

Stealing from the White Man: Black Women's Geography as Seen in Heist Films

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Heist films are predicated on entering spatial boundaries that are not accessible to the average person. Film theorist Julian Hanich expands on this idea, stating “the spatial transgressions symbolize an act of freedom and can be read as metaphors for social mobility; the heist film thus epitomizes our attempts to overcome the feeling of exclusion and denied access” and from this transgression comes narrative pleasure (311). However, continuing with Hanich’s framework, the characters we see performing the heist are typically white able-bodied cis-gendered heterosexual males who can take the employment of a heist willingly without coercion and can be made affluent in doing so. This means that audiences only have white men to identify with as subjects transgressing space in a larger social environment where they rob other white men who are also at the top of various systems of power, like class, race, and gender. This leads to the pressing question of what spatial transgressions are white men in reality taking, without the occasional exception of class. It wasn’t until around the turn of the millennium that heist films could become multiracial and narratively include a binary of willingness to coercion to take the job, albeit still featuring male-centric stories. While the diversity of male representation has only expanded, women are seemingly faced with a widening gap of representation in the genre. Using Hanich’s framework, that heist films are metaphors for social mobility and pleasure is derived from transgression, then narratively heist films are better executed when Black women are the main characters as they transgress the most social boundaries, like racialized doubt, get shown more of their characterization to better identify them, and showcase their innate knowledge of their social geography.

One of the earliest films that broke the male domination of heist films was *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino 1997). *Jackie Brown* follows the titular character, a flight attendant, who gets investigated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for exporting guns to Cabo, Mexico for international gun dealer Ordell Robbie. After finding cocaine in her bag, the ATF agents send her to county jail, resulting in Ordell getting Max Cherry, a bail bond agent, to bail her out. It’s with Max that Jackie hatches a plan to work for the ATF to gather evidence to prosecute Ordell, working for Ordell to get his half million dollars out of Cabo while also taking Ordell’s money under his nose and the ATF. Once her heist is all planned out, she successfully sneaks Ordell’s money to Max and lures Ordell into an ATF trap, wherein he gets killed, resulting in her being cleared of any crime. Afterward, she thanks Max for his help by tempting him to come to Spain with her, but to no avail, and she drives off while he helps a new bail bond client.

Though after roughly 30 years of women in heist films, there are still few women-centric films in the genre. One of the more recent entries is *Widows* (McQueen 2018). *Widows* follows

the widows of men who were career heist-men after they died on the job of robbing a political candidate, Jamal Manning, running for office in the 18th ward of Chicago. Jamal, furious that he was robbed, tasks Veronica, the widow of the mastermind of the heist, with getting his two million dollars returned. Veronica then seeks out and employs Alice, Linda—the other widows—and Belle to complete the next heist her husband had planned out to pay Jamal back and secure all of their financial stability. The next heist is to break into Jack Mulligan's house, the political candidate running against Jamal. Even though there were small errors in their execution, like inputting the wrong safe code or Alice being shot and needing medical care, they were successful and got paid in full. In the wake of their achievement, all members of the team seem to be getting back to their normal lives with their cut of the heist.

Black women are one of the most marginalized groups in America; their specific marginalization transcends reality and is represented in cinematic media. In *Jackie Brown*, when being interrogated by the ATF agents, they dwell on how Jackie has been in the air service industry for 16 years and only has employment with a second-rate airliner, mocking her pay, lifestyle, and overall position in society. While her employment prospects might be influenced by a previous drug charge, the ATF agents still maintain that she should have higher career prospects with her seniority. When Jackie tells Max about her overall plans for the heist and to deceive all of them, he pushes back against it, doubting that she can pull it off. Ordell and the ATF agents react the same way when told her abridged plans, questioning her abilities. Ultimately, she tells all four men that they must trust her and that her plans will work out. Narratively, the same doubt of Black women is used in *Widows*, though this doubt comes from the characters themselves. As Jamal tasks Veronica with getting his two million, she expresses her doubts to him about it. Upon recruiting Alice and Linda, they also doubt their ability to pull off a heist. Veronica has to reassure them and remind them of their societal position, as women who all lost their only source of income and women of color, relating to Linda, who is Latine. Black sociologist Michael Eric Dyson writes that academia has been researching the intersections “of black [people] in relation to... how their lives are shaped by structural changes in the political economy... [exploring] the deeply ingrained and culturally reinforced.... lack of self-esteem that characterize black [people],” and to a larger extent non-white people in America (122-123). While Jackie doesn't doubt herself, all the characters around her do as they have been socialized by the system of white supremacy and the patriarchy; similarly, Veronica and her team have internalized their doubt by the same systems. This means that Jackie and Veronica, both being Black women, understand the social context of their racial and gender caste in America. Despite this, both women successfully achieve their goals and gain upward social

mobility or maintain it, respectively. This makes their social transgression of race, class, and gender expectations the spectacle of the narrative, the execution of their heists more rewarding, and a positive representation of Black women.

Another aspect of the audience's narrative pleasure derived from these women's heists is the longer amounts of time spent with their characters to better identify with them. Consider that typical heist films feature mostly white men who only have one characterization—especially if it is a team heist film—like the leader, brains, or brawn. Jackie's screen time is spent convincing the men in the film that she can pull off her plans, surviving Ordell's plans to kill her, and romancing Max. During her screen time, she is characterized as determined, witty, and composed. Her characterization is sealed from the beginning as she knows only she can save herself and pull off her schemes within the system of white supremacy and the patriarchy. She only loses control of the situation when the ATF agents find cocaine in her bag when they first investigate her and put her into county jail. This contrasts with Veronica, Alice, and Linda, whose characterizations are more malleable from the team aspect of heists. Veronica, while donning a façade of toughness in front of her crew, maintains a calculating demeanor along with motherly attributes. She only breaks down when pushed by Jamal or Jatemme, Jamal's brother, and goes to Alice to be comforted. Alice is characterized as being man-dependent, even being criticized for it, though she is also shown to be resourceful, utilizing her beauty to obtain the getaway vehicle and weapons, and deciphering the vault designs. Linda and Belle get the least development, though the audience can summate that they both care about their family and want to be able to provide for them. Criminologist Nicole Rafter comments on identification, saying “when we identify with films characters, we get ‘scenarios’ that we then store in our memories. Most of us [know] that these scenarios are fantasies; identification does not lead automatically to imitation” or admiration (68). So by getting more characterization than in a male-centered heist film, the audience can begin the process of identifying with these various women characters. While Jackie is a hyper-specific character, Veronica, Alice, and Linda offer more diversity for audiences to identify with. It's also notable how little screen time is devoted to the actual heists versus how much screen time is devoted to planning or characterization in both of these women-centered heist films, compared to a male-centered heist film where narratively planning and training for the heist is shortened to a montage with empowering music. This assures that the women featured in their respective heist films are characters audiences understand motivations for and want to root for, thus improving the audience's viewing pleasure.

Lastly, considering the heist film's geographic nature, if Black women are centered in heist films, then the narrative can explore filmic Black women's geographies. Black studies professor Katherine McKittrick describes Black women's geographies as the "interplay between domination... underscored by the social production of space," citing that "concealment, marginalization, [and] boundaries are important social processes" within constructing the discipline and having it represented and translated into cinematic landscapes (xi). In *Jackie Brown*, every scene starts with a graphic identifying the location the characters inhabit, ranging all over Los Angeles from Del Amo Mall—where the heist takes place—to Venice Beach, to Compton, to LAX, to Max's bail bonds, and various bars. All locations are introduced by Jackie or Ordell, who are both Black characters who hold the most agency in the narrative. These are spaces that Jackie or Ordell feels comfortable in, not only for discussing details of their heist but also as Black individuals in the city of Los Angeles. Jackie chose the Del Amo Mall food court for the trial run of the heist and Billingsley's dressing room to make the final heist. This is similar to *Widows*, where the spaces in which the narrative takes place are locations in Chicago that Veronica, Alice, and Linda have access to and are excluded from. When Linda attempts to decipher the vault designs by using the internet, the public library, and visiting the Bridges-Getty architect offices, she uses spaces that are public use. Both women employ an antithesis of the typical male-centered heist film, as male-centered heist films focus on getting to increasingly exclusive and high-security localities. This means that McKittrick's definition of Black women's geographies and Hanich's framework of heist films intersect, providing a filmic example of how women of color make social transgressions and gain social mobility.

Hopefully in the future, film theory can be put into practice when taking into account how many calls to action there are currently to have diverse representation within media, especially to combat plastic representation with more nuanced portrayals. Hanich's framework might have been constructed with male-centered films in mind, though his framework isn't solidified with male-centered films. *Jackie Brown* and *Widows* highlight his framework best as examples of how, narratively, heist films are better executed when Black women are the main characters, since they transgress the most social boundaries, get shown more of their characterization to better identify them, and have an innate knowledge of their social geography.

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