

Presence Through Absence: Investigating Presentations of Race in *Film Noir*

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Abstract

Film noir is a celebrated and anthologized genre of film popularized in the 1940s and 1950s, known for its gritty dialogue and criminal protagonists. Much of the research focus on such films is on the fantastic lighting or misogynist elements such as the femme fatale. However, little attention is paid to the ways that race and white supremacy find their way into *noir*. I argue that this is due to the invisibility that whiteness performs within *film noir*, a function of white supremacy that ultimately erases a desire to think about race at all. Using scholarly work that characterizes *noir* as wholly self-conscious and reflective of the time in which it was created, I interrogate how *film noirs* escape the diverse cityscapes of the post-war United States they are said to replicate. Over the course of this paper, the novel and film *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *noir* films including *Trapped*, *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past*, *The Killers*, *The Reckless Moment*, and *No Way Out* are examined to consider how an overwhelming presence of white visibility indicates the obscurity of non-white characters in their absence, and, when visible, their occupancy of particular spaces within these films. The following paper uses Patrick Fuery's *Theory of Absence* to connect my conclusions that creators of *film noir* reproduce white supremacist rhetoric. Such research is necessary not to rid the romanticization of these films, but rather to shed light on their reproduction of harmful narratives and engage film lovers in thoughtful consumption of media.

1. Introduction

Film black is the literal translation of *film noir* from French. The study, celebration, and love for the ways in which *noir* films negotiate morality and entrapment rest alongside the inquiry into a main character's fall into darkness, and more broadly, what darkness truly represents in these films. These films and their dealings with darkness manifested in the 1940s and 1950s, an era clouded by the threat of destruction in the Second World War and communism following the war's conclusion. Often set in the city and following an

anti-hero figure entangled with crime and disillusionment, *film noirs* are difficult to truly pin down. There is no specific formula or definition for *noir* film, which is why researchers still wrestle with this genre, nearly 90 years after what Paul Schrader calls the first *noir* film cycle in 1941 (273). However, deep-set shadows and manipulations of light are an important part of most *noir* films, which makes the name more than just a metaphor for the darkness these films effectively encapsulate.

Most criticism of *noir* forgets an important element that impacts the genre as a whole: the

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characters are overwhelmingly white. In an effort to perpetuate the homogeneity and universality of whiteness through the absence of non-white characters, *film noir* does the opposite of erasure; rather, it indicates a presence of conventions rooted in racism. This absence is predicated on *film noir's* neglect of social reality. When whiteness is present, it is contorted to situate non-white characters as subservient to perpetuate racialized stereotypes and Otherness. The following paper investigates such absences in three sections: the presentation of whiteness in a selection of *noir*, the disregard for social reality in depictions of racial difference, and the geography of non-white characters when featured in *film noirs*.

2. Methods

Cinematic close reading requires a keen eye to decipher the techniques in film that attempt to go unnoticed and preserve fluidity. The current reading of cinema entrusts critical deconstruction theory to find meaning in what is effectively absent on screen. Deconstruction, as a critical literary theory, thinks about language as unstable and closely investigates how a text's meaning can never truly be uncovered. This critical theory emerged from the scholarship of Jacques Derrida and later had contributions from literary scholar Paul de Man. Any investigation into language and meaning effectively undoes or deconstructs said meaning. Patrick Fuery's theorizations in *The Theory of Absence* indicate that the existence of things always holds a "capacity for absence" (1). Thus, whatever is concretely present, "the state of being with or in the same place as a person or thing; attendance, company, society, or association," simultaneously represents what is missing ("Present," 1.a.). This informs a reading of the classical cycle of *film noir*, in which an all-

white cast illuminates the omission of non-white actors. This quality of the present is an active force, where its workings can be recognized as a conscious negation of an absent something (1). Understandably, there is a power struggle between the present and the absent, where the present force attempts to keep its luminosity by suppressing the absent.

In the context of *film noir*, this void of non-white characters is the product of white supremacist ideology, which aims to universalize whiteness through the suppression of non-white characters. The use of the word presence here has another important meaning: "A person or thing that exists or is present in a place but is not seen, esp. a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or perceived to be present," such as a ghost ("Present," 6). Whiteness operates under the former definition of present, while the underpinnings of white supremacy operate under the latter definition. Put another way, the overwhelming whiteness visible in *film noir* indicates the scarce screen time non-white characters receive, and such presence also attempts to make this overwhelming uniformity invisible, as well as the mechanics of white supremacy that make it possible. Although Patrick Fuery's work is largely abstract in its language, it lends itself to this argument and informs much of the following analysis. While beneficial for this investigation, solely focusing on absences detracts from what is present in a text. It is integral that attention to presences and absences be used in tandem, so that a clear and whole picture may be presented. This is visible at the end of this paper, where I discuss the *noir* *No Way Out* and how it confronts racism directly.

Theoretical frameworks of absence and presence are used alongside close readings of *noir* in three categories: whiteness and *film noir*, flawed depictions of social realities, and

geographies of non-white characters. In the first category, the novel and 1946 film adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* help demonstrate the performance of whiteness and the influence of the Hays Production Code. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* follows Frank, Cora, and Nick, and the aftermath of Frank and Cora's plot to kill Nick, Cora's husband.

In the second section, the 1949 film *Trapped* lends itself to a discussion of relationships with police and the white-washed version of Los Angeles displayed in the film. Convicted criminal counterfeiter Tris is sought out by the U.S. Treasury Department and offered release from prison if he assists in uncovering the current counterfeiters. When Tris escapes from his parole officer, he immediately runs to his girlfriend, Laurie, whose apartment is already bugged by law enforcement. Tris is tied up in one bad decision after another and faces the law throughout the film, inevitably trapped.

The final section tracks a pattern of how non-white characters are figured on screen. Films briefly discussed here are *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *Too Late for Tears*, *Out of the Past*, and *The Reckless Moment*. All the films deal with murder and feature non-white characters who are spatially separated from their white counterparts and sometimes function as an aide to the protagonist of the film. Interestingly, many of these non-white characters are not credited by the film, and their absence from the credits is made distinctively present for anyone curious about other work by these actors.

3. Whiteness in Noir

The quality of presence that attempts to deny the visibility of another is perfectly exemplified by the transition of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* from written work to film. The

novel follows Frank, a drifter, after he begins work at a diner owned by Cora and her much older husband, Nick. Frank and Cora become ensnared in a love affair turned fatal when they plot to kill Nick. From the second page, Nick is marked by his ethnicity in vulgar ways. He is stripped of his name and is solely referred to as "the Greek" alongside bigoted statements, including "greasy" and "[he] makes you sick to your stomach when he touches you" (Cain 15). The primary plot of the novel predicates on Frank and Cora's disdain and hatred for Nick, which can be extended to hatred for his ethnic identity. Here, Nick's ethnicity is deeply present, and Cain's choice to figure Frank and Cora in such a binary opposition to Nick makes a commentary about racial and ethnic relations within America during the 1930s. As such, ethnicity becomes a critical part of the story, but by the time this film is produced and released to theaters, this feature is absent. Only slight indications of Nick's ethnic identity from the novel are present: Frank asks Cora why she would marry a man "like that," and Nick's slight accent. The major discussions about the hatred of non-Anglo-Saxon Americans and language-constructed Otherness present in the print narrative are erased in the film version. This tendency of presence to suppress and create absence prompts considerations about the stakes of these absences. Taken in conjunction with the novel's saturation with conversations regarding race and ethnicity, albeit negative ones, there seems to be a conscious choice by filmmakers to remove any critique of race relations and to eliminate non-Anglo-Saxon characters to preserve whiteness.

The elimination of Nick's ethnic identity in the screen play also illuminates the inner workings of the Hays Production Code, which was a set of principles for filmmakers and production companies that prohibited a host of content, including the representation of good vs. evil and

obscenity. The Hays Production Code was published in 1930 but was largely enforced in 1934 after the creation of the Production Code Administration (Leff 4). The Code was an agreement of self-censorship by the film industry and was enforced until 1968, when MPAA ratings were established through a script-review phase before shooting began on a film (Leff 5). Of note here is the Addenda made to the 1930 Code, where the code clarifies that miscegenation, “sex relationship between the white and black races [was] forbidden” (Doherty 236). The interest here is that the code specifically outlines and places Black and white in opposition to each other, as though race only exists between the two. The Hays Production Code had already been established by the time Cain published *Postman*, so by the standards of the code, Nick and Cora’s marriage in the novel might be considered on the edges of miscegenation. When translated to the screen, Nick and Cora’s relationship becomes one of two visibly white people. This change serves the interests of filmmakers to erase any indications of different racial identities, although Greek identity would be considered an ethnic identity, not necessarily a racial one. The awkwardness of describing such a thing points out the oddities of racism and race itself. There is such circularity in reasoning as to what “race” is or one’s ethnic identity, which Fields and Fields’ *Racecraft* discuss at length in their book. The pair describe how “disguised as race, racism becomes something Afro-Americans are, rather than something racists do” (96-97). Instead of finding fault in racism by racists, Field and Fields describe how this identifier of race becomes something for a non-white subject to assume. Rather, individuals should interrogate the systems and ideologies that led to naming someone with their race. Their articulations form around the difficulty in truly describing race and racism because of its oddities

and how it forces its audience to “simultaneously accept two conflicting views” (Fields and Fields 108). This transition from print to screen and its unique erasure is described perfectly by Megan Abbott: “whiteness is assured by Hollywood’s silvery gaze,” a gaze that distorts (123).

In such an absence of diverse racial and ethnic identities, it becomes crucial to discuss how whiteness operates in the context of *film noir*. Ignoring white as a race only serves the interests of white supremacy; under this lens, whiteness becomes universal and normal. The pervasiveness of whiteness is meant to treat a white identity as one that is just, moral, and most importantly, the default (Abbott 92). When white protagonists are immersed in darkness, blackness becomes a metaphor for criminality and wrongdoing, as suggested by Manthia Diawara (Diawara in Lott 544). As Megan Abbott proposes, the object of maintaining a universality of whiteness by *film noir* is carried out through distinctive Othering. James M. Cain gets at this concept through Frank and Cora’s dialogue in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Abbott describes how Frank and Cora fetishize whiteness by putting it in opposition to other races, thereby Othering them. Frank assumes that Cora is Mexican, which prompts a highly racist and charged conversation between the two. Cora attempts to differentiate herself as much as possible from being Mexican, as though it dirties her: “I’m just as white as you are. You want to get along good around here, you won’t forget that;” “My name was Smith...that don’t sound much like a Mex does it?;” and, “I don’t even come from around here [California]. I come from Iowa” (Cain 6-7). This ultimately Others anyone who is not white, thereby making white something to be identified with, something positive, and something present. Abbott explains that this tendency to “racialize others” reflects “the era’s racial anxieties” (93). By making whiteness

universal, there seems to be an invocation of concealment that comes with pervasiveness. However, if whiteness is figured to be invisible, then it would indicate that it is uniquely present. Invisibility is not a rendering of imagination, but rather something concealed from sight.

4. Blemished Social Realities

From this realm of absence emerges a disregard for social reality within *noir* films. An important classical *film noir* characteristic that reflects a consciousness of American anxieties and the desire for a realistic portrayal of life is non-existent for films set in Los Angeles (216). This characteristic of realism and a tendency for *film noir* to represent American anxieties is introduced in Paul Schrader's famed "Notes on Film Noir." Although Schrader's essay does provide a comprehensive overview of significant characteristics within a typical *noir*, Schrader misses a few notes. He indicates that *noir* is particularly influenced by the historical moment when it is produced, specifically noting postwar disillusionment and realism (215-216). If *noir* is supposedly concentrated on realism, then certainly a large piece of American history is missing from many of the films. Part of this shift to realism is the film's portrayal of its setting: an urban cityscape, usually Los Angeles, New York City, or San Francisco. Instead of using sets, *noir* films were shot on location in the city they depicted. This realism was further depicted through imperfect characters and the struggles of everyday people (Schrader 268). In most of these settings, though, only white actors are visible in the background of racially and ethnically diverse cities.

One historically significant event that Schrader fails to mention taking place during the classical cycle of *noir* is the Great Migration. This

in-migration of Black Americans to the West Coast, particularly Los Angeles, coming from the South, completely refigured the landscape of Los Angeles. The Great Migration, occurring from 1910 to 1970, significantly changed the population distribution of the United States. One point eight million Black Americans left the South during the first half of this period, from 1910–1940; from 1940–1970, over double this amount left the South (Sides 38). In Los Angeles specifically, the Black population grew from 9,424 in 1910 to 503,606 in 1970 (U.S. Department of Commerce). This substantial influx of people, especially after World War II, a period that Schrader notes is particularly important for the classical *film noir* cycle, "grew so fast that even the most determined could not ignore it" (Sides 44). It became a conscious choice for filmmakers to ignore the changing landscape of Los Angeles.

The degree to which the misrepresentation of reality is evident in Los Angeles is presented in *Trapped* (1949). The film follows the government's attempt to turn a criminal counterfeiter, Tris, into an unknowing informant for a revived counterfeit operation. Set in Los Angeles, the entire film is absent of non-white characters, even in background roles. Whiteness prevails over the entirety of this film, in which the plot is predicated on Tris's staged escape from prison, organized by the government. Conversations regarding the absence of non-white characters lend to an analysis of how whiteness operates within this film. While it is Tris's cunning and deception that allows him to leave prison, it is difficult to say that it is not also Tris's whiteness that affords him the privilege of leaving the prison—something that would not have been possible for a person of color. Tris's arrest is also indicative of white privilege as it pertains to interactions with the police. When Tris is escaping the police after violating his parole terms, he is

given a gentle warning shot to try to stop him, rather than something much more fatal. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has a long history of police brutality and racism, famously in the 1960s during the Watts Rebellion and 1990s after the arrest of Rodney King and subsequent rioting.¹ LAPD's Chief, William Parker, was largely responsible for the commonplace violence against Black folks, specifically by the police force, during his reign from 1950–1966 (Claybrook Jr.). Considering the historical context of L.A.'s police department and its relationship with people of color, deemed racialized subjects, Tris's experiences with police become overtly related to his skin color.

L.A.'s tight grip on *film noir* is pervasive. Although some films, like *Trapped*, are completely misrepresentative of Los Angeles's cityscapes and populations, other *noir* films, with white anxiety hanging over them, create a racialized binary between the white subject and a non-white Other. When these characters are featured in *film noirs*, they are given stereotypical service-oriented roles such as maids, cooks, waiters, and garage attendants, made to be subservient to their white counterparts (Wager 34). The nature of these roles is also important to note, as they are usually tertiary characters who do not recur in scenes or have a particular influence over the plot of the movie but serve a singular purpose. The absence of fully developed non-white characters, in conjunction with a lack of conversation and commentary on race relations, indicates such a presence. In Eric Lott's terms, "*noir* responded to this problem [of racism in the United States] not by presenting it outright but by taking the social

energy associated with its social threat and subsuming it into the untoward aspects of white selves" (551). Lott speaks directly to a conscious use of absence to represent an existence of anxiety. For Lott, the manifestation of white fear of changing city landscapes resulting from the Great Migration works in a metaphorical way. Instead of facing racism plainly, these white characters take on these anxieties with non-racialized threats that are nonetheless clouded. The white character, in his supposed universality, becomes an agent representing a white anxiety of falling into darkness.

5. Geographies of Non-white Characters

The casting of non-white actors in certain roles also plays a significant role in how different characters within *film noir* occupy space and geography. Service-oriented roles are housed in specific spaces within the film, usually separated physically from the spaces that the main characters inhabit. Garage attendants Charlie (*Double Indemnity*) and Pete (*Out of the Past*) are both secluded in the underground garage, never shown above-ground amongst white characters. There are also instances when people of color are portrayed as behind or backgrounded in some way. The cook in *The Killers* is separated from the white characters by a counter that he cooks behind. Sybil, in *The Reckless Moment*, is always blocked in the background of the other characters, peering through a window, or in a gap of space between the white family she works for. Not only the casting choices for specific roles, but the

¹ These are just two examples of highly publicized public and police interactions that resulted in violence. The Watts Rebellion was a nearly week-long riot following a forcible arrest by the police of Marquette Frye. The riots gained national attention from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Lyndon B. Johnson (Stanford). Rodney King's brutal

arrest by the LAPD was broadcast on TV News outlets and brought attention to the LAPD's racialized interactions with people of color, particularly. The video sparked outrage across the country, and the acquittal of the police officers, three of whom were white. What resulted was riots across Los Angeles.

maintenance of space segregates non-white characters from white characters and seems to racialize non-white characters as Other.



Figure 1: Sybil, the Harper family's maid, is consistently placed in the background of scenes and often separated from the family by doors and windows.

This inhabitation of space by non-white characters, while segregated, creates certain affordances. Because these characters are beneath or on the outskirts of white society, the spaces they inhabit are often invisible to the unsuspecting white person and allow Black characters to move through spaces with ease (Rabinowitz 4). The maid as a character trope for Black women in *film noir* is one way that the geography of Black space is represented and eventually exploited by white characters. This is evident in Sybil's character in *The Reckless Moment*, who is constantly framed in the background of shots or seen looking through windows. She is always separated in some way from white characters, yet she is still privy to the information they discuss (see Figure 1). Rabinowitz talks about this quality as being within the "margins of white America" (4). This sentiment describes just how closely Black women are located geographically to white America, yet are still demarcated as "Other" and are made to walk this incredibly thin line. This is also evident in the case of Eunice from *Out of the Past*. This film uses flashbacks to tell the story of Jeff, a former private investigator, and Kathy, a femme fatale with a past of murder and lies. Jeff enters a Black jazz club

with ease and indifference to seek out Eunice, Kathy's former maid, for any information she might have regarding Kathy. Her supposed closeness to and knowledge regarding Kathy is assumed based on her employment. Jeff uses a threat of danger to get the information out of Eunice and is exploitative of her maintenance of space. This in-between of the Black woman uniquely situates her in a space that seemingly relies on her yet casts her as Other. Eunice's ability to house valuable information makes her an asset to Jeff, but she is not allowed, visually at least, to share space with her white counterparts. Her value seems to come from what she can do for Jeff, not her value as a person.

In contrast to a female embodiment of the spatial area, Eric Lott's "The Whiteness of Film Noir" discusses how space is exploitive of Black male characters by *noir* protagonists. Lott specifically notes how Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* uses Charlie, a Black male garage attendant, to help him carry out his plan (547). Neff uses, so to speak, Charlie's inhabitation in the shadows and underground as an alibi, relying on the naivety of the Black subject to unknowingly play a role in his scheme. He makes a conscious effort to speak to Charlie, noting in his dialogue, "I drove right into the garage, this was another attempt to establish my alibi," and tells him that he is staying in for the night (see Figure 2). In nearly two lines of dialogue, Neff constructs a narrative based on his knowing and Charlie's unawareness. The characteristic Lott shows is also relevant in *Too Late for Tears'* protagonist, Jane. Like Neff, Jane makes an effort to engage in conversation with Pete, a Black garage attendant (see Figure 2). She acts as if she is traveling normally, and makes it appear that her husband Alan is driving their car, not Danny, her killer accomplice. Jane takes advantage of Pete's space underground to establish a clean alibi, again with an unknowing

counterpart. These inclusions of Black characters do not seem to be genuinely concerned with representation, but rather with characterizing Black characters as not only in service to white characters but also as accomplices in their criminality



Figure 2: From left to right: In *Too Late for Tears*, Jane (pictured right) establishes an alibi by making conversation with Pete, a garage attendant (pictured left). Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* descends stairs to speak for the second time to Charlie, a garage attendant who washes his car, to solidify his alibi of staying inside his apartment for the night.

Under this discussion of absence and presence, much of the conversation has relied on the ways that racism and bigotry are figured as underlying currents, visibly absent from the silver screen, yet nonetheless still there. This, of course, is not the case for all *film noir*, especially in the case of *No Way Out*, which displays the issue of race relations in the United States quite explicitly. The film does not shy away from portraying white anxieties regarding changing landscapes and depicts a fully developed Black character whose family life, beyond his employment status and even racial identity, is also represented.

Dr. Luther Brooks, a Black man, works in a prison wing of a hospital where he must treat two white criminal brothers, Johnny and Ray, who are violently racist towards him. While Dr. Brooks administers a spinal tap to Johnny, he dies. Ray then accuses Dr. Brooks of murdering his brother and attacks him profusely with racial slurs and commentary. The story is largely based on discriminatory practices against Dr. Brooks and a general tension between white and Black characters, to the extent that the movie shows a

race riot near the end. This was a problem for many communities, and *No Way Out* was banned from screening in Chicago (De Rosa 54). The race riot was considered threatening to the tensions between real Black and white communities and was often condemned by journalist reviews. Making the struggle for racial tensions in America at the forefront of this 1950 film recognized the social and political climates within the United States while still achieving the classification of *noir*, so much so that even reviews of the film illuminated the white anxieties it portrays. While many white liberal journalists supported the anti-racist posture of the film, many suggested “by distortion or omission an equally grave threat to white society (Herald Tribune) in the figure of a black community coming together in dialogue and decisive action” (De Rosa 63).

While *No Way Out* flips absence on its head, this film is largely an exception to the absence and presence rule of *film noir*. In the classical cycle of *film noir*, it is difficult to find many other films that so deeply commit to representing a complete character, explicitly portray the deep-rooted fears of both white and Black Americans, and still remain a story of crime, use of expressionist lighting, and conform to the realism that defines *noir*. As such, the ways this film presents American racial realities help indicate the absence felt within many other *film noirs*.

6. Conclusion

It is worth noting the absolute distinctiveness of *film noir* and the ways it has captured the attention and study of so many. Numerous literature companions feature cinema studies scholars dissecting various elements of *noir* across films with attention to lighting, characterization, historicization, and in some cases, race. *Noir* has

not singularly captured the attention of academics, though. Modern interpretations of *noir*, aptly called *neo-noirs*, capture elements of the classic cycle of *noir* but place characters in modern struggles and contexts. Many of these films are also filmed in color, creating a more concerted effort on the part of writers and directors to capture *noir*'s mood while telling a story in color. A concrete definition of *noir* is like a difficult puzzle. Because there is no single way to dilute *film noir* into a neat definition, it allows continued research and study to remain relevant.

Noticing how these films negotiate an embodiment of white and non-white characters is necessary. This is essential because the elements that allowed classic *noirs* to gain and retain popularity are built on the ideas about race at the time. The *neo-noir* films produced afterwards are connected to this history. But when race appears to be absent, how can one say that these films reflect the perceptions of race, and therefore racism, at the time? By utilizing Patrick Fuery's theoretical framework of presence and absence, the absences become present when one notices what is not there. While films endeavor for their audiences to track what is present on the screen, attention to elements or people who are missing creates fruitful dialogue to uncover why that may be. Tracking how film adaptations erase ethnicity and conform to the Hays Production Code demonstrates not only the sensibilities of the time but also how white supremacist ideologies made their way into filmmaking. Paul Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*" is the quintessential criticism on the topic, yet one of Schrader's defined characteristics of *noir*, realism, is not entirely accurate as it comes to depictions of urban cities. Using the Great Migration and Los Angeles as a case study illuminates how filmmakers' portrayals were not reflective of the diverse cityscapes.

Perhaps most visible is how, when

included, non-white characters are often forced into separate spaces from their white counterparts. They might be literally underground, as in the case of garage attendants, or peeking through windows. These spatial designations visibly demarcate non-white characters as Other and segregate the camera. Future research on this topic might investigate how *neo-noirs* take up some of these issues and reinvent the affect of *noir* without the lack of diverse casting and inconsiderate characterization. This research investigates some of the groundwork laid for *neo-noirs*, but does not address how race and racism are addressed in these modern films. A comparison of *noir* and *neo-noirs* that considers how the two film cycles figure race would be beneficial to see how societal movements impact film and prompt discussions about how modern interpretations of *noir* may also reflect the current generation's understanding of race. There is certainly joy and pleasure in documenting what one sees on screen, but the stakes of that joy and pleasure in the face of the absent must also be considered.

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