about Hollywood cinema:

Filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships.⁵

Since race is a constitutive rather than secondary feature of American national identity, we should not be surprised to find racial undertones and overtones haunting Hollywood films, just as the repressed stories, the sublimated agonies, and the buried labor of people of color 'haunt' everyday social life.⁶

The physical settings in *noir*, therefore, are never neutral. They cover a range of ethnic sites and perceived urban histories, the most prototypical of which includes the African-American back alley landscapes of the early 1900's.



Fig. 2. "Logan Place". September 26, 1935. From James Borchert *Alley Life in Washington*, 1980.

Noir's portrayals of these landscapes as modern wastelands mirror the sentiment and concern of a physical urban reality during the 1930's and 40's. Dwellings that lined rear and dead end alleys and courts were typically small, crude and bleak. They were two room, two story structures with poor sanitation and ventilation, inadequate sewage and no internal plumbing. During the early 1900's alley conditions were deteriorated. They were debated extensively and many were targeted for condemnation and urban renewal. The physical realities of these residences were indeed harsh, and as a result never perceived by the mainstream as part of a neighborhood community. As Dean MacCannel's observes, "no one would actually want to live in the imagined proletarian and subproletarian space of *film noir*"⁷ Therefore in line with mainstream sentiment, *noir* projected back alleys as the grim consequence of African-American urbaniza-

tion. They become icons of its backlash by symbolizing stereotypical African-American traits of licentiousness, degeneracy, criminality, and declining social values through their representation as steamy, wet, dirty and forbidden street scenes.

Yet recent *film noir* by African-American filmmakers and research of back alley and African-American ghetto life has offered alternative social and cultural visions of black urban experiences. Through these works, alley neighborhoods and African-American ghetto communities are described less through physical conditions. Instead they are characterized as communities with internally strong social structure whose flexibility offers resistance to obstacles produced by racial conflict and social injustice.⁸

In comparing the real and represented spaces of back alley and ghetto communities in *film noir*, one can begin to understand both the extent to which black urban society has been denied representation, and the cultural implications of the representations given. Additionally, one can also begin to speculate upon the status of recent representations of urban ghetto community experiences in black *noir*, and assess the status of past and present racialized images on film.

History of Back Alley Development

Since the beginning of urban development African-Americans have been relegated to the periphery or the hidden interior spaces of the city. Just as the African-American back alley social life flourished behind the slave and service buildings of urban plantations during the early 1800's, so did the domestic landscape of southern black immigrants develop within the alleyways, courts, and residual interior spaces of large urban blocks. Alley housing developed behind the most expensive and elegant homes, and because they could only be reached through the narrow alleys that cut through the blocks, they remained virtually undetected and unaffected by the wealthy avenue residents.⁹

The history of alley dwelling construction is largely unknown due to poor record and resources, but several theories about their development exist. One theory supports the belief that the alley communities of the late 19th and early 20th century are a direct outgrowth of the urban plantation alley system. While there are many social similarities, alley community dwellings are oriented toward the actual alleyways and courts, and not the larger main street residence.¹⁰ A more probable theory is that inner city back alleys developed on a small scale by local independent owners of a block who subdivided their property at the rear, built inexpensive rowhouses, and rented them out to unskilled workers and immigrants.¹¹ These ethnic and working class urban alley enclaves developed into mini-ghetto neighborhood communities that were typically segregated by race. Because alley housing was largely a response to the constraints of a pedestrian metropolis, back alley neighborhoods were located within the densest part of the city.

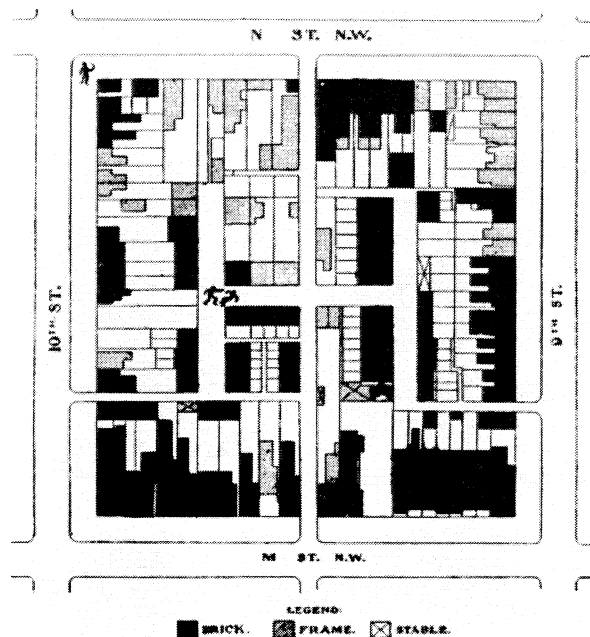


Fig. 3. "The Blind Alley of Washington, D.C.", 1912. From James Borchert *Alley Life in Washington*, 1980.

The internal alley was typically twenty to thirty feet wide, and in some cases intersected by a secondary internal alley that was not accessible to the outside of the block. It was these primary and secondary "blind" or "hidden" alleyways for which *noir* has an affinity, and it is within these spaces that *noir*'s "black" anti-hero (the analog of African-American subjectivity) is ultimately trapped. It was believed that "hidden communities... bred conditions of vice, crime and immorality", and in turn these ethnic urban enclaves became a primary source of mainstream urban fear.¹² Film noir's representation of these urban spaces as dark black holes, therefore, can ultimately be understood as a "white [nightmare] about American blackness" and the fear of moral decline.¹³ Noir's "black" hero has fallen from "whiteness" and turned black.

While alley dwellings were in existence prior to the Civil War, the growth of the city's population during the early to mid-1900's created an inexhaustible demand for low-cost dwellings, spurring wood and brick alley construction. Between 1910 and 1950 the largest internal migration in U.S. history took place, as over 5 million African-Americans moved from southern plantations to northern cities in hopes of finding better jobs, better schools, and greater racial equality. The number of African-Americans in the northern states grew 400 percent between 1920 and 1950. Blacks found work in the munitions factories, aircraft plants and shipyards in urban industrial centers.¹⁴ Yet as blacks continued to inhabit the cities, "the less space they had to occupy."¹⁵ Murphet notes that "deed restrictions, naive pub-

lic housing initiatives and pervasive racist intolerance all contributed to the impaction of black communities into small and impoverished ghettos.¹⁶ He further notes that the “systematic push to suburbanization after the War...led to an ‘abandonment of the cities’ by the upper tiers of the white working class and the white middle-class. The loss of tax money to city centers consequent with this white flight entailed the neglect of much of the urban infrastructure.”¹⁷

In addition to the government’s role in alley housing neglect, alley property owners contribute to the ultimate deterioration of alley dwellings. The owners tended not to own the immediate front main street building, and as absentee landlords (typically living on the other side of town) allowed their properties to fall into disrepair. The high level of alley deterioration forced two formal housing reform efforts to ban alley dwelling entirely. Both were ironically squelched by the two world wars. It is not a coincidence that the postponement of the second housing reform effort from the late 1930’s until 1955 and the beginning of the civil rights movement, coincides with the decades in which noir was at its zenith.

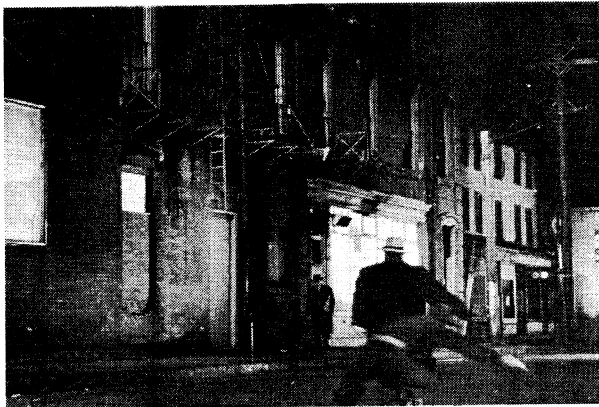


Fig. 4. Still from *Boomerang*. From Foster Hirsch *Film Noir the Dark Side of the Screen*, 1981.

Middle-class America’s discomfort with African-American housing conditions and urban alley culture is legible through noir’s decaying, derelict and terrifying streets that “resound with [the] fear of a race/class faction.”¹⁸ Borchert notes, “the compact city of the nineteenth century, tolerated ‘alley ghettos’ within its blocks, twentieth century ‘city beautiful’ thrived on order and segregation of function and people. The alley, as a threat to that new social consciousness, had to be removed.”¹⁹

The Social History of Alley Dwellings

Despite the harsh physical realities of early alley residences, potent alley communities grew. Recent research of the back alleys of Washington, D.C. by James Borchert has discovered that in contrast to early beliefs that “folk migrants [underwent] a period of disorder as a result of their exposure to urban life,

[African-Americans]... used primary groups and folk experiences” to create strategies to help cope with very crude urban experiences.²⁰ From urban gentry plantation compounds to urban back alley life, African-Americans drew upon rural folk culture to help themselves adapt to harsh realities of slavery and then segregation in the city.²¹ With strong family networks, folk traditions and kinship ties the African-American back alley communities matured. Unlike *noir*’s empty and abandoned streets, back alley landscapes developed into strong urban neighborhoods filled with residents, extended families, and friends. Traditional *noir*’s dark urban tone and conspicuous absence of black citizens only raise middle-class American fears of a growing African-American urban presence and its prodigious development during the early decades of the 1900’s.²²

Borchert notes that these alley communities exemplified a critical moment in the African-American transition from rural to urban and plantation to ghetto “in scale”, “chronology” and social setting.²³ These communities drew from slave and previous African ideals about family structure, lifestyle and living arrangements. The strength of their family form and kinship network was responsible for the resilience of back alley life. Unlike mainstream beliefs that urban black families were broken, disordered and suffered from social disorganization, research has shown that the majority of alley families were nuclear with extended and/or augmented members.²⁴ The alley families were significantly “fluid” and there is considerable evidence that a two-parent family model existed in the alley community, well into the 20th century.²⁵



Fig. 5. “Alley House Interior—First Floor Rear: Logan Court.” James Borchert *Alley Life in Washington*, 1980.

It was common for alley families to take in friends, relatives, and occasionally strangers to either supplement the family income or aid others during times of need, a practice that was also evident before and during slavery.²⁶ Borchert notes, that frequently “alley order, form and values...differed from those of the mainstream... [but] certainly main alley residents approached mainstream values to varying extents.”²⁷ Many dwellings were

clean and respectable despite external states of disrepair and African-American women (as in slave, African, and to some extent mainstream Anglo-American cultures), played a significant role in monitoring and maintaining the larger alley community.

When African-American and middle-class sensibilities clashed, it was the result of mainstream American misunderstanding of black cultural differences and strategies for survival. Overcrowded conditions and junk collecting challenged mainstream ideals of domestic lifestyle and the image of domestic space. In noir this discomfort is registered through the representation of alley urban space with its tight and garbage littered streets. Generally, African-American's were accustomed to smaller room sizes than Anglo-Americans and at least one alley family member was typically from a rural or slave environment, where no indoor plumbing, overcrowded conditions, and small crude shelters were well known conditions.²⁸ While by any standard alley dwellings were indeed crowded, African-Americans were very resourceful given their two room 20' x 30' dwelling. By expanding sleeping quarters to the back yard in the summer months, "making beds out of couches", and "folding them up against a wall" by day, alley dwellers maximized their very limited space.²⁹ They arranged furniture for efficiency, well-being and comfort. Borchert notes that, "[a] trunk might serve as the bottom of a bed, thus combining storage space and sleeping facilities...or an icebox [could] serve both its original purpose and as a table."³⁰ The use of the alleys and courts as immediate extension of residential quarters contributed to the social climate of back alley life. Not only did these areas become social gathering spaces, but also staging areas for large items that were collected for junking. Alley residents like slaves did not draw a hard line between house and yard and as a result the yards were generally filled with scraps, bottles, crates, metals, etc. that were to be sold. Junking was a resourceful practice, and for some, a full-time profession. While items stored in the yard and alley were unsightly, junking as a practice supplemented family income and demonstrated a fluidity of African and slave agricultural folk traditions.³¹ Real alley scenes were chaotic and debris filled, and this is precisely the image of African-American urban residential life portrayed through *noir* representation of its "dark" and dangerous city streets.

With the exception of brief and insignificant appearances as porters, maids, domestics and servants, African-Americans were physically excluded from noir's film form. Instead, black subjectivity was visually and aurally housed within representations of post-war urbanism and *noir*'s overcoded city streets.

Like the portrayal of back alleys as blighted wastelands, jazz and rhythm and blues "emerges from the shadows to challenge white male identity."³² Images and sounds are surrogates for the black community and all their perceived ill conduct. Therefore when projected, the milieu galvanized criminal behavior. Noir's representations of African-American presence produced immoral acts and in turn validated perceptions of social degeneracy associated with black occupation of American cities.



Fig. 6. Still from *Panic in the Streets*, 1950.

The recent new wave of African-American *noir* however challenges this white paradigm and the latent racism on which its sensibilities rest. Within the past decade, *film noir* has been appropriated by many African-American filmmakers to purposefully expose *noir*'s repression of black subjectivity and critique its themes of African-American urban identity, family, and cultural values. These films "celebrate the resilience and tenacity of the post-war black community and... recover its lost... culture."³³ This new phase of black *noir* broadens our understanding of African-American society and culture and offers insight into how it might be more critically represented on film.

African-American *Noir*— The Black Paradigm

Manthia Diawara identifies two classifications of black *noir* crime films. The first category, the "realist" or "gangsta" *noir*, is built from the legacy of Hollywood mob and gangster realist cinema and includes such films as *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Hughes, 1993). While these works presents strong images of a black ghetto community, their nihilistic vision of black culture feeds mainstream fantasies of a crushed, immoral, and dangerous urban society. Packaged as "real" life urban experiences, (complete with contemporary historic references, gangsta rap music, and actors) these fictions fetishize black urban experiences by creating a monolithic meta-reality that crudely speaks for an entire black community. The urban ghetto of these films is reduced to a barren and vice-ridden cultural space whose metaphorical similarity to the coded black landscapes of traditional *noir* bears mentioning.

The second category, the classic romance *noir*, more directly follows the conventions of traditional *film noir* in both narrative and visual style, and includes such films as *A Rage in Harlem* (Duke, 1991) and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Franklin, 1995).³⁴ These works portray African-American society through the eyes of black subjectivity, and highlight a range of black urban cultures. This type of black film form metaphorically brings *noir*'s cul-

tural “blackness” to light. Diawara notes that “the deployment of *noir* style by black filmmakers redeems blackness from its genre definition by recasting the relation between light and dark on the screen as a metaphor for making black people and their cultures visible”.³⁵ Yet for many black *noir* filmmakers, the light that reveals black culture intentionally distorts traditional meanings of black and white. The high levels of brightness in these “dark” films are deliberately contradictory to narrative action. Even daylight, in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, holds a feeling of brooding and oppression that reflects its protagonist’s awareness of an imminent white authority.

Yet despite the looming feeling of oppression, the African-American community in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is portrayed as a cohesive and unified population, that parallels the social spirit of many northern and border urban ghetto communities during the same wartime era.

Watts and Central Avenue neighborhoods are represented as active and vibrant cultural landscapes as are most public social spaces in the film. Naremore writes the following about *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

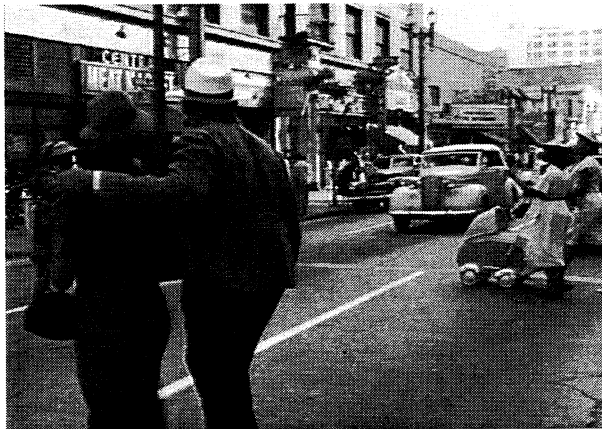


Fig. 7. Opening still from *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1996

The beautifully orchestrated crane shots of Central Avenue show us both the neon-lit dens of iniquity and the vibrant, crowded life on the street. At the Regent Theater, we glimpse a marquee advertising Oscar Micheaux’s *Betrayal*, and in other scenes we hear snippets of music.³⁶

Everyday urban spaces are lively and culturally rich. Unlike traditional *noir*’s representation of an abandoned and derelict community setting, these black public spaces feel safe and celebratory, and the urban scene is enticing. The viewer is invited to participate in everyday black urban life and made to feel safer within black public and private community settings than those occupied by whites. While dance and pool halls on Central Avenue are attractive and moody, white institutions and districts are made “black”, oppressive, and foreign. Placed in the position of the black subject, the viewer is asked to experience everyday urban life, confront race-related aggressions, and

experience its subsequent frustrations and fears.³⁷ Through black *noir* film form, the viewer is made to feel as if s/he is a part of the black urban community and a participant in a critical aspect of African-American culture.

The protagonist’s strong image of male domesticity signal black *noir*’s desire to represent stability and respect for community and social values. Atypical of traditional *noir*, the protagonist of *Devil in a Blue Dress* is domesticated and relishes his part of the American dream. He owns a comfortable bungalow in Watts with a porch, hardwood floors, breakfast nook, and lawn. The orderliness of his home and his devotion to his residential community is mirrored throughout neighborhood.

We see him talking to neighbors, people tending to their gardens, neighborhood children playing, and a lot of activity in the streets. All of the homes are well maintained, and the neighborhood is clearly socially strong and in solidarity. The last scene of the film is a panoramic shot of this residential community that makes Watts feel peaceful and pastoral. It is the final symbol of the southern roots of black urban community development, and a reference to the impact of the great migration through which black culture survived.



Fig. 8. Final still from *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1996.

While black *noir* appropriates the conventions of traditional *noir* is modes of reversal produce a worthy self-critique of black urban identity. Black *noir* draws upon the political actions inherent in traditional *noir*, and portrays a reality of an urban society and culture that had previously been repressed. It exposes the latent racial voice inherent in traditional *noir* and brings a critical aspect of American urban history to light.

NOTES

- 1 Joan Copjec, *Shades of Noir*, “Introduction” (New York and London: Verso, 1993) p. x.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. x–xi.
- 3 James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998) p. 220.
- 4 Manthia Dawara, *Shades of Noir*, “Noir by Noirs: Toward a New

- Realism in Black Cinema” (New York and London: Verso, 1993) p. 262.
- ⁵ Ella Shohat/Robert Stam *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 179.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ⁷ Dean MacCannell, *Shades of Noir*, “Democracy’s Turn: On Homeless Noir” (New York and London: Verso) 1993, p. 29.
- ⁸ Manthia Diawara, *Shades of Noir*, “Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema” (New York and London: Verso, 1993) p. 263.
- ⁹ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850– 1970* (University of Illinois Press, 1980, p. 2.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23– 25.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 45– 47.
- ¹³ James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998) p. 238.
- ¹⁴ Julian Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious” (*Screen: Spring* 1998) p. 28.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹⁹ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850 – 1970* (University of Illinois Press, 1980) p. 52.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- ²² Julian Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious” (*Screen: Spring* 1998) p. 28.
- ²³ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850– 1970* (University of Illinois Press, 1980) p. 218.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78 – 81
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ³² Julian Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious” (*Screen: Spring* 1998) p. 30.
- ³³ James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998) p. 252.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- ³⁵ Manthia Dawara, *Shades of Noir*, “Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema” (New York and London: Verso, 1993) p. 263.
- ³⁶ James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998) p. 252.
- ³⁷ James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998) p. 250.