

TRANSGRESSION, RACIALIZED POLICING, AND THE LIMITS OF IDENTITY: DEEP COVER

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the depiction of an undercover African American police officer in Bill Duke's Deep Cover and the conceptions of identity, society, and legality that inform this character. Through close analysis of several key sequences, this essay examines the film's blurring of policing and criminality as a critical representation of limited, racist notions of identity.

INTRODUCTION

Similar to the Chester Himes's Harlem Domestic Cycle and the three films it inspired,¹ Norman Jewison's In the Heat of the Night, and Charles Burnett's The Glass Shield, Bill Duke's Deep Cover portrays the narrative conflicts related to African American police officers as they face on-the-job racism. While the (almost always male) protagonists uphold the supposedly neutral apparatus of law and order, their professionalism and ability are scrutinized repeatedly because of the essentialist and racist ontological association of African Americanism and, more broad, blackness, with criminality, depravity, and violence. Deep Cover presents aspects of this conflict and also includes an interesting twist on this standard with its complex depiction of its protagonist, Russell Stevens (Laurence Fishburne).

Stevens starts out the film as a uniform "beat cop," but early on is chosen to become an undercover agent for the D.E.A., posing as an up-and-coming drug dealer. While he confronts racism within the police institution from the film's outset, this shift in Stevens's professional life is represented as problematic since it seems to depend upon his skin color, cultural heritage, and negative associations with blackness rather than upon his skills as a police officer. The film simultaneously represents this racism within the police and societal prejudices against African American men both as a boon to his undercover policing but as damaging to his personal life.

Stevens is unlike characters from the above-mentioned films and from television programs that deal with similar situations—NYPD Blue, Homicide: Life on the Streets, and The Shield—because he makes use of and comes to believe racialized associations of African American identity and criminality, while other characters tend to reject all racism that comes their way.² Stevens also is unlike characters whose ethics or psyches are challenged by identification with criminals—Heat, Silence of the Lambs, or the most literal, Face/Off—or characters who "go over to the other side" for economic gain or self-preservation, such as

Training Day and Cop Land. Instead, Deep Cover foregrounds Stevens as his own doppelganger, where questions about conflicting identities are internalized within the “raced” roles of his law enforcement and criminal work; and as a cop corrupted by the system, not by his own desire for money or status. When he begins to transgress the institutional practice of his profession and become a successful criminal, he not only begins to view himself as a criminal—the way that most characters view him—but also to consent to the damaging, essentialist notions of race that guides this perspective.³ Before I consider specific moments in Deep Cover, I want to offer an overview of existent studies of Deep Cover, as well as the film’s narrative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several authors have written about Deep Cover, alone or grouped with other films, in contexts that differ slightly from my own analysis of the film. B.L. Chakoo’s short essay, “Violence in American Crime Films: A Note on Deep Cover,” uses a psychoanalytic framework to evaluate violence in the film and make a case for psychoanalytic criticism in general. Chakoo’s observations are valid in relation to Deep Cover, but ultimately the essay is less concerned with the film—a “minor...typical Hollywood film of crime and violence” in Chakoo’s estimation—and only gestures toward the racialized elements of the film that are my focus (101, 103).

Kenneth Chan’s “The Construction of Black Male Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties” situates Deep Cover in a generic context; action films that highlight the problematic representational equation between black masculinity and criminality. Although Chan does not devote much attention to Deep Cover, my analysis shares his methodology in relation to blackness and criminality, as does Jacquie Jones’s review of Deep Cover, “Under the Cover of Blackness.” My approach most resembles Jones’s consideration of what she identifies as “Deep Cover’s most important innovation [in cinematic history,] the treatment of criminality [as an] investigation of criminality itself (32).” Where Jones and I diverge stems from my focus on the representational complexities of racialized policing and my close analysis of the film, while her argument creates important links between the film and post-1960s African American public culture and Black Nationalism.

In “*Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema*,” Manthia Diawara briefly considers Deep Cover and Duke’s previous film, A Rage in Harlem, within the generic framework of film noir and alongside, a close analysis of Himes’s first novel from the Harlem Domestic Cycle, A Rage in Harlem. Diawara points out the similarities between Himes’s politicized texts and the films noirs of the “new” black filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s:

Using Himes’s A Rage in Harlem as a paradigmatic text for the way in which black artists enter the roots of *noir* structure in their works, it is possible to distinguish two categories of *films noirs* by *noirs* in the Reagan/Bush era. The conventional category includes films like A Rage in Harlem, One False Move, and, possibly, New Jack City...the realist and black nationalist category includes films like Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Head (sic) and Malcolm X, Boyz n the Hood, Straight Out of Brooklyn, Chameleon Street, Juice, and Deep Cover. (263, 273-74).

Diawara does not fully develop his criteria for these categories (how, for instance, does he define conventional and realist?), but the connection he provides between the films and Himes's fiction is an instructive way to examine the complications of the African American police detective characters.

Wahneema Lubiano's two essays, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others" and "Don't Talk with Your Eyes Closed: Caught in the Hollywood Gun Sights," offer the most sustained analysis of *Deep Cover* in the existing literature about the film. Lubiano, like Jones, draws on Black Nationalism to discuss the film, but unlike my affiliation with Jones's review, Lubiano and I draw different conclusions about the film and Stevens. Lubiano's essays critique *Deep Cover* for its support of one ideological strand of black nationalism in which the male-dominated heteronormative family is central, and in "Don't Talk With...", she proposes that at the end of the narrative, Stevens enacts a return to the "fold": "black brotherhood, black patriarchy, and selfless devotion to the (white) law," based upon the combined influence of Christianity and black nationalism (143). I think Lubiano's assessment of *Deep Cover* is a valid interpretation, and to be sure, the film's recurring interest (obsession) with the role of fathers is troubling. However, I do not think that the film is a validation of "selfless devotion to the (white) law," a crucial point of the film and its conclusion about Stevens, as will become clear in the remainder of this essay.

Narrative Overview

The film opens with a traumatic episode in which the young Stevens (Cory Curtis) watches his drug-addicted father (Glynn Turman) rob a liquor store before he is shot and killed. Stevens's poetic voice-over plays over the sequence and provides us with some explanation of the events shown: "So gather round while I run it down and unravel my pedigree. My father was a junkie...My father, when I saw him die like that, saw him find his grave in the snow, I only had one thought. It wasn't gonna happen to me." This sets the stage for Stevens's assignment as an undercover officer, to infiltrate a drug cartel with connections to Latin America, which immediately follows the opening sequence.

Being undercover necessitates that Stevens engage in criminal activity—selling drugs, money laundering, and even murder of rival dealers—and acting as a criminal brings Stevens closer to becoming more like his father. His two father-figure "bosses," a D.E.A. supervisor named Carver (Charles Martin Smith) and David Jason (Jeff Goldblum), a crooked, white Jewish lawyer who works with the Latin American drug cartel and who eventually takes Stevens on as his partner in drug distribution, sanction these activities despite their opposing legal positions. An additional father-figure, an African American detective named Taft (Clarence Williams III), trails Stevens throughout the film, not knowing that Stevens is undercover, but attempting to redeem him based on ethnic-cultural affiliation and Christianity. Because Stevens receives competing support and admiration from these three men and because of his memories of his criminal father, he begins to question his own identity as an African American man, a police officer, and a drug dealer.

“A Scumbag for the Right Side”

Very little is known about Stevens’s professional life as a police officer before he goes undercover since none of his police work is shown within the film. The adult Stevens, already well into his career as a police officer, first appears in the film as he meets Carver in a dark, nondescript office. This meeting occurs at the end of a sequence composed of three, nearly identical shot-reverse shot patterns in which Carver individually asks three African American male uniformed officers, “do you know the difference between a black man and a nigger?” The first officer responds to Carver’s question with an uncomfortable smile and answers “no,” while the second officer lifts Carver out of his chair and asks “who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?” The third officer, Stevens, stares at Carver and calmly answers, “the nigger is the one that would even answer that question.” Carver smiles at Stevens’s answer, confident that he has found his undercover agent.

Stevens’s answer presents him as a man superior to the other two men—neither acquiescent nor volatile. The interview ostensibly tests his professionalism as a police officer to gauge how he responds to a tense situation. Stevens therefore is unique amongst the candidates and ready for Carver’s challenge. But the answer further confirms Carver’s ideological position with regard to Stevens’s racialized identity and poise, or rather, how Stevens responds to racism and not just any tense situation. Carver creates an imaginary equation between Stevens and himself since they “know” the several problematic answer to the question: that within the neutral domain of police business, prejudices do not exist; that black man and nigger exist as meaningful identities; that there is some quantifiable difference between these supposed identities. These answers, in turn, are meant to excuse Carver of his racist tactics.

We next see the men in another meeting, presumably shortly after their first meeting since both men wear the same clothes, that is depicted in series of shot-reverse shots, both close-up shots and medium shots. The men sit across from each other at a desk, and the substance of this meeting centers on Carver’s attempts to convince Stevens to work undercover in Los Angeles as John Q. Hull, a drug dealer. Carver entices Stevens with the notion that he can do more good as an undercover cop than he can as an officer in uniform. Furthermore, Carver argues that John Q. Hull will be a “scumbag for the right side” in L.A. because he is unencumbered by familial connections.⁴ Stevens’s potential for success, Carver notes, can be found in his “psychological profile,” which suggests that Stevens will be particularly adept for the job: he “score[s] almost exactly like a criminal [who] resents authority, [has a] rigid moral code [with] no underlying system of values, [and has an] insufficiently developed sense of self [that stems from his] rage [and] repressed violence.”

Implicit in Carver’s assessment is that Stevens’s personality traits are necessarily character flaws and that such characteristics are an essential part of his personality that cannot be altered. This logic is informed by an equation of blackness and criminality that links biology to inherent criminal attributes and, in turn, is supported by the long-standing belief that innate “criminal minds” and/or “criminal personalities” exist. Such reasoning allows Carver to label Stevens a potential criminal even though he is a police officer with no criminal record. Carver concludes, “undercover all [of Stevens’s] faults will become virtues. [He] will be a star.” In Carver’s professional opinion, Stevens is the perfect candidate for the undercover job, and after

Carver convinces Stevens of this, it is only a matter of time before he takes the assignment. We then follow the development of John Q. Hull, a development that seemingly reflects upon Stevens's skill as an undercover police officer. Or does it?

This question about Stevens's skill as an undercover officer is an interesting one because, just as we do not know much about his career as a uniformed officer, we do not know how he prepares to become an undercover agent. Soon after Stevens takes the assignment, a vertical wipe transports viewers from Cincinnati to "Los Angeles, 2 Weeks Later" (noted in a superimposed title) and the shabby hotel that Stevens, now known as Hull, calls home. We then see a brief meeting between Stevens and Carver during which Carver shows Stevens slides of the men who run the Latin American drug cartel and explains each man's role. From this meeting, the film immediately shifts to a highly stylized montage that shows Stevens as he buys drugs, sells drugs, walks on the streets of Hollywood, and exchanges confiscated drugs for money with Carver. The montage includes numerous jump cuts, canted angles, and a distinct red-tone lighting throughout that occasionally highlights red cars and red clothing. The visually evocative aspects of this sequence (and another later montage) and the fast-paced and bass heavy music on the soundtrack communicate in visual and aural shorthand that Stevens has fully taken on the persona of Hull. He has followed Carver's orders and has acquired the accoutrements associated with his "glamorous" drug-dealing lifestyle—an abundance of money, flashy cars, and a party-like atmosphere on the streets where he deals.

Up until this moment in the film, no one discusses Stevens's professionalism and/or his ability to carry out the undercover assignment, except that in Carver's mind, Stevens is a "natural-born" undercover cop because he thinks "almost exactly" like a criminal. Implicit here is Carver's conception of Stevens's visible racial identity, a point that Chan notes as the manner in which "race and racism...inform the psychological profile [Carver] uses to prove Stevens's 'criminal' suitability for the assignment...Carver's offensive choice to interview only black officers for the undercover job reflects the racial specificity of criminal profiling (39)." For Carver, the ability to "look" like a criminal apparently automatically resides in the amalgamation of blackness and masculinity.⁵ Yet for several of the criminal characters in the film, it appears that Stevens's ability to "pass" as a drug dealer is not so clear-cut.

As the film begins to represent Stevens/Hull as a criminal, it also presents the criminals whom Stevens is supposed to trick as scrutinizing his undercover identity and profession. If we believe, as Carver does, that Stevens's ability to maintain the cover of a drug dealer is formidable, then why do several characters distrust the man they know as Hull and even speculate as to whether or not he is a cop? Is it possible that Carver's assessment of Stevens's psychological profile is uncanny in its precision—that Stevens is only "almost exactly like a criminal?"

"This Guy is a Cop"

The first examination of Stevens by criminals is in a boxing gym when he meets David and Eddie (Roger Guenveur Smith), the "middle-man" between David and various street-dealers. Eddie has arranged the meeting between the two men at David's behest, but Eddie has his own

motives for the meeting since he has been arrested and wants to betray Stevens to the police in order to save himself.

A wide shot shows David as he glides into the meeting at the gym while he is jokingly sparring with a boxer. The camera is placed slightly in front of David at a left angle, and it tracks along with his movements until he stops directly in front of the ring. The now static wide shot continues without a cut as David sits down in the center of the frame, between Stevens and Eddie who sit facing each other from the left and the right edges of the frame, respectively. Stevens and David verbally address each other as the camera shifts from the wide shot to present the two characters in matching head-and-shoulders shot edited in shot-reverse shot pattern. This representational strategy presents an intense bond between them as they stare at each other during their otherwise brief conversation. Stevens immediately questions David about the nature of the meeting and attempts to subvert David's authority within the meeting to prove himself as a worthy adversary-ally (the contradictory positions in their buyer-seller relationship). David calmly tells Stevens that he wants to meet anyone who buys a lot of product from Eddie, and in a somewhat amiable tone he asks Stevens, "Where are you moving this stuff?" Stevens gruffly responds, "Do Macys tell Gimbels, motherfucker?," and prompts David to abandon his amiable tone. David breaks the exchange of looks, turns to Eddie and says, "Forget it Eddie. This guy is a cop," before he walks off-screen. A short time later in this sequence, David and Eddie are shown outside of the gym in a wide shot where Eddie convinces David that Stevens is a legitimate dealer. David capitulates to Eddie's pleas and gives him the drugs that are to be sold.

The boxing gym sequence does not present one clear motive for David's suspicion of Stevens. If we take David at his word, we can conclude that he does believe that Stevens is a cop, but why? Like Carver earlier in the film, David might be testing Stevens as a new recruit to see how he deals with pressure. Another explanation is that this is one of David's attempts to prove his "toughness" as a drug dealer and as a man, a major narrative element within the film from this point on. In David's case, this toughness cannot be disentangled from his preoccupation with his own masculinity, so it is possible to understand that David's scrutiny of Stevens is a way for him to flex his own muscles and define his own masculinity.

When we next see Stevens, David, and Eddie, Stevens and David have already established a more substantial bond that is a direct result of their last meeting: Taft arrests Stevens after the boxing gym sequence because Eddie has set him up, but Stevens does not inform on the drug cartel. As a repayment for his loyalty, David acts as Stevens's lawyer and secures his release (the product that David gave to Eddie to sell to Stevens is actually a baby laxative). David and the cartel now are assured of Eddie's betrayal, so David orchestrates yet another confrontational meeting in order to punish Eddie. Also present at this meeting is Felix Barbossa (Gregory Sierra), David and Eddie's Latino boss who is the first target on the Latin American drug cartel hierarchy. Felix punishes Eddie by beating him to death with a pool-cue, and this brutal action stands as a crucial moment within the film because it marks the decisive beginning of Stevens's foray into the cartel. So as to not "blow his cover," Carver's number one rule of undercover work, Stevens cannot intervene to stop the murder. Instead, after Eddie's death, Felix ordains Stevens as Eddie's replacement and David's new "associate." While Stevens welcomes this promotion since it means that he has successfully infiltrated the cartel, his

official entry into the cartel also means that he will, at the very least, continue to witness other crimes and not be able to intervene.

Even though Stevens has been welcomed into the cartel and has passed David's and Felix's tests, he cannot conclusively end speculation about his identity as the film continues its proliferation of meetings as the center of drug sales *and* policing.⁶ As new associates, Stevens and David attend a meeting with Betty McCutcheon (Victoria Dillard), an African American art dealer who specializes in "ethnic" art and who launders the cartel's drug money, at which Betty asks questions about Stevens's identity.⁷ Unlike the boxing gym meeting, David is not visually presented in a stable position of authority in this shot, yet he does aurally control this meeting through his manic explanation of how Betty launders the cartel's money.

The film present David's aural control over the sequence as being incomplete, however, when it shifts the wide shot of all three characters to a complicated and a slightly confusing shot-reverse shot pattern that contains three distinct close-up shots. Stevens sits at the desk, Betty sits across the desk from him, and David stands next to Betty and moves his gaze between the other characters. Within this three-shot pattern, the film presents a more narrow focus on a shot-reverse shot pattern established between Stevens's and Betty's close-up shots. The effect of this shot-reverse shot pattern within another shot-reverse shot pattern is to create an aural-visual tension between David's monologue and Stevens and Betty's visual exchange.

As in the earlier confrontation between Stevens and David at the gym, the structure and the content of the shot-reverse shot exchange between Stevens and Betty highlights the stare-down test-of-wills between the two characters. At the conclusion of David's monologue, Betty tells him that he "talks too much," and offers Stevens a line of cocaine. When he refuses to snort it, she announces that she doesn't trust him. Stevens attempts to calm Betty with a response in an affected Latino accent, and David defends Stevens, at first by stating that he is cool and then with recourse to masculinity—"A man has two things in this world—his word and his balls." Much like Carver's and David's tests, it is possible that Betty forces Stevens's hand to learn how he responds to pressure. Betty is not explicit about the possibility that Stevens is a cop, but David's characterization of Stevens certainly responds to this potential fear.

Stevens is cool because he is loyal to the cartel and because he fully embodies the macho swagger of a successful drug dealer, at least in David's opinion. David then extends his word-balls assertion into another explanation of Stevens's cool character, a glowing but racist description of Stevens's murder of a rival African American drug dealer named Ivy (James T. Morris). David's description starts with an assurance to Stevens and Betty that it is not a demonstration of his "condescending infatuation with just everything black" but is of course just that. He proceeds to compare Stevens to a "beautiful panther," a "jungle storm," and a "dangerous, magnificent beast [who has] the gift of fury." After Stevens verbally and physically challenges David's racism, Betty is convinced that Stevens is trustworthy, and the combined support of David and Betty becomes foundational for Stevens's self-conception as a drug dealer, once his other trust-bound relationship with Carver is called into question.⁸

In one of the final meetings between Stevens and Carver, Stevens tells his superior that he has an upcoming meeting with Gallegos, the number two man in the cartel. Carver agitatedly

responds that the assignment has been terminated because Stevens violated a direct order. A series of medium shot-reverse shots depict Carver as he rages about Stevens's insubordination and Stevens quickly reasons that Carver is protecting Gallegos. Carver at first responds with silence, then tells Stevens not to "make a conspiracy" out of his termination, and finally pulls his gun and threatens to arrest Stevens. Stevens appears to comply, but as he moves toward Carver, he grabs the much smaller man and slams him into the hood of the car.

Carver tells the truth at this point: the State Department has ordered him to stop his pursuit of Gallegos because Gallegos's uncle, Gúzman (René Assa), who is also involved in the cartel, is now a political ally. Carver lied to Stevens, he claims, because the government lied to him. Then, in a stunning reversal of his earlier approach to Stevens, Carver tells him that they should become partners in Washington D.C. where they will have "the spoils of war...a budget [and] clout." The questions about Stevens's identity that occur throughout his succession of meetings culminate in this moment when in an angry but resigned tone Stevens tells Carver, "I can get more money and clout on the street than [I can] following your ass to Washington. This whole fucking time I'm a cop pretending to be a drug dealer. I ain't nothing but a drug dealer pretending to be a cop. I ain't gonna pretend no more. I quit."

This sequence should offer to us conclusive evidence about Stevens's character, or even suggest that he is now John Q. Hull, but as the remainder film demonstrates, Stevens's self-description is not as comprehensive as it appears to be. Instead of cementing the boundaries of his identity, Stevens's repudiation of his old persona and his acceptance of his drug dealer persona serves to make any essential or any fundamental conception of his identity irrelevant. To put this another way, is it possible that Stevens's self-description does nothing to resolve questions about his identity because it does not matter if he is a drug dealer or if he is a cop?

CONCLUSION: NO COVER?

Carver's "scumbag for the right side" logic and David's conception of Stevens as evidenced by his condescending admiration suggest that Stevens's successful performance develops from his ontological-essentialist identity, not from training or experience. This is stressed further in the penultimate sequence in the film when Taft attempts to arrest Stevens, David, and Gúzman at a nighttime meeting at which David and Stevens try to convince Gúzman to invest in their synthetic drug scheme. Gúzman escapes arrest with diplomatic immunity, and when it seems that Taft will arrest the other men and appears to have pulled his gun, David shoots him. In actuality, Taft has reached for his bible, and the realization of this prompts Stevens to run to Taft's aid and to reveal his identity as an undercover cop. Somehow, Taft has already deduced this.

While Taft recognizes that Stevens is a cop, David only understands this when Stevens restates his admission. Surprisingly, David's response is calm as he spells out the insignificance of identity "labels": "Forget this Judeo-Christian bullshit. The same people who taught us virtue enslaved us, baby... We've had fun, and I know your dick gets hard for money, power and women. And it doesn't matter that you're a cop, so let's get in the van," which is filled with the cartel's money. To underscore his point, David again shoots Taft and this time kills him, and in response, Stevens kills David.

Stevens's actions, as well as Taft's admission that he always knew Stevens was a cop, allow Stevens to reclaim the professional status as a police officer while he simultaneously rejects his drug dealer status. David's statement, however, provides us with another understanding of Stevens's professions whereby his two professions only appear to be opposed. Instead, David's logic proposes that Stevens was a cop pretending to be a drug dealer, he was a very good drug dealer, and actions speak louder than words, identity, or supposed affiliation. In a dichotomy that we can characterize as the boundaries and the theory of law and order versus the application of law and order, it is the application, in David's estimation, that prevails.

By the end of *Deep Cover*, Stevens is once again wholly Stevens, but it is not clear which of his competing professions he will pursue, perhaps an indication of David's influence. The film's final sequence starts with Stevens at the U.S. Capitol Building where he severs connections with the D.E.A. He secures immunity from prosecution for himself and for Betty with the aid of a videotape of Gúzman's involvement in the drug trade. Stevens then appears at the grave of Belinda Chacon (Kamala Lopez), a Latina woman whom he knew and who has died of a drug overdose. Through his voice-over, we learn that Stevens and Betty have adopted Belinda's son, James (Joseph Ferro), and that he has eleven million dollars taken from the cartel. (The money is mentioned as Stevens leaves the Capitol Building, when Carver demands to know what happened to the money. Stevens responds by asking Carver the same test-question that Carver once asked Stevens, and then answers it himself: "the nigger is the one who would even think about telling [where the money is]," and then punches Carver in the stomach.) In voice-over, Stevens tells us that if he gives the money to the government he is a fool and if he keeps it he is a criminal, and then asks, "what would you do?" Given that Stevens announces two more possible identities for him, a more appropriate question for us at this point might be, what identity categories and social boundaries are now meaningful to Stevens?

One answer, I think, can be found in the fact that as a cop or as a drug dealer, Stevens is bounded by organizational hierarchies, but if he keeps the ill-gotten money, it affords him some freedom from these institutions. Again, we can read this possibility as the influence of another of David's last few statements voiced in the meeting with Gúzman before Taft interrupts it. When Gúzman hears the terms of the synthetic drug plan, presented to him in a business proposal that includes a product sample and "marketing and cash flow" reports, he calls David and Stevens "racist Americans" and accuses them of trying to exclude the "poor Hispanics" from the drug trade. David quickly contradicts this statement and states that Gúzman knows that "there is no such thing as an American anymore. No Hispanics, no Japanese, no blacks, no whites, no nothing. There's just rich people and poor people."

David's claim about the irrelevance of established boundaries and identities, with the exception of class, convincingly recasts the police-versus-criminal theme that threads throughout *Deep Cover*. For Stevens to choose sides, he must take into account David's perspective. Although the film does not provide an explicit answer to Steven's dilemma, his voice-over suggests that he has acceded to David's vision of a borderless social realm. (If not and Stevens is affiliated with and committed to law enforcement, then what is the predicament?) We can understand that Stevens's identity crisis is produced by the absent boundaries that are suggested at the film's conclusion. Through Stevens, Duke presents a representational interrogation of the

conventional African American police officer character and the very boundaries and categories that seem to define such characters—race and ethnicity, lawful and criminal, an historic outsider inside. Stevens’s struggle to understand these categories as well as his transgressive presence within the police institution provides the framework for *Deep Cover*’s narrative, yet as we learn from David and Carver, and even Stevens’s own final voice-over, his struggle and these categories perhaps no longer matter.

ENDNOTE

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¹ The films are Ossie Davis’s *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Mark Warren’s *Come Back, Charleston Blue*, and Bill Duke’s *A Rage in Harlem*.

² While the African American detective may or may not reject a racist address, I agree with Stephen Soitos’s assertion that African American detectives are always aware of race. In *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, Soitos posits that, “the blues detective always delineates the color line as primary in any case of social relation [and is] interested in the social and political atmosphere [as] inscribed by racial prejudice” (31).

³ It is worth noting that Duke is an actor who appears as a corrupt African American police officer and federal agent in *Payback* and *The Limey*, respectively, in addition to his numerous roles in film and television where he is cast as a legitimate police officer.

⁴ At one point in the interview, Carver presents Stevens with precise details about his father’s death and uses this detail to explain why Stevens has avoided drugs and alcohol his entire life.

⁵ Several authors discuss the intersection of blackness, masculinity and criminality, including Phillip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* and Kobena Mercer’s *Welcome to the Jungle*. Yvonne Tasker and Sharon Willis offer discussions of the combination of these characteristics within cinematic representation, Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies* and Willis in *High Contrast*. Also see the essay collections *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, Ed. Robert Goodings-Williams and *Representing Black Men*, Eds. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham.

⁶ Indeed, the film relies on a representation of the police and the criminals as business rivals, complete with motivational and/or promotional slogans: Carver’s “A Scumbag for the Right

Side”; Eddie’s “Stay Black” and “In God We Trust”; David’s “I Want My Cake and Eat It Too” and “Never Again.” Also, when Eddie, who says that he wears a suit coat and a tie to work every day, turns Stevens in to the police, he explains to Stevens that it was “just business.”

⁷This sequence begins at the apartment of David’s African American mistress, Jacqueline (Paunita Nichols), where Stevens meets David. As they leave Jacqueline’s, Stevens and David briefly discuss David’s self-proclaimed and acute attraction to African American women. Stevens speculates that it is a “slave thing,” which David misinterprets as a comment about bondage, but that Stevens clarifies as a racist desire. In both of her essays, Lubiano writes that “Betty McCutcheon [is] David Jason’s mistress [who] Hull woos...away (“Don’t Talk” 140; “Black Nationalism” 241). While Lubiano’s assessment of the film in both essays is compelling, I’m not sure how she determines that Betty is Jason’s mistress. She does not offer any evidence from the film to support this claim, and in my repeated viewing of the film, I cannot ascertain any relationship between David and Betty that develops beyond their business association and their occasional flirtation.

⁸Betty’s trust of Stevens is cemented further by their personal, sexual relationship. As Lubiano points out in “Don’t Talk with Your Eyes Closed,” a homoerotic dynamic helps explain David’s interest in Stevens.

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