

Essays on  
James Ellroy's Noir World

Edited by Steven Powell

# THE BIG SOMEWHERE



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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Bloomsbury Publishing Inc  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in the United States of America 2018  
Paperback edition published 2020

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Cover design: Daniel Benneworth-Gray  
Cover image © Mark Coggins

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Powell, Steven, 1983- editor.

Title: The big somewhere: essays on James Ellroy's noirworld / edited by  
Steven Powell.

Description: New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. |Includes  
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018028823 | ISBN 9781501331336(hardback : alk. paper) |  
ISBN 9781501331350 (epdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Ellroy, James, 1948—Criticism and interpretation. | Noir  
fiction, American—History and criticism.

Classification: LCC PS3555.L6274 Z55 2018 | DDC813/.54—dc23 LC record  
available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018028823>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-3133-6  
PB: 978-1-5013-6167-8  
ePDF: 978-1-5013-3135-0  
eBook: 978-1-5013-3134-3

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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*For Craig McDonald,  
The man who writes what he lives and lives what he writes*





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## Acknowledgements

The genesis of this book was the Visions of Noir conference held at the University of Liverpool in 2015, and I owe a debt of gratitude to the many friends and colleagues who made that event possible especially Sharon Connor, Chris Routledge, David Seed, Daniel Slattery and finally Martin Edwards for his invaluable contribution. I would like to thank all the contributors to this volume for producing sterling work in line with my vision of an anthology of critical essays on Ellroy and for putting up with my editorial demands with patience and good humour. In addition, I express my deepest gratitude to Haaris at Bloomsbury for believing in this project from the start and Katherine De Chant and James Tupper for their kind assistance. I would also like to thank Sweda at Deanta.

On a personal level, I would like to thank my friends Adam and Vicky for taking me to the quiz nights which served as a welcome distraction, but most of all I am grateful to my wife Diana without whom this book, or any other book I've put my name to, would not have been possible.

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# Introduction

Crime has always been a part of James Ellroy's life. He was born in Los Angeles in 1948, when the city was enjoying a post-war economic boom, but the spread of the affluent middle classes was offset by rising levels of crime both in the encroachment of organized crime into many levels of American industry and the seemingly incomprehensible savagery behind the murder of Elizabeth Short, the Black Dahlia, whom Ellroy later immortalized in his fiction. Occasionally, crime spilled over into the glitzy idolized world of Hollywood that was held up as both a place and a lifestyle Americans should aspire to. The death of gangster Johnny Stompanato, stabbed to death by the daughter of his lover Lana Turner, was one such event that fascinated the young Ellroy, partly because he was already becoming aware of the reality behind the Hollywood sheen through his reading of tabloid magazines: 'My father subscribed to scandal rags and let me read them. I got the scoop on Ava Gardner's nympho status and Johnny Stompanato's size. Scandal sheets gave me an alternative reality to juxtapose against the crime movies I saw' (Ellroy 1997a: xvii). Stompanato and other celebrity mobsters such as Mickey Cohen and Johnny Roselli, who moved in Hollywood circles and were treated like movie stars, became recurring characters in Ellroy's later novels, but although Ellroy acknowledges there was a certain charisma behind these Mob figures he is unflinching in exposing the greed and sexual violence that drive them. In *L.A. Confidential*, Stompanato is not only violent towards women, he is also a police informer. Ellroy deconstructs the myth that there is honour among thieves as Stompanato doesn't believe in any criminal code and informs on fellow mobsters in order to stay out of prison.

Ellroy first felt the devastating effect of crime personally as a ten-year-old child when his mother was murdered, her strangled corpse found in the shrubs outside of Arroyo High School in El Monte where his mother had taken him to live after divorcing his father. There was no glamour to this crime – the media interest was minimal – in contrast to the death of the handsome gangster Stompanato or the aspiring starlet Elizabeth Short, and as the crime would go unsolved Ellroy's emotional reaction to it was ambivalent, at times it must have seemed like it did

not affect him at all: 'I felt relieved. I remember forcing myself to cry crocodile tears on the bus going back to L.A.' (Kihn 1992: 29). Life resumed as Ellroy moved in with his father, a chronically broke accountant addicted to get-rich-quick schemes who had briefly served as Rita Hayworth's business manager: 'He told me he poured the pork to Rita' (Canavese 2006: 153). It was probably a lie, but nevertheless the lurid suggestion fired an imagination that was already becoming obsessed with crime and the subversive environment it entailed: 'If you grew up in L.A. and grew up obsessed with crime, you would probably dig crime movies and very possibly recognise the existence of a showbiz/true crime/scandal rag matrix. Your imagination might get corrupted very young' (Ellroy 1997a: xvi-xvii). Since the death of his mother, Ellroy was now living without a parent who could imbue discipline. He developed a taste for crime fiction, and for his eleventh birthday his father bought him two books: 'One was *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*; the other was *The Badge* by Jack Webb' (Silet 1995: 47). While it might seem that Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories would provide the perfect lesson in constructing mystery narratives to an aspiring writer, it was actually *The Badge*, with its summary of the murder of Elizabeth Short and the subsequent police investigation, that would give Ellroy his lifelong literary obsession. Ellroy now had a famous crime to equate the murder of his mother to in his mind. Crime fiction and true crime began to correlate in his early formulation of narrative, 'My imagination supplied the details that Jack Webb omitted,' as he was now using his imagination to push his grasp of story beyond what was considered acceptable in print at that time (Ellroy 1996: 103). Growing in tandem with this deepening knowledge of storytelling was his natural skill for performance. Ellroy volunteered for the US Army, but upon being subjected to its rigidly ordered, heavily disciplined way of life at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he faked a nervous breakdown and secured a discharge. Nobody questioned if he was really suffering from a breakdown, and as army life was anathema to the creative freedom he aspired to, he essentially used a theatrical trick to escape it. Ellroy has always been a consummate performer, a skill which helped him create his self-styled Demon Dog of crime fiction persona and made him one of the few American crime writers working today who is regarded as a celebrity. For Ellroy, crime writing is more than just a profession: it is his identity and he has striven to make sure it is recognized as such by as much of the reading public as possible. After his father's death, Ellroy found himself entering adulthood with very little in the way of friends, family or career prospects. It was at this point that he became a perpetrator of crimes, partly out of compulsive necessity as he



suffered from homelessness and drug and alcohol addiction. His police record lists arrests for burglary, petty theft and driving under the influence and he had served time in the Los Angeles County Jail. In the long term though he was absorbing skills and experience that would serve him well as a novelist.

In the second chapter of this anthology, Jim Mancall examines how Ellroy's multiple arrests coincided with his discovery of the novels of Los Angeles police officer Joseph Wambaugh and his true-crime book *The Onion Field* (1973), works which led Ellroy to an innate understanding of the lives and inner drama of police officers. Through his criminal experiences and Wambaugh's detailed accounts, Ellroy was getting an in-depth knowledge of both sides of the law, which would prove invaluable for his later career as a novelist. He would eventually become a major supporter and virtual spokesman for the work of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). This is one of the many ironies of Ellroy's career: a reformed criminal gaining a close working relationship with a police department. It may seem unlikely but certainly possible that Ellroy's access to LAPD resources for research purposes was a tacit exchange for defending their more controversial policing methods. But the fact that the same reformed criminal is now a novelist creating his own mythology, or it could be argued demythologization, of the history of Los Angeles and the LAPD seems entirely implausible, but in Ellroy's case that is exactly what happened.

After a severe case of pneumonia almost killed Ellroy he decided to enter rehab in the late 1970s. Ellroy has been clean ever since, aside from a brief relapse when he became addicted to painkillers, and his life of crime remained firmly behind him. This stability meant he could now begin crime writing, and his first novel, *Brown's Requiem*, was published in 1981. The critical and commercial success of his novels coincided with emerging academic interest in the crime fiction genre. Nevertheless, when I began my research on James Ellroy, critical studies on his work were still relatively rare. Several contributors to this book have produced some of the most insightful work on the author. Jim Mancall's *James Ellroy: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (2014) provides an insightful encyclopaedic guide through all of Ellroy's major works, as well as character biographies and discussion of key themes. More than any other critic, Mancall has excelled at unravelling Ellroy's extraordinarily convoluted plotting. Anna Flügge's *James Ellroy and the Novel of Obsession* (2010) examines the author through the prism of literary schools of thought, stretching much further back than the history of the crime genre. Flügge argues that Ellroy has been inspired by literary Romanticism more than he has by his more obvious

predecessors, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, in the development of the American crime novel. For my part, I have edited the anthology of interviews *Conversations with James Ellroy* (2012) and authored the monograph *James Ellroy: Demon Dog of Crime Fiction* (2015) which examined the role and importance of Ellroy's authorial persona in shaping narratives both on the page and off, with the burgeoning sense of dark celebrity, feeding on the often-disturbing tales of his past, which developed and consolidated Ellroy's position as one of the foremost American crime writers. The first full-length study of Ellroy's work, however, was produced by Peter Wolfe; *Like Hot Knives to the Brain: James Ellroy's Search for Himself* (2007) connected key events in Ellroy's life to his fiction, arguing that Ellroy's life story had essentially been reformulated into his narratives. In addition to this, there have been influential articles by Lee Spinks, Josh Cohen, Peter Messent and other critics too numerous to mention here, but which are referenced throughout this anthology as major works of scholarship on Ellroy's fiction.

Scholarly material is now being produced on Ellroy at a fairly steady rate, yet it has not impeded the author. Ellroy shows no signs of winding down even if some of his more recent works have met a lukewarm critical response. Ever a risk taker, Ellroy left some reviewers exasperated with the mechanical prose style of *The Cold Six Thousand*, which took his pared-down prose style to extremes. Similarly, the decision to write four prequels, a second LA Quartet, which precedes chronologically the Quartet that established him as a major voice in crime fiction, may seem like the safer, predictable choice. It is my contention though that this was a conservative risk on Ellroy's part, putting himself into a scenario where he would be forced to reimagine and reinvent characters and narratives which had become fixed in reader's minds gave him the opportunity to essentially rewrite the original Quartet and bring his followers, perhaps a touch reluctantly, on a journey wherein the preconceptions of the original novels are completely transformed.

All of this brings us to this critical study. *The Big Somewhere: Essays on James Ellroy's Noir World* is structured, as the title suggests, as an exploration of the narrative mysteries, geography, setting, influences, inspiration and characters that comprise the world Ellroy created in his fiction. It was a world forged in writing from the experiences Ellroy gathered growing up in Los Angeles in the film noir era of the 1950s. As he himself put it, 'My filmic pantheon rarely goes past 1959 and the end of the film noir age' (Ellroy 1997a: xvii). Ellroy has lived as a noir character and has at times remained mentally closeted in that era. The

title of this anthology is both an allusion to Ellroy's novel *The Big Nowhere* and the works that have inspired him: film noirs such as *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Big Combo* (1955), *The Big Heat* (1953), where 'Big' is commonly employed as a prefix to both the absolute and fatalistic nature of existence. The 'somewhere' references what Ellroy has carved out of that existence through the noir world of post-war LA, the corrupt institutions dominating the American way of life and the nightmare lives his characters often gleefully embody, all forming part of the noir world this critical study is designed to analyse. Ellroy has often explored the concept of compartmentalization, whereby characters seek to clearly define their many overlapping roles and place their often horrific deeds within the context of the right role to provide justification for it. Ellroy himself has had to compartmentalize his own complicated interaction with crime since childhood. His novels feature section titles such as Extradition, Extortion, Subversion, Coercion, Incursion and Interdiction, in which the narrative is duly compartmentalized to reflect this sense of roles and identity, even if ultimately the characters come undone in that such complex multiplicity of roles can never be sustained. Thus, the chapters in this book are divided into sections which serve to compartmentalize and aid in this investigation.

The opening part, 'Genre and Literary Influences', explores the crime writers and genre tropes that inspired Ellroy in his early understanding of narrative and how he took these influences further, adapting or, in some cases, rejecting them, as his writing career developed. In "'Tragic Power": The Influence of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett on the Work of James Ellroy' I look at James Ellroy's literary career from its inception, paying close attention to his debut novel *Brown's Requiem* and how it was heavily indebted to the hard-boiled style pioneered by Raymond Chandler. After writing *Brown's Requiem* Ellroy has subsequently publicly disavowed the influence of Chandler and began exploring a more idiosyncratic style in his later novels preferring to invoke, if he credited anyone at all, Chandler's contemporary Dashiell Hammett as his main inspiration. I argue that Ellroy has essentially manufactured a false dichotomy between Chandler and Hammett's work. By framing the birth of the crime fiction genre as belonging almost exclusively to Chandler and Hammett, he presents his own work as emerging from the tension of these two opposing forces, but still insists that Hammett possesses the superior legacy. Analysing key moments in his early career through to the LA Quartet, I reveal that Ellroy continued to draw upon the Chandler style for many years even when he was deriding the author in interviews and elsewhere and that by taking Ellroy at face value critics have

overlooked this subtle presence in his work. Underlying this piece is the belief that Ellroy has had great sway in scholarly investigations of his work and that he should not be fully excused for his repudiation of Chandler's fiction when his influence can clearly be detected, and, I would argue further, that Ellroy has left enough clues to suggest that Chandler's legacy survives in his work.

Continuing with the theme of how Ellroy's work fits into the history of the genre, James Mancall's chapter "'No-Man's Land': Broken Men and Traumatized Police Officers in *The Onion Field* and *The Black Dahlia*' examines the influence on Ellroy of an author who is much closer in age to his generation. Joseph Wambaugh has received far less critical attention than either Chandler or Hammett, and although he has been cited by Ellroy relatively rarely, each time he has been referenced with considerable respect. Mancall argues that the insight Wambaugh's work gives of the everyday nature of police work is crucial to Ellroy's development as a stylist. Although in other respects their backgrounds were strikingly different – Wambaugh was an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department in the same period in the 1970s when Ellroy was a committed recidivist – Mancall argues that this polarizing difference in character was akin to the effect of Chandler and Hammett, as it was able to impart stylistic traits in Ellroy's LA Quartet novels. Focusing predominantly on *The Onion Field*, a non-fiction novel similar in style to *In Cold Blood* by Wambaugh's mentor Truman Capote, Mancall demonstrates how Wambaugh's portrayal of the personal lives of policemen, riven absurdly chaotic by the pressures of urban policing, was a precursor to Ellroy's depiction of the LAPD as a state institution of normalized corruption. The irony of Wambaugh's literary influence was that he was writing about a police department in the 1970s that had developed greater levels of public accountability since the scandals of the 1940s and 1950s that were fictionalized in Ellroy's Quartet novels. Transparency in the public sphere did not relieve the inner nightmare for the individual policeman, but it unintentionally displayed the timelessness of Ellroy's portrayal of men haunted by violence.

Moving on from the direct influences on Ellroy's writing, the second section of this anthology examines Ellroy's impact in the noir genre, which has equalled, perhaps even exceeded, that made by the authors who inspired him. 'Ellroy and Noir' begins with a chapter by Anna Flügge titled "'Capable of Anything': Dudley Smith's Role in Ellroy's LA Quartets'. Perhaps the most iconic of all Ellroy's characters, with an overbearing personality to match Ellroy's own Demon Dog persona, Dudley Smith has come to symbolize the key tenets of Ellroy's fiction: corruption in the LAPD, the thin line between good and evil, the

uncredited importance of underworld figures to historical events and the shifting complexity of LA during the film noir era. Murderous, charming and enigmatic and with an exaggerated sense of Irish-American identity, Dudley Smith's power is unrivalled: 'There's a beast in me. I destroy those I cannot control. I must be certain that those close to me share my identical interests. I'm benevolent within that construction. I'm ghastly outside of it,' he tells one of his lovers, but he could just as easily be warning off any colleague in the LAPD who had the delusion of taking him on (Ellroy 2014: 557). Flügge traces the evolution of this seminal character in Ellroy's work to unravel the nature of Dudley Smith from the mystique Ellroy has created for him: revolutionary during the Irish War of Independence, uniformed cop in the age of Prohibition, OSS agent during the Second World War, and the LAPD's most powerful and corrupt detective in the 1950s. Smith's character is finally re-examined through the backstory that *Perfidia* offers, and its distinct movement from the original Quartet where Smith was the untouchable, almost mythological but minor, character to Smith as a central protagonist whose vulnerabilities are more easily seen centre stage.

Continuing the theme of Ellroy's contribution to noir, Nathan Ashman's chapter "Geography Is Destiny": Cinematizing the City in the LA Quartet' explores the influence of cinema on Ellroy's work. Ellroy has always been fascinated by film; his idiosyncratic prose style is cinematic and often reads closer to a screenplay than novel style. Four of his novels have been adapted into film, and Ellroy enjoys a secondary career as a screenwriter. But Ashman explores a different, and heretofore overlooked, aspect of cinema in his work on how the architecture, demographics and landscape of Ellroy's portrayal of LA reflect the overpowering influence of the movie industry in the City of Angels. Through the reconstitution of the Hollywoodland sign to the abandoned movie lots where Elizabeth Short is tortured to death in *The Black Dahlia*, Ellroy's LA is a city not just influenced by cinema, it has been actively cinematized.

The third section of this anthology parallels the direction of Ellroy's literary career by progressing from an examination of the noir genre and LA setting of the Quartet into a broader investigation of the national structures linking the government to the underworld in the post-war United States. This section is given its title from a quote by Ellroy in the prologue to *American Tabloid*, "America Was Never Innocent": Underworld and Government Power Structures', and begins with a chapter by Rubén Abarrio, 'Between Althusser and Foucault: Power Relations in James Ellroy's Underworld USA Trilogy', which examines how Ellroy's protagonists live by the method of compartmentalization thrust

upon them by oppressive state agencies which pressures individuals to take on a multiplicity of roles often overlapping the law enforcement, intelligence service and finally organized crime sphere of influence. Abarrio argues that the shifting nature of roles and power in Ellroy's narratives makes it relevant to the writing of both Louis Althusser on repressive state agencies and Michel Foucault on ideology.

In Chapter 6, '*White Jazz: Paradoxes of Race in the LA Quartet*', Joshua Meyer explores the white power structure of LA and how it is dependent on racial classification and stereotyping for its continued existence. Meyer considers the means by which Ellroy's characters either fit into the hierarchy of racial superiority or work to impose on or perpetuate it. But this racist power structure, aside from being abhorrent, is both contradictory and unworkable. Meyer takes the example of Dudley Smith – hardly an all-American WASP, but a freedom-fighting Irish catholic revolutionary on the one hand who, at the same time, is an admirer of Hitler and who wants to subjugate the black population of LA through the illegal narcotics trade. Smith, both as oppressor and hailing from an oppressed people, embodies the paradox of whiteness in Ellroy's novels.

Following on from this piece connecting the malleable definitions of race to power structure, Rodney Taveira's chapter, '*The Divine Violence of the Underworld USA Trilogy*', identifies the role of violence in propping up bureaucratic structures in Ellroy's narratives. Taveira argues that Underworld novels are underpinned by Ellroy's fascination with archives, as evidenced in the 'Document Inserts' comprising fictional newspaper articles, *Hush-Hush* gossip columns, police and intelligence reports, transcripts of recorded conversations and every other form of paper trail which appear throughout the text giving the impression that the novels are a form of compendium of documents or historical archives. The Underworld series climaxes with Don Crutchfield, a character strongly modelled on Ellroy, acquiring J. Edgar Hoover's classified archive of papers which he has built up over nearly five decades as FBI director. Taveira explores the metafictional questions Ellroy poses regarding the information that is being relayed to the reader of the novel and the value of the secrets uncovered by characters in the narrative constantly searching for, uncovering and appearing in documented files.

In the final chapter of this section, '*From Paranoia to the Contrary: Plotting the Noir World of James Ellroy*', Woody Haut argues that Ellroy's dissection of political structures began much earlier than the critically acclaimed LA Quartet novels. Starting with the novels Ellroy published before he began work on the

Quartet, Haut connects the inbuilt political nature of these works to the social climate in which it was published. The contemporarily set early novels are imbued with a critique of the Reaganomics of the 1980s, a trend Ellroy was not above criticizing despite his own conservative views. By the time Ellroy completed the final novel of the Quartet, *White Jazz*, Bill Clinton had won the 1992 race to enter the White House and the Democrats had accepted much of the new economic consensus only under a socially liberal guise which, in Haut's view, offered only a mirage of accountability which is reflected in the fractured, even apocalyptic, tone of *White Jazz*. Haut's contention that Ellroy's period novels reflect both the individual and the broader political landscape of the time in which they were written, as much as the time in which they are set, is extended to *Blood's a Rover*, published during George W. Bush's administration, and the critique of Japanese-American internment in *Perfidia*, written at a time when the Obama administration was still grappling with the injustices of the War on Terrorism.

In the concluding section of this anthology, 'Ellroy and After: The Ellrovia Influence on Authors and Genre', two chapters assess the impact and legacy Ellroy has already achieved in both American and British genre writing, focusing particularly on the work of two authors who have developed the Ellrovia style to their own specifications. In "A Pointed Demythologization": The Influence of James Ellroy's Novels on Megan Abbott's Revisionism of the Femme Fatale, Diana Powell examines how the noir themes Ellroy revised in the Quartet have since required their own radical reimagining. Ellroy's noir vision has made a distinct mark on the genre and has been absorbed culturally, so much so that modern writers addressing noir must also address Ellroy's version of noir. As an author whose material has proved problematic to feminist critics, Ellroy found himself a surprisingly affectionate protégé in Megan Abbott. Abbott's first four novels were set in the classic noir age and are suffused with candid, often graphic, descriptions of sex and scathing portrayals of the sexual drive and insecurity behind the masculine tendencies to violence. The Quartet is, as he says, about 'bad men in love with strong women' (Rich 2008: 185). Yet Abbott challenges long-held stereotypes regarding femme fatales and strong heroines who ultimately need rescuing. Despite moving away from noir through more cross-genre themes such as teenage love and rivalry in *Dare Me* (2012) and *You Will Know Me* (2016), Abbott still retains traces of Ellroy's influence.

The concluding chapter of this book, 'Individual and Institutionalized Corruption: The Influence of James Ellroy's LA Quartet on the Novels of



David Peace', is an examination of how Ellroy's noir themes can be revised and transplanted into other time periods and international settings. David Bishop examines the influence Ellroy's work had on the writing of David Peace. On the surface, the two men could not be more different. Ellroy is an Angeleno right-winger with a turbulent private life he has made public through two memoirs and scores of candid interviews. Peace is a Yorkshire socialist who prefers to keep his personal life out of the headlines and largely separate from his writing. The parallels between their work, however, are often so striking that the authors seem to be on a similar career trajectory when it comes to the critical reaction to their more experimental works. The repetitive prose and cold, challenging text of *The Cold Six Thousand* met a similar lukewarm response as Peace's later equally uncompromising novel *Red or Dead*. Peace started his writing career by envisioning the corrupt LAPD as an American cousin to the self-serving West Yorkshire Police in his Red Riding Quartet, closely modelled on the LA Quartet. Bishop demonstrates how Peace took this influence to its natural endpoint when he resolved to write a superior crime novel to *White Jazz*, which he had come to regard as the best of the genre. To do this, Peace embraced a new setting in post-war Japan in *Tokyo Year Zero* (2007). *Tokyo Year Zero* explored the birth of a city after an apocalypse, Japan's defeat in the Second World War, whereas *White Jazz* examined LA's post-war crime wave portrayed as a near-societal breakdown.

While it would be overly restrictive to firmly label Megan Abbott and David Peace as Ellrovian writers when they are original stylists in their own right, the final section will prove nonetheless the lasting impact Ellroy has had on a new generation of writers and how the influence of his work can manifest itself in contemporary texts in complex, malleable forms.

The structure is designed to compartmentalize but also to be comprehensive. All of the key works are covered, from the early, somewhat overlooked, novels to the Lloyd Hopkins series, the LA Quartet, the Underworld USA Trilogy to finally his latest novel *Perfidia*, the first of a planned second LA Quartet. While this is an all-encompassing critical overview, there is still a degree of repetition. The reader will find themselves coming back to certain characters in this book, such as Danny Upshaw, Dave Klein and Dudley Smith and revisiting themes of paranoia and corruption from one chapter to the next. However, it is possible to read through the repetitions by the unique, sometimes oppositional, critical perspective given by each contributor. Ellroy's narratives are so complex and interwoven with subplots, dense with action and featuring an expansive cast of characters that it is possible to read Nathan Ashman's analysis of *The Big*



*Nowhere* and to think he has read a different book to Woody Haut's evaluation of the same novel.

By the end of this book I hope that scholars, students and readers of James Ellroy will have come closer to understanding his narrative worlds and mapping the geography of his noir portrayals of post-war Los Angeles and America, or rather Underworld USA. However, no reading or conception of the author can remain static for long. While James Ellroy is still writing, and I suspect for long after, there will always be new readings and hidden meanings to be discovered in his Big Somewhere.

That is, perhaps, the ultimate achievement of the man who calls himself the demon dog of American crime fiction.



## Part One

# Genre and Literary Influences



# ‘Tragic Power’: The Influence of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett on the Work of James Ellroy

Steven Powell

James Ellroy has often reflected on other authors and on his own place within the literary canon. His opinion of crime writers and how they influenced him, however, has been changeful and, in some cases, caustically dismissive. His comments on Ross Macdonald, for example, show a re-evaluation of his own early tastes and influences: ‘I loved the Lew Archer books. I don’t know if I could stand them now’ (Hogan 1995: 58). Ellroy concedes that although the ‘lost child motif’ of Macdonald’s novels was formative in developing his early narrative structures, upon revisiting Macdonald’s novels, he found them to be ‘appallingly overwritten, full of metaphor’ (Hogan 1995: 58). This harsh re-evaluation comes just over ten years after he described Macdonald as ‘my greatest teacher’ (Tucker 1984: 7). Once Ellroy surpassed Macdonald’s influence by creating increasingly complex narratives and themes more expansive and interwoven than what he had learnt from reading and studying the Lew Archer private detective novels, he subsequently played down the impact of Macdonald’s work. Through comparison with his own writing, he chastises the very thing that once inspired his novels. Macdonald’s novels, Ellroy later claimed, are ‘not really my bowl of rice’ (Hogan 1995: 58).

Although Ellroy has only fleetingly spoken of Macdonald, by contrast, other authors have gained a permanence in Ellroy’s writing and summation of his own work. Ellroy has consistently referred to the work of Raymond Chandler, in recent years with increasing scepticism. Ellroy acknowledges that Chandler’s writing was a significant influence on his first novel *Brown’s Requiem* (1981) but, as he put it, ‘I have less affection for [Chandler] by the day’ (Hogan 1995: 57). According to Ellroy, Chandler created a style which ‘is easy to adapt to the

personal prejudices of the individual writers, which is why you now have the gay private eye, the black private eye, the woman private eye, and every other kind of private eye' (Hogan 1995: 57). To an aspiring writer, Ellroy concedes this effect was beneficial; *Brown's Requiem* melds Ellroy's 'personal prejudices' onto the formula Chandler created in the Philip Marlowe novels. But rather than develop this Chandler-inspired narrative further, Ellroy claims that after the publication of his first novel, the influence came to an abrupt halt. Yet, unlike Macdonald, whom Ellroy does not go back to, Ellroy cannot help but refer to Chandler even if only to criticize. This inspiration, and subsequent recantation, focuses on Chandler's work as a novelist. While Chandler made his name writing for pulp magazines such as *Black Mask*, Ellroy by contrast 'didn't buy the old canard that you had to start by writing short stories' (Rich 2008: 181). This criticism is ironic given that Ellroy's own education as a writer had been through reading pulp novels, and when, after developing a successful career as a novelist, Ellroy turned to composing his own short stories, he did not show much flair for them. Despite this, Ellroy has consistently stated that the private-eye novel or anything else that could be considered Chandler-influenced were no longer present in his work. Arguably, Ellroy's noir settings and old Hollywood narratives, would evoke, if not Chandler, then his contemporaries. The author Ellroy would credit with being an influence, more than anyone else, on the LA Quartet was Dashiell Hammett. As Lee Clark Mitchell has argued though, major thematic and stylistic differences which supposedly separate Chandler's and Hammett's work are less significant than has been assumed:

At first glance Chandler seems utterly different from Hammett, though it soon becomes clear that he embraces his predecessor's techniques, extending and complicating them via both setting and syntax. Or rather, he takes Hammett's concentration on quirky details and ups the ante by lowering the stakes, giving us less essential description, more frequent diversions and digressions, as a way of further impeding the plot. (Mitchell 2015: 10)

Ellroy has been guilty of simplifying Chandler's legacy, limiting it to the creation of the easily imitated hard-boiled private detective. Like Chandler's revisionism of Hammett's themes, Ellroy 'ups the ante by lowering the stakes'. The paradox here is that the hard-boiled PI is not Chandler's creation alone, his legacy is both smaller, and in some ways, creatively bigger than Ellroy gives him credit for. Ellroy began shifting his vision of the genre to Hammett, while not acknowledging that Chandler 'embraces his predecessor's techniques'. Yet, in interviews, Ellroy

would rarely bring up Chandler's name without also mentioning Hammett and vice versa, indicating some innate understanding of their pairing.

Ellroy's open acknowledgement and then disavowal of Chandler has not had its similar counterpart in Hammett, partly because Hammett's influence on Ellroy's work was more subliminal. As late as 2008, Ellroy claimed that in retrospect the work of Hammett had been more influential than he realized when he was first writing the Quartet novels: 'I had to reread a little Hammett, because I wrote the Everyman Library introduction to one of their volumes, and was amazed at how my sensibility of the goon and the political fixer and the bagman and the hatchet man strike-breaker came out of that' (Powell 2008b: 170). Ellroy looks more kindly on these subconscious influences, as his debt during and after the writing process is indistinct. They are not fully formed fonts of inspiration, as Macdonald 'my greatest teacher' was, nor do they provide any tangible impediment to creativity, as Chandler's PI in *Brown's Requiem* did (Tucker 1984: 7).

By continually playing Hammett against Chandler, the overt and the subverted, the defined and the undefinable, Ellroy has purposefully created a paradox in his relationship with two of the most important practitioners of detective fiction. Ellroy's definition of the two men is key: Chandler, in Ellroy's view, was conservative, predictable and set the conventions of the genre, whereas Hammett's writing was edgy and existed in a narrative world without conventions. It is not difficult to observe, given Ellroy's somewhat unhinged Demon Dog persona, why he would prefer the latter influence. But the oppositional roles he designs for both authors, both oddly reliant on each other, are too simplistic and conveniently suited to the image Ellroy was trying to acquire. In this chapter, I will argue that Chandler's influence on Ellroy's work extended far further than the debut novel in which Ellroy has always attempted to contain it, and that, much like how he overlooked Hammett for lengthy periods of his career, the Chandler effect has been more complex, undefinable and subliminal.

Neither Hammett nor Chandler could have known the enormous influence their writing would have in the field of crime fiction over fifty years since their death. Both men died relatively young, unhappy and past their best. Neither man produced as much as was expected of their peers, such as Erle Stanley Gardner who wrote hundreds of books and had to employ pseudonyms in order to effectively market the enormous output. Nor was there such an interest in crime fiction as an academic discipline. It fell on Chandler himself to codify some of the traits of the hard-boiled school in *The Simple Art of Murder* (1944),

a practice which was common among writers from the Golden Age of detective fiction which Chandler explicitly criticizes.

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor. (Chandler 1944: 987)

Years later, Ellroy parodied these words to elevate his work above Chandler's, and bring his narrative to the same plateau as Hammett's:

Down these mean streets the single man who can make a difference must go. There is an institutionalized rebelliousness to it that comes out of a cheap liberalism that I despise. It's always the rebel. It's always the private eye standing up to the system. That doesn't interest me. What interest me are the toadies of the system. (Duncan 1996: 85)

By separating Chandler's detective 'man of honor' from the 'toadies of the system' Ellroy brings the genre full circle. Chandler himself recognized Hammett's influence, and how both their writing was a reaction to Golden Age detective fiction:

Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley; it doesn't have to stay there forever, but it was a good idea to begin by getting as far as possible from Emily Post's idea of how a well-bred debutante gnaws a chicken wing. (Chandler 1944: 988–9)

Chandler and Hammett met only once, at a 1936 gathering of Black Mask writers in LA, and the relationship appeared amicable. There was no professional rivalry as Hammett's writing career ended fairly early amidst his struggles with alcoholism and the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Instead, Ellroy has himself invented and prolonged a literary feud of sorts, pitting the men's work against each other as opposing ends of the crime genre. In his own work, it could be argued that Ellroy is, in many ways, continuing Chandler's theory of a genre which is in constant movement, rejecting that which came before it (in Chandler's case Golden Age mysteries). In Ellroy's oeuvre, the movement is from private and police detective novels, *Brown's Requiem* and the Lloyd Hopkins novels, to historical crime fiction, the LA Quartet and Underworld USA trilogy. By casting both Chandler and Hammett as the originators of the hard-boiled genre, and minimizing the importance of the writers that followed



them, he crowns himself as the third point of the trinity – Chandler, Hammett, Ellroy – and navigates a new journey from hard-boiled to neo-noir.

Due to the shifting, malleable nature of Chandler's influence on Ellroy's work, in attempting to fully assess it, a difficulty arises not unfamiliar to that faced in film noir criticism – that of definition and classification. Starting from the novel Ellroy himself tied to Chandler, from the title alone, *Brown's Requiem* reveals this debt. Chandler had sued the writer James Hadley Chase after Chase had directly lifted material from the Marlowe novels for his work *Blonde's Requiem* (1946). It may just be a coincidence but, in referencing *Blonde's Requiem*, Ellroy could have intended the novel to be a parody of a plagiarism as he was so deeply indebted to Chandler himself. Certainly his titular detective, Fritz Brown, is derived as much from pastiche as praise for the Philip Marlowe model. Brown's first-person narration takes the reader through the story, employing a succession of wisecracks and colourful similes that are clearly mimicking Chandler's prose, and Marlowe himself is referenced directly at one point when Brown walks into the Westwood Hotel:

The flat finished white stucco walls, ratty Persian carpets in the hallway and mahogany doors almost had me convinced it was 1938 and that my fictional predecessor Philip Marlowe was about to confront me with a wisecrack. (Ellroy 1981: 193)

This is the most overly metafictional moment in the text, but the more influential traces of Chandler can be found in Ellroy's exploration of how relationships form through an oppositional attraction, which in some ways echoes his ambivalent reading of the creator of Brown's 'fictional predecessor Philip Marlowe'. Brown's one client is Freddy 'Fat Dog' Baker, a corpulent, racist, foul-mouthed and suspiciously wealthy golf caddy. Brown is in some ways the antithesis of Fat Dog; he is handsome and charming and even begins an affair with Fat Dog's sister who he has been hired to watch with the specific intention of stopping her forming a relationship with another man. In short, Brown is a 'complete man and a common man', and he cannot hide a degree of affection for the client he soon discovers is capable of horrific acts of violence (Chandler 1944: 987).

Brown finds that Fat Dog has been brutally murdered in Mexico. This unexpected event occurs halfway through the novel, thus denying the reader an expected showdown between the private detective and the would-be antagonist. Shortly after discovering his corpse, Brown admits his sympathy for Fat Dog:

He deserved to live. He just never had the chance. He had no choice in the matter. It was locked in, from the beginning. He was destined to become what he became. I'm no liberal, but I learned one thing from being a cop: that some people have to do what they are doing, that they can't help it. (Ellroy 1981: 121–2)

Brown delivers this monologue, somewhat insensitively, to a character who was also seeking his revenge on Fat Dog. His references to being a cop reveals how Ellroy conceived Brown as being like Marlowe, who also alludes to a prior career in law enforcement. But since leaving the LAPD, Brown has not entirely become Ellroy's interpretation of the Chandler-model outsider working against the system, which in many respects Marlowe was not anyway despite his sceptical view of the corrupt Bay City police. Brown lost his job in the LAPD, but he has reinvented himself as the archetypal self-made 1980s businessman in the semi-legit car repossession trade; thus his private detective label is merely a tax write-off. He knows that Fat Dog is a more blue-collar version of himself, only burdened by psychosexual urges, such as incestuous feelings for his sister, ingrained in him so deeply he can never reform. This is a more explicit version of Marlowe quoting Shakespeare out of tacit sympathy for his client, the psychopathic but lovelorn Moose Malloy – one of the many characters in *Farewell, My Lovely* – who he claims 'had loved not wisely, but too well' (Chandler 1940: 366).

Ellroy's attempts to create a homage to Chandler led to an epiphany after its publication: 'I wrote *Brown's Requiem*, and I had a tremendous revelation when I finished it. I realized that all modern private-eye novels are bullshit, and that I would never write another one' (Silet 1995: 44). Yet while Ellroy excised the private eye from his narratives, I would argue that he did not lose the influence of Chandler, which could still be detected both in overt references and tonal undercurrents in his first mammoth undertaking as a novelist, the LA Quartet series, simply because he could not write about the time and the city of Chandler without referring to the author. Starting with Ellroy's most celebrated work, *The Black Dahlia* (1987), Ellroy makes a factual reference to Chandler's work through his choice of title. Chandler had scripted the film noir *The Blue Dahlia* (1944). It was not a notable crime film, as Chandler would later freely admit, and was hampered by a troubled production in which the author struggled to control his drinking in order to deliver the script. It did however gain a footnote in film history because the title inspired the moniker the LA Press gave Elizabeth Short when the Black Dahlia murder became headline news, as Ellroy's novel acknowledges, without, significantly, naming the film's screenwriter, Chandler:

We can thank Bevo Means for that. He went down to Long Beach and talked to the desk clerk at the hotel where the girl stayed last summer. The clerk told him Betty Short always wore tight black dresses. Bevo thought of that movie with Alan Ladd, *The Blue Dahlia*, and took it from there. I figure the image is good for at least another dozen confessions a day. As Harry says when he's had a few, 'Hollywood will f\*\*k you when no one else will.' (Ellroy 1987: 105)

There are also thematic parallels between the two works which go deeper than the title. In the original draft Chandler envisioned the killer to be serving in the US Navy and suffering from trauma-induced blackouts related to his wartime service, but the studios considered this to be overly controversial and unpatriotic for a film made during wartime. Ellroy's novel follows the original police investigation fairly closely, including, the false murder confession of Corporal Joseph Dumais. Ellroy renames Dumais as Dulange in the novel, and as Dulange is one of Elizabeth Short's boyfriends, Ellroy uses him to provide backstory about the murder victim. Dulange is cleared, as was Dumais in real life, once his confession is discredited due, in part, to his chronic alcoholism as he was receiving treatment for addiction at the time of the murder. However, his loathsome behaviour is permanently exposed, including how he cruelly manipulated Short by bribing a doctor to tell her she was pregnant. As a survivor of the trenches, Chandler intuitively knew that the inner violence and trauma of those who survive combat, and the military indoctrination that comes with it, would be an issue in post-war America just as it had been a major factor in driving the popularity of hard-boiled fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Chandler's ideas were shunted aside, but within a few years film noirs such as *Crossfire* (1947) and *Act of Violence* (1949) would candidly explore trauma and violent compulsions in war veterans, a trend that Ellroy would continue by making the killer of Elizabeth Short – Georgie Tilden – a disfigured veteran of the First World War. *The Blue Dahlia* was structurally confusing as Chandler's original vision was rewritten, and he completed the script in a haze of perpetual alcoholism. As Chandler's most recent biographer Tom Williams put it, '*The Blue Dahlia* has become a footnote in the story of the Black one' (Williams 2014: 222).

Chandler was paid \$1,000 a week by MGM to adapt his fourth novel, *The Lady in the Lake*. However, his opinion of Hollywood had already soured after working on *The Blue Dahlia* and he gave up after three months' work. The subsequent film adaptation was scripted by Steve Fisher, and directed by and starring Robert Montgomery as Marlowe. The film is most notable among the Chandler adaptations for the optical-point-of-view technique by which

everything is seen from Marlowe's viewpoint, and the only glimpse of the private detective the audience is granted is when he looks in a mirror or if he breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly. Chandler's efforts on the script had never attempted any such literal-minded methods to visualize the first-person narration of the novels, and he dismissed it as a gimmick and, perhaps a touch slighted, not original, 'Let's make the camera a character; it's been said at every lunch table in Hollywood one time or another' (Hiney 1997: 159). Ellroy, however, considered the idea of point-of-view detection promising enough to revive and revise it in *The Big Nowhere*. In the novel, Sheriff's Deputy Danny Upshaw is investigating a series of mutilation murders and employs an innovative technique called Man Camera which imagines frame by frame the point of view of the perpetrator: 'As the Man Camera, Upshaw recreates crime scenes as movie scenes' (Mancall 2014: 83). The more obvious danger for Upshaw would be that the detective succumbs to the same murderous compulsions as the killer. However, this clichéd route is secondary to Ellroy's use of Man Camera as a lens that turns back on Upshaw framing his long-repressed homosexuality.

When Upshaw visits the home of the homosexual pimp Felix Gordean to interrogate him he soon finds his sense of control as a detective is put to the test:

For a split second Danny felt terrified; Gordean and Pretty Boy became paper silhouettes, villains to empty his gun into. He about-faced out the door, slamming it; he puked into the street, found a hose attached to the adjoining house, drank and doused his face with water. (Ellroy 1988: 282)

Gordean is staring into a two-way mirror watching homosexual acts taking place on the other side, while Upshaw is firing him questions, keeping his eyes locked on the pimp so as to resist the urge to look into the mirror and devour the same images that Gordean is enjoying. Gordean takes pleasure in luring ostensibly straight men out of the closet, and standing before Upshaw, 'elegant in a silk robe', he could be a gay Hugh Hefner (Ellroy 1988: 281). Here, the two-way mirror acts as a kind of camera, but unlike Man Camera, Upshaw does not want to know what it will reveal or the desires it will unleash in him by looking through its lens. It is not just his sexuality that bothers Upshaw, it is the violence it triggers in him as 'Gordean and Pretty Boy became paper silhouettes', targets for him to use a phallic weapon (his gun) on. While leaving the house he assaults a man with a punch 'to the gut, grabbed a handful of hair and lashed slaps across his face until he felt his knuckles wet with blood' (Ellroy 1988: 283). This violent act follows Upshaw vomiting and subsequently washing out his mouth and face

with water. The angry flash of sadism he shows on the young homosexual is supposed to be as cleansing to Upshaw as the water he has just doused himself with, and reflects his upbringing in police culture wherein violence is condoned but homosexuality is not accepted, and it also makes him more aligned with the psychosexual urges of the killer. And yet the fact that his knuckles become wet with the man's blood is a suggestive reminder that violence is not a means of escape from his sexuality, it only drags him back to it.

Despite mocking the idea of a character acting as the camera on film, there are numerous examples in Chandler's novels of characters being literal and metaphorical cameras, including methods that explore the sexual dynamics of a crime scene as Ellroy did with *Man Camera*. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe follows the bookseller Arthur Geiger whom he suspects is blackmailing Carmen Sternwood, the daughter of his client General Sternwood. Marlowe sits in his car outside a house Geiger visits. He is lured inside by 'a single flash of hard white light', then a scream followed by gunshots (Chandler 1939: 24). He finds Geiger dead and Carmen so heavily drugged she is barely conscious:

She had a beautiful body, small, lithe, compact, firm, rounded. Her skin in the lamplight had the shimmering lustre of a pearl. Her legs didn't quite have the raffish grace of Mrs Regan's legs, but they were very nice. I looked her over without either embarrassment or ruttishness. As a naked girl she was not there in that room at all. She was just a dope. To me she was always just a dope. (Chandler 1939: 26)

Marlowe admires Carmen's body with the slow long gaze of a camera. He uses five adjectives to describe her beautiful body and the absence of conjunctions suggests this attention to detail is rooted in more than just a detective's ability to process information quickly. He compares Carmen's legs to her older sisters, and her skin to the 'shimmering lustre of a pearl', but his enjoyment of her physical beauty sparks in him emotional contempt. Carmen is a 'naked girl' and 'a dope', barely aware of his presence, but tellingly Marlowe claims to admire her shape without 'ruttishness', sexual desire. It is only after his visual analysis of the scene that Marlowe notices an actual camera behind something that 'looked like a totem pole. It had a profile like an eagle and its wide round eye was a camera lens. The lens was aimed at the naked girl in the chair. There was a blackened flash bulb clipped to the side' (Chandler 1939: 26). Geiger has been taking pornographic photographs, but Marlowe is the authentic *Man Camera*. Geiger's camera is secondary to Marlowe's point of view. Everything about the scene is

fake, especially the element of sex which Geiger has had to induce by drugging Carmen whose scream was in response to the sheet lightning caused by the flash bulb, and not by the gunshots or death of Geiger which had been 'somebody else's idea of how the proceedings might be given a new twist' essentially transforming the staging into, in modern terms, a snuff film (Chandler 1939: 26). Like Upshaw, Marlowe does not want to be emotionally involved in the sexual angle of the crime, which is why his first-person narration displays a sudden flash of contempt for Carmen after admiring her body shape. With the murder of Geiger, by contrast, he is more blasé in his description. Even when it comes to relationships, until late in the series, Marlowe is fairly chaste and the sex happens off the page. The penultimate chapter of *Farewell, My Lovely* ends with Anne Riordan telling Marlowe, 'I'd like to be kissed, damn you!' (Chandler 1940: 364). But while Marlowe and Upshaw are not the perpetrators of the crimes, sex is all pervasive and its visual imprint on every scene affects both the participant and viewer.

In *Double Indemnity*, one of the few film noirs Ellroy considers 'wonderful' and 'truly artful', Chandler collaborated with director Billy Wilder to adapt James M. Cain's novel to the screen (Canavese 2006: 153). Ellroy credits Wilder, not Chandler, for the film's noir brilliance. In truth, there was tension between Wilder and Chandler from the start as the author did not appreciate the Austrian director's extroverted, womanizing personality. It was Chandler's first time working inside a movie studio and Wilder found the novelist equally difficult:

He had that idiotic idea, you know, that if you know about 'fade in' and 'dissolve' and 'close-up' and 'the camera moves into the keyhole' and so on, that you have mastered the art of writing pictures. He had no idea how these things were done. (Luhr 1991: 31)

Chandler's first efforts at the script amounted to what Wilder dubbed 'technical drive', making Chandler's later objections to the experimental *Lady in the Lake* seem particularly hypocritical. Instead, Wilder wanted Chandler to focus on his renowned hard-boiled dialogue, or 'Chandlerisms', to convey the adulterous, later murderous, central relationship of Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in ways that confounded the prudish and censorious Hays Code and led to its gradual abandonment. However, the concept of sex, violence and voyeurism being inextricably interlinked was an extension of Chandler's fascination with camera angles and character point of view which he worked into the first draft that Wilder detested so much. Just as Marlowe's narration and the presence of a

camera underpins the dark sexual desire at the Geiger murder scene, the script direction that 'the camera moves into the keyhole' is laden with innuendo and implicates viewer and character in voyeuristic storytelling. The art of detection and the viewing of sexually attractive figures (be it Carmen in *The Big Sleep* or Phylliss Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*) become indistinguishable in Chandler's work, and are taken to even more twisted extremes by Ellroy with Man Camera in *The Big Nowhere*.

In terms of working methods, the differences between Ellroy and Chandler, aside from the alcoholism which Chandler wrestled with while writing and Ellroy overcame before he started his career, are fairly minimal. Both writers professed a dislike for research, which in practice meant an inability to wade through or even skim-read piles of books or historical documents. Instead, Ellroy could draw upon his experiential knowledge of LA, one that was rooted partly in being born there and growing up in the classic film noir age, and partly in understanding the aesthetics of Chandler's portrayal of the city. Socially, Chandler had contacts in the LAPD that were useful for his writing. He was an acquaintance of LAPD Police Chief Thaddeus 'Thad' Brown, who Ellroy rechristened as Thad Green and used as a character in his novels. Chandler is also rumoured to have had an abortive meeting with a much more prominent figure who Ellroy would later adapt as a character in his novels. Dining at a restaurant near his home in La Jolla, Chandler received a message that J. Edgar Hoover was present and was invited to join him at his table; Chandler refused and a furious Hoover, in keeping with Ellroy's fictional portrayal of him, loudly proclaimed that he would have Chandler 'investigated'. There is no proof the incident ever happened and Tom Hiney describes it as 'La Jolla legend' (Hiney 1997: 181). Chandler himself was happy to contribute to legend. In an interview with Ian Fleming for the BBC, Chandler provided some speculative background to the mechanics of how a murder contract is issued and carried out in the criminal underworld. Fleming asks Chandler about the recent murder of Mafia boss Albert Anastasia. Anastasia was shot to death by masked gunman at the Park Sheraton hotel barbershop in New York. In Chandler's version of what may have happened, the killers would be living quiet lives running a business in a part of the country such as Minneapolis. They would be summoned to New York, given instructions on the target (who they would not know personally), follow him for days until they knew his routine thoroughly and then shoot him dead in the street, leaving the guns at the scene and making a quick getaway by car, and subsequently going back to their everyday jobs all for a fee of around

ten thousand dollars, 'if it's an important man. It's small money to the Syndicate' (Powell 2012c).

Chandler's theory reads like the outline of a hard-boiled novel and is not wholly dissimilar to a rumour started by Dashiell Hammett's partner Lilian Hellman. While working as a Pinkerton detective, Hammett was supposedly offered a contract to murder union agitator Frank Little. Little met a horrific fate in Butte, Montana, in 1917 after waging a campaign against the Anaconda Copper Mining Company whom he held responsible for an accident in which 168 miners were killed. Armed men snatched Little from a boarding house, savagely beat him and broke his leg before finally lynching him from a trestle. According to the more lurid accounts which circulated at the time he was also stabbed and castrated.

Ellroy was obsessed with the story and Hammett's supposed involvement fuelled his fascination with author:

Hammett's mythic refusal is a primer on situational ethics. He knew it was wrong and didn't do it. He stayed with an organisation that in part suppressed dissent and entertained murderous offers on occasion. He stayed because he loved the work and figured he could chart a moral course through it. He was right and wrong. That disjuncture is the great theme of his work. (Ellroy 2007a)

The 'disjuncture' deliberately echoes his earlier parody of Chandler, 'Down these mean streets the single man who can make a difference must go' (Duncan 1996: 85). In Ellroy's version of the story, Hammett turned down the murder contract but stayed as a Pinkerton not because he could 'make a difference', as Chandler would envisage, but because he thought he 'could chart a moral course through it'. In Ellroy's mind there is a clear distinction between the two paths, and between both writers – Chandler and Hammett. Marlowe fears being tainted by sin as seen in his attraction and sudden contempt for Carmen Sternwood, but for Hammett and his Continental Op they will muddle through and accept not succumbing to evil or being destroyed by it as all they can hope for. They are 'the toadies of the system' Ellroy is fascinated with (Duncan 1996: 85). Disjuncture also seems an appropriate term as critics are far from in agreement as to the moral code of the Continental Op. In his study *Hammett's Moral Vision* (2006), George J. Thompson charts the division of critical opinion on the Op's guiding principles. Robert Edenbaum argues that the Op is engaged in a good versus evil battle whereas William Kenney describes him as 'morally ineffectual and morally ambiguous' (Thompson 2007: 36). Thompson, like Ellroy, falls



somewhere in the middle of this debate rejecting Edenbaum's argument that the Op is a knightly figure like Marlowe. It is telling though, that even when Ellroy rejects the morality of Chandler's 'Man of Honor', he still frames the debate of Hammett's moral vision within the context of Chandler's mean streets.

Like any 'mythic refusal', the murder contract story is almost impossible to disprove as Hammett scholars have discovered. Sally Cline bluntly states that the episode and the 'agency's role in union strikebreaking eventually disillusioned him (Hammett)', but remains non-committal on the issue of a murder contract (Cline 2014: 20). Nonetheless, the tragic events in Butte inspired Hammett's writing of *Red Harvest* which, while not his best-known novel, was the one that left the most lasting impression on Ellroy: 'I like *Red Harvest* better than *The Maltese Falcon*' (Powell 2008b: 172).

*Red Harvest* is not a mystery novel which slowly unravels its narrative but a ballet of bombs and bullets made bizarrely plausible as the characters never question the chaotic world Hammett puts them in – Personville, known as 'Poisonville' by the locals. The Continental Op has been summoned to the town by a client, but he soon finds himself at odds with almost every character in the surreally violent world Hammett creates. In one scene, allusively reminiscent of the Frank Little murder, the Continental Op is drugged and awakes to find he may have murdered his nominal friend Dinah Brand:

I opened my eyes in the dull light of morning sun filtered through drawn blinds.

I was lying face down on the dining-room floor, my head resting on my left forearm. My right arm was stretched straight out. My right hand held the round blue and white handle of Dinah Brand's ice pick. The pick's six-inch needle-sharp blade was buried in Dinah Brand's left breast.

She was lying on her back, dead. Her long muscular legs were stretched out towards the kitchen door. There was a run down the front of her right stocking.

Slowly, gently, as if afraid of awakening her, I let go of the ice pick, drew in my arm, and got up. (Hammett 1929: 147)

The scene perhaps alludes to how Hammett may have found the Frank Little murder contract thrust upon him, and while it is doubtful he had any significant involvement, Little was nevertheless murdered and Hammett could not or did not prevent it. The same is true of the Op and Dinah Brand. The explanation for the murder is convoluted and alludes to overlapping responsibility. The Op was drugged by Dinah but when he wakes it is her corpse that is lying next to him. He later works with the criminal Reno Starkey, only to find that he is Dinah's

murderer. If not all of the plot machinations make sense then the Op's feelings for her both dead and alive are always ambiguous. Dinah is very earthy for a femme fatale. The Op notes that she is overweight when he observes 'her big body sprawled in an arm chair', but his behaviour around her suggests tenderness more than any desire for sexual conquest (Hammett 1929: 64). He does not try to take advantage of the body that she flaunts, even when he awakes with his hand around the dagger 'buried in Dinah Brand's left breast', he lets go of it with care 'as if afraid of awakening her' and by extension, further incriminating himself. There is not any time to mourn Dinah however, as ultimately she abides by the same corrupt philosophy as the rest of the characters and is beyond redemption, even in death. As George J. Thompson argues, they are 'unaware of other modes of behavior. They have all been poisoned, morally' (Thompson 2007: 44).

*White Jazz* features a similar narcotic-induced murder scene, clearly inspired by *Red Harvest*, wherein Dave Klein commits a murder in a state of drugged, semi-conscious hallucination. Klein is not a stranger to murder, however, and is introduced to the reader accepting a murder contract. Thus, being framed for murder threatens his life but not his conscience. Ellroy can portray 'disjuncture (which) is the great theme of his (Hammett's) work' in Dave Klein, as he works for both the LAPD and the Mob and tortures himself over crimes he has willingly committed and others he was forced to do (Ellroy 2007a). There is no real freedom of contract in a Mob hit, as Klein knows he will be killed if he refuses it. He is being blackmailed by LA Mob chieftain Jack Dragna and others over previous murders he has committed. The LAPD is safeguarding informer Sanderline Johnson who has agreed to testify about the Mafia's infiltration of the boxing industry. Klein throws Johnson to his death from the window of a hotel where he was supposed to be under police protection. Ellroy undoubtedly based the murder on the 1941 death of Abraham 'Kid Twist' Reles, a mobster who turned State's evidence and fell to his death, in mysterious circumstances, from the window of the Half Moon Hotel in Brooklyn while being guarded by the NYPD. Reles was dubbed 'The Canary Who Could Sing, but Couldn't Fly' in the press. In *White Jazz*, *Hush-Hush* reports Johnson's death with the headline 'Hallelujah, I Can Fly', whereas Klein informs his sceptical superiors it was a suicide (Ellroy 1992: 21).

After each murder he commits Klein buys a dress for his sister Meg. Violence is followed by an act of tenderness, albeit of a sexual kind as his feelings towards Meg are incestuous and relate back to the crimes that led him to being permanently indebted to the Mob. The double homicide of Anthony Brancato and Anthony

Trombino, 'the Two-Tony's', occurred in LA in 1951 and is fictionalized in *White Jazz*. Klein is ordered to kill the Two-Tonys as part of Mob business; they are Kansas City gangsters trying to muscle in on the LA rackets, but he has personal reasons to want them dead. They have been sexually aggressive towards Meg and the vengeance he wreaks is more a consequence of his unnatural feelings for her than any sense of chivalry.

Klein's capacity for violence, both as a detective and as a contract killer for the Mob, would be unthinkable in a Chandler, or even Hammett narrative. The Continental Op's grim fate negotiating his way through an amoral world would not permit the same brutality that Klein indulges in. However, this evolution of character between the three authors – Chandler, Hammett, Ellroy – has not been a move towards realism. Ellroy has stated, 'My L.A. Quartet books are a hyperbolized view of police work in the 1950s,' and through this admission he is subconsciously retracting much of his criticism of Chandler's work (Duncan 1996: 83). A close inspection of Hammett and Chandler's work, which in comparing the two Ellroy practically demands, reveals that the Continental Op is every inch the fantasy figure that Philip Marlowe is. Perhaps even more so as his anonymity suggests that if Hammett named him he would have given the character a sense of reality which he does not warrant. Better to keep him nameless, and faceless, so that he can meld to the fictional world he inhabits. When Marlowe first visits the Sternwood mansion in *The Big Sleep*, and observes the Arthurian design, 'a broad-stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but for some very long and convenient hair,' it is Chandler's invitation to the reader to enjoy the confectionary of a crime story (Chandler 1939: 3). Equally, there are just as many moments when Marlowe foregoes the wisecracks to reveal something deeper. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe ends the novel feeling angry and inadequate after he has been betrayed by his friend Terry Lennox, who has faked his death and undergone plastic surgery.

You bought a lot of me, Terry. For a smile and a nod and a wave of the hand and a few quiet drinks in a quiet bar here and there. It was nice while it lasted. So long, amigo. I won't say goodbye. I said it to you when it meant something. I said it when it was sad and lonely and final. (Chandler 1953: 658–9)

Ellroy pays tribute to *The Long Goodbye* through the character of Dr Terry Lux in *The Big Nowhere*, a plastic surgeon who operates on the serial killer Coleman Healy. Lux is a thoroughly disreputable character who, as his name suggests by

evoking the word 'looks', is venal and shallow and through his actions helps a psychopath evade detection. Marlowe has a strong moral code, but has to come to terms with how he was duped by Lennox and unwittingly aided a murderer. This is one of the many goodbyes of the novel; the goodbye to friendship and the perception Marlowe had of Lennox and himself. Off the page, it was also a personal goodbye to Chandler as his wife Cissy was dying while he was drafting the novel. The title was also, as with his debut novel *The Big Sleep*, a reference to death and Ellroy keeps Chandler's noir fatalism alive in his own choice of title alluding to death, *The Big Nowhere*. For Ellroy, characters such as Dr Lux and the homage they pay to Chandler's most poetic and elegiac novel suggest that he never truly said goodbye to the author, despite what he otherwise claimed, and plastic surgery is the perfect metaphor for an inspiration that burned brightly, then was angrily rejected, before being reconstituted in different forms and masked by a rather fake dismissal of Chandler's influence.

Ellroy tried to paint himself as the author who graduated from Chandler to Hammett and then surpassed both of them, but their legacy complemented each other in the LA Quartet novels, never fully drifting into obscurity as Ellroy became increasingly confident and assured as a writer. As he said of Chandler in one of his more sympathetic observations:

He came out of L.A., and he wrote in the first person. And it's the L.A. of my early childhood and the L.A. before my birth, which is intensely romantic to me. And I sure as shit loved the books while I read them. (Powell 2008a: 170)

## ‘No-Man’s Land’: Broken Men and Traumatized Police Officers in *The Onion Field* and *The Black Dahlia*

Jim Mancall

James Ellroy has not always made it easy to identify his literary influences. In some interviews he even takes the opposite approach, going so far as to distance himself from the work of other authors. In one interview, Ellroy described John Gregory Dunne’s novel about the Black Dahlia murder, *True Confessions* (1977), as wonderful, but at the time, he worried that it ‘precluded anyone else ever writing about the Black Dahlia’ (Silet 1995: 47). When he eventually decided to write his own Dahlia novel, he did so with ‘a certain degree of consciousness’ and ‘made every effort to differentiate *The Black Dahlia* from *True Confessions*’ (Silet 1995: 47). Similarly, he recounts being ‘astounded’ by Don DeLillo’s novel on Lee Harvey Oswald, *Libra* (1988), and commented, ‘I was kicking myself that I didn’t come up with this idea first’ (Rich 2008: 186). After the publication of his own account of the JFK assassination, *American Tabloid*, Ellroy sent DeLillo a copy and promised to ‘attribute his contribution in all my big interviews’ (Rich 2008: 186). But at the same time, he has also been careful to position *American Tabloid* as something completely different from DeLillo’s novel; ‘Lee Harvey Oswald does not appear in the book’ (Duncan 1996: 78), and his novel focuses on tracking ‘all the harbingers of the assassination from five years earlier’ (Powell 2008b: 170).

Even when Ellroy cites literary influences, he is just as likely to minimize the degree of influence. Ellroy disavows Raymond Chandler as a forefather of his own work, calling him ‘overrated and not as important as he is given credit for being’ (Silet 1995: 43). However, with the possible exception of Dashiell Hammett, the author Ellroy has cited most consistently as an influence is Joseph Wambaugh, whose groundbreaking police novels *The New Centurions* (1971), *The Blue Knight* (1972) and *The Choirboys* (1975), as well as the true-crime book

*The Onion Field* (1973), have played a major but somewhat overlooked role in shaping Ellroy's writing. Ellroy cites Wambaugh as '**BIG**. The major influence. The biggest. Big, Big, big influence; most important crime writer since Hammett' (Hogan 1995: 58). Ellroy calls his 'debt' to Wambaugh 'incalculable' and he credits Wambaugh with 'single handedly' obliterating 'the jive, whiny, poetic, utterly disingenuous, first-person private eye' novel and creating 'a new iconic figure, the traumatized police officer' (Ellroy 2010a). Ellroy claims that in the early 1980s, he reread Wambaugh's entire 'oeuvre in chronological order' and the result was that 'his entire world exploded'. Wambaugh, he says, gave him 'the great themes of my work: the lives of police officers and bad men in love with strong women' (Ellroy 2010a). Wambaugh's influence can be traced throughout Ellroy's writing, but in this chapter I will focus on Wambaugh's *The Onion Field*, and the first book in Ellroy's LA Quartet, *The Black Dahlia*. Ellroy labelled *The Onion Field* a 'masterwork', and it may contain one of Wambaugh's most searing portraits of the 'traumatized police officer'.

*The Onion Field* is Wambaugh's non-fiction account of the 1963 murder of LAPD officer Ian Campbell. During what seems to be a routine traffic stop in Hollywood, Campbell and his new partner, Karl Hettinger, suddenly find themselves in a standoff with two petty criminals, Gregory Powell and Jimmy Lee Smith. Powell surprises Campbell, takes his gun, and then holds Campbell at gunpoint. Campbell tells Hettinger to surrender his own firearm, and then Powell and Smith force the two policemen to drive out to a remote farm near Bakersfield. In an onion field there, Powell (and perhaps Smith) shoots and kills Campbell, but Hettinger manages to escape, and both Powell and Smith are arrested shortly thereafter.

As concise and suspenseful Wambaugh's recreation of the events leading up to the murder is, *The Onion Field* is equally, if not more, focused on the arbitrary processes of the legal system, and the way that system ultimately fails in the pursuit of justice in the seemingly endless trials and retrials of Powell and Smith. Though Powell and Smith are apprehended nearly immediately after the murder in 1963, it is not until 1970 that Powell will be sentenced to death and Smith to life in prison. At one point, the case becomes so convoluted and exhausting that one of the prosecutors, Phil Halpin, complains that 'nobody cares' about it 'anymore' and he fears that it will '*never* be over' (Wambaugh 1973: 433). By the time Powell is finally sentenced to death, Wambaugh reports that the case transcript filled '159 volumes ... of court transcript', standing as 'the longest in California history' (Wambaugh 1973: 480). And even then, the case is still not

over: in 1972, Powell's death sentence is lifted when 'the California Supreme Court declared that capital punishment was cruel and unusual' (Wambaugh 1973: 481).

But even this extensive examination of the California legal system may not be Wambaugh's ultimate focus. In the aftermath of the murder, Karl Hettinger loses his trademark sunny optimism and descends into illness, alcoholism and even petty crime. But it is not only the murder of his partner that traumatizes Hettinger, it is the terrible judgement, both implicit and explicit, levied against him by the LAPD itself. Wambaugh is concerned most of all with the myth of the heroic cop, and the recriminations brought to bear when a police officer fails to live up to that myth. This theme is Wambaugh's greatest influence on Ellroy's fiction: the police officer, reckoning with questions of heroism and manhood. The protagonists of the LA Quartet are men broken by and seeking escape from the crushing masculine culture of the LAPD.

In 2005, as several of Wambaugh's novels were reissued, Ellroy published the essay 'Choirboys', his tribute to Wambaugh. 'Choirboys' recounts Ellroy's period of homelessness, substance abuse and low-level crime in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that time, he read many crime novels, including the works of Chandler, Hammett and Ross Macdonald, but it was Wambaugh, Ellroy writes, who became his 'all-time teacher' (Ellroy 2005: 346, 353). Ellroy first came across *The Onion Field* in the public library, where he read a pre-publication magazine excerpt. He decides to shoplift a copy of the book. But while reading it in the makeshift Goodwill box that serves as his home, he is rousted by LAPD, and loses his copy of *The Onion Field* somewhere on the journey to Wilshire Station and the county jail. He does, however, earn the cops' praise for his 'reading taste' (Ellroy 2005: 347). Ellroy will eventually steal three more copies of the book, but only finishes it when, karmically, he actually saves the money to purchase a fourth copy. He praises not only 'Wambaugh's outrage' at a legal system that allows Powell and Smith to escape 'their just fate of death', but also what he calls 'Wambaugh's terrible compassion' (Ellroy 2005: 349).

The phrase 'terrible compassion' is evocative, almost poetic. Ellroy does not elaborate on what he means by it, but he goes on to say that *The Onion Field* 'moved me and scared me and rebuked me for the heedlessness of my life' (Ellroy 2005: 349). We may find all of these emotions in Wambaugh's 'terrible compassion'. Wambaugh's portrait of Powell and Smith is not without some element of sympathy. Powell and Smith are presented as multi-dimensional human figures, but if there is compassion in these portraits, it is not compassion

without judgement: it is 'terrible' in the sense that it is formidable. It rebukes the criminals for the 'heedlessness' of their lives – not only their willingness to murder another human being, but also their desire to try to evade the consequences.

Ellroy writes that when he read *The Onion Field*, he learnt 'from it', but was not yet ready to change his life. He reads Wambaugh's books 'as great criminal and literary teachings, and moral indictments of *me*' (Ellroy 2005: 358). Eventually, of course, Ellroy does change his life; he becomes sober and publishes his first novel. In 'Choirboys', he writes, 'I'll credit God with the overall save. I'll cite Joe Wambaugh and Sex as secondary forces' (Ellroy 2005: 362). His inclusion of 'Sex' is a typical Ellroy touch, but it should not diminish the seriousness of the claims that Ellroy makes about Wambaugh's influence. On the contrary, given that Ellroy wrote a memoir based, in part, on his sex life, it emphasizes Wambaugh's importance to be ranked alongside it in significance. At the end of the essay, Ellroy addresses Wambaugh directly: 'You granted me vision. You unlocked the love and dutiful rage in my heart' (Ellroy 2005: 364). This vision that Wambaugh has granted is another version of 'terrible compassion' – a 'dutiful rage' leavened by 'love'. If the murder of his mother is the crime that saturates all of Ellroy's work, it may be that his inheritance from Wambaugh, the 'dutiful rage', the 'terrible compassion', is of nearly equal significance.

*The Onion Field* has a cast of characters which includes many familiar figures from Ellroy's fiction such as Chief William H. Parker, Harvey Glatman, Caryl Chessman and the Mecca Club arsonists. Pierce Brooks, the detective who brings Powell and Smith to trial, also appears briefly in *My Dark Places*. We can even trace Ellroy's idea of 'the wonder', the ineffable knowledge of life that Fred Underhill seeks in *Clandestine*, to *The Onion Field*, where Wambaugh writes that policemen are 'seekers of the awesome, the incredible, ... the ugliness and the tedium, the humor and the wonder' (Wambaugh 1973: 4).

But more central to both *The Onion Field* and *The Black Dahlia* are questions of cowardice, manhood and the institutional marginalization of men who are suspects. As Wambaugh tells it, during Jimmy Lee Smith's first night in the county jail after his arrest for the murder of Ian Campbell, Smith has a 'fearful dream' of the murder, a dream in which he sees Campbell's 'jacketed arm and hand, jerked toward Jimmy' with each gunshot (Wambaugh 1973: 248). But after this dream of Campbell's accusing hand, and a few more, Smith claims to never dream of the murder again. In fact, he denies that he is troubled by it at all: 'My conscience is clean', he says, 'if this thing you call a conscience is for real, and



not just something rich white people *say* is for real just to make guys like me feel like they oughtta punish themselves' (Wambaugh 1973: 249). This denial of conscience as a construct of 'rich white people' is a powerful indictment of a social system that all but relegates Smith, an African-American, to a life of petty crime. But in denying conscience, Smith also minimizes his own vulnerability; the denial is an attempt to assert that he is impervious to the consequences of the murder. For even as Smith claims not to be troubled by dreams of the murder of Campbell, he is, in fact, still tormented by the crime. Twice during the initial trial, Smith recalls his nightmares of Campbell's shooting; 'I can't sleep,' he tells prosecutor Marshall Schulman, 'I can't sleep. I just keep seeing that officer's coat jumping' (Wambaugh 1973: 300). And in his final statement to the jury during the penalty phase of the 1969 retrial, Smith breaks down, sobbing: 'I wasn't even brave enough to stop [Powell] from killin that man. I coulda stopped him. I didn't have the guts. ... I'm better off dead. ... what's the use of livin? I ain't even a man' (Wambaugh 1973: 478).

Smith's breakdown may be an attempt to shift the blame for the crime to Powell, but this deep, uneasy sense that he 'ain't even a man', that he 'didn't have the guts' to stop Powell, continues to haunt Smith throughout the book. Before the murder, as Smith and Powell somewhat haplessly embark on a series of robberies, Smith is always on the verge of leaving the unpredictable and vain Powell. But Smith is never able to quite cut himself free from Powell, and while Smith and Powell await sentencing, his frustration finally erupts and he beats Powell into submission. Initially, he exults in his victory: 'Powell went down to his knees after one punch, like the whinin snivelin punk he was! It was so easy, so damn easy Jimmy couldn't believe it' (Wambaugh 1973: 368–9). But sometime later, a fellow inmate advises Smith that since his life may depend on the generosity of Powell's testimony during the penalty phase of the trial, Smith needs to 'play up to him, baby' (Wambaugh 1973: 370). Reluctantly, Smith does just that, not only reconciling with Powell, but performing oral sex on him (Wambaugh 1973: 371). Wambaugh describes this as the 'last overture'; Smith was 'literally on his knees – abject, humbled, degraded' (Wambaugh 1973: 372). Smith's punch may have put the 'whinin snivelin punk' on 'his knees', but now, in a desperate effort to save his own life, it is Smith himself who is 'on his knees'. His capitulation to Powell nearly undoes Smith; as Wambaugh describes it, from this moment, Smith's behaviour 'deteriorated, became sex-oriented, erratic' (Wambaugh 1973: 371). Smith solicits other prisoners for sex, attempts to foment a gang rape, and eventually talks of suicide (Wambaugh 1973: 371–2).

In this abject state, Smith nearly becomes the figure that has tormented him throughout his time in prison: the Flea. The Flea is an elderly, demented convict whom Smith first meets in Folsom Prison, early in Smith's criminal career. The Flea is a 'filthy, prowling phantom' obsessed with oral sex, wandering the prison yard with 'brown teeth, twisted and broken, and drooling' (Wambaugh 1973: 95). While in Folsom, Smith has the sensation that he cannot escape the Flea, and imagines that the Flea is 'looking at him. Like he knew him' (Wambaugh 1973: 95). The Flea's harrowing gaze is so powerful that at one point, Smith dreams that he has been transformed: looking into the shards of a shattered mirror, he realizes that somehow 'he *was* the Flea!' (Wambaugh 1973: 96). As the shards of the shattered mirror suggest, Smith sees in Flea a fearful double, a lifelong prisoner reduced to something sub-human. And indeed, when, after the murder, Smith is again sentenced to Folsom, he is horrified to see that the Flea is still there, 'more demented, more loathsome than ever – pawing at motes and gleaming dust specks in the silver dusk' (Wambaugh 1973: 484). Smith, observing the decrepit Flea, then turns to a prison guard and remarks, 'I was *born* for Folsom Prison' (Wambaugh 1973: 484). If the sight of the Flea causes Smith to observe that he was '*born* for Folsom', it suggests not only that Smith views himself as fated to a life of crime and incarceration, but that the Flea has always represented a fearful future persona.

In juxtaposing Smith and the Flea, Wambaugh suggests the potential collapse of Smith's hardened masculinity. But Smith is not the only figure in *The Onion Field* who will collapse in the aftermath of the killing; as much as *The Onion Field* is the story of the murder of Ian Campbell, it is also the story of Hettinger's attempts to cope with surviving the murder, and the institutional forces brought to bear on him as the survivor. Towards the beginning of *The Onion Field*, we learn that Hettinger had always 'dreamed of being a farmer' (Wambaugh 1973: 28), and ironically, he tells Campbell that he likes police work for the freedom it provides: 'I think that's why I'm a policeman ... I guess I just have to be free and moving around ... I couldn't have a job where I was closed up inside four walls and a roof' (Wambaugh 1973: 5). But after the death of his partner, that sense of freedom will quickly evaporate; life as a police officer will feel ever more confining and institutional.

In the aftermath of the murder, Hettinger's courage will be called into question, and the LAPD brass will blame him for not doing something, anything, to prevent the killing. One of the 'fundamental truths' of police work, Wambaugh tell us, is that 'policemen thoroughly believed that no man-caused

calamity happens by chance'. At some level, police officers believe 'that there is always a step that should have been taken, would have been taken, if the sufferer had been alert, cautious, brave, aggressive – in short, if he'd been like the prototypical policeman' (Wambaugh 1973: 255). That 'fundamental truth' informs the special memorandum on 'Officer's Survival' drafted by Inspector John Powers after the killing (Wambaugh 1973: 256). Powers is known as 'the Patton of the Los Angeles force'; he is, as Wambaugh puts it, a 'cop's cop' who 'talked like a real man' (Wambaugh 1973: 256). Powers' memo begins by noting that the 'brutal gangland style execution of Officer Ian James Campbell' underscores a 'basic premise of law enforcement': police officers 'cannot make deals with vicious criminals'. All men must die, Powers continues, and given this truth, 'the manner of man's living and dying is of paramount importance'. For Powers, 'there are situations more intolerable than death' (Wambaugh 1973: 257). The message is clear: rather than surrender his firearm to Powell and Smith, Hettinger should have somehow fought back. The memorandum goes on to recommend specific actions a police officer can take when 'covered by a gunman', but reminds officers that should those actions fail, 'a strong religious faith gives you calmness and strength in the face of deadly peril' (Wambaugh 1973: 258). As Wambaugh goes on to report, the memorandum becomes a standard element of LAPD training, and 'the command never to surrender a weapon under any circumstances becomes part of the department manual' (Wambaugh 1973: 414). And despite the fact that Campbell told Hettinger to give up his firearm, the blame for the situation falls squarely on Hettinger. The memorandum will even become known as the 'Hettinger Memorandum', and now, living with his cowardly choice, Hettinger endures a fate 'more intolerable than death' (Wambaugh 1973: 256).

Pierce Brooks, the imposing detective, is troubled by the Hettinger Memorandum. He reads it as implying that 'Campbell and Hettinger were almost – he hated to even think the word – cowards' (Wambaugh 1973: 258). Questions of cowardice are important to Brooks, who, in *The Onion Field*, is a figure of relentless, implacable justice. When Powell, on the stand, makes something of a show of crying for Ian Campbell's 'wife and kids', Brooks, watching, thinks, 'Scum' (Wambaugh 1973: 340). Wambaugh tells us that 'it was not the killing which now angered the detective' but 'the killer's ... unmanly sniveling. ... Scum, thought the detective. Scum. Scum' (Wambaugh 1973: 343–4). Brooks's judgement of Jimmy Lee Smith is equally, if not more, severe. He 'despised' Jimmy Smith as a 'lying coward' (Wambaugh 1973: 308).

The question of whether Hettinger could have prevented Campbell's murder, and whether he was a coward for not doing so becomes a crushing weight for Hettinger. At Campbell's funeral, he blurts out, 'Maybe I should've done something more. Maybe I should have grabbed the wheel and wrecked the car. I'm so sorry' (Wambaugh 1973: 250). He is haunted by thrashing, violent dreams, and even though he resolves that he is 'blameless in the death of Ian Campbell', he becomes physically and emotionally distraught (Wambaugh 1973: 275). Most damaging of all to Hettinger is the notion that the LAPD 'think I shoulda done more' (Wambaugh 1973: 378). As the years go by, and the trials drag on, Hettinger, like Smith, nearly collapses. He loses weight, even loses height, develops migraines, and finds himself weeping without warning or control. At one point during the trials, when prosecutor Marshall Schulman addresses the jury, he mistakenly says, 'Officer Hettinger was outright cold bloodedly killed' that night in the onion field (Wambaugh 1973: 321). He is quickly corrected, but Wambaugh notes that the 'slip of the tongue' may have been 'prophetic' (Wambaugh 1973: 321). The murder of Ian Campbell, and the weight of guilt apportioned to Hettinger, have effectively killed Hettinger as well.

Crucially, Hettinger's collapse is conveyed as a loss of his manhood. As his physical and emotional trials continue, Hettinger becomes sporadically impotent and he also becomes a compulsive shoplifter. Wambaugh links the two symptoms; as he describes Hettinger's impotence, he also notes that Hettinger's first theft is of a 'masonry drill' (Wambaugh 1973: 385). The symbolism could not be more clear: having surrendered his weapon, Hettinger attempts to recover a phallic substitute. The authorial choice here deserves attention. When describing the release of the Hettinger Memorandum, Wambaugh reports that an unnamed 'young vice cop' vociferously disputes the recommendations of the Memo, noting that on the very night that Campbell and Hettinger were abducted, another pair of officers were also disarmed and abducted (Wambaugh 1973: 260–1). Those officers lived, however, and the vice cop argues that Campbell and Hettinger cannot be blamed for making the same choice. The angry 'young vice cop' may be a stand-in for Wambaugh himself; Wambaugh served on the LAPD at the time of the (Onion Field) murder, and it is possible that the 'young vice cop' is him, voicing Wambaugh's outrage at the publication of the Hettinger Memorandum. But by so closely juxtaposing Hettinger's impotence and the theft of the masonry drill, Wambaugh undercuts that outrage, and suggests that perhaps at some level Wambaugh himself shares the department's judgement of Hettinger's manhood.

Eventually, Hettinger's shoplifting leads to his arrest, and he is forced to resign from the LAPD. Until that point, Hettinger has served as personal driver to Chief of Police William H. Parker, a figure who frequently appears in Ellroy's fiction either as a character or through deferential references. Hettinger comes to admire Parker 'to the point of adulation' (Wambaugh 1973: 399). But when Hettinger is arrested and forced to resign, Parker is silent. As Wambaugh notes, Parker 'had every opportunity' to prevent Hettinger's dismissal and 'could have saved' him, but chooses not to (Wambaugh 1973: 399). The judgement of the father-like Parker is unbending, as is the judgement of the LAPD itself. At a subsequent hearing to determine whether to grant Hettinger a police pension, Wambaugh reports that 'one man connected with the granting of the pension' notes with irony that 'the police hierarchy' is nearly as remorseless as 'the two condemned men who started the misery'. Both 'the archetypal police mentality', as this observer puts it, and the 'psychopathic mind' are 'utterly unable to identify with the victim in this case' (Wambaugh 1973: 414). That lack of empathy is clear to Sheldon Brown, another prosecutor. During Powell's second penalty trial, Brown despairingly summarizes the effects of the unending reversals, mistrials and hearings: 'Campbell was so forgotten he may as well never have lived,' Brown laments, and Hettinger is simply 'a broken man, anyone could see that' (Wambaugh 1973: 468). Hettinger may have survived the killing, but he never truly escapes the onion field.

Hettinger is the quintessential 'traumatized police officer', broken not only by a terrible crime, but by the unrelenting judgement of the LAPD itself. This theme, I would argue, is what Ellroy carries into his own fiction. From the opening of Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, questions of heroism, cowardice and the institutional pressures that define them, all converge in Bucky Bleichert's narrative. As the prologue opens, the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 erupt; sailors, Marines, cops and zoot-suited 'pachucos' square off against each other in Downtown LA. The newly minted police officer Bleichert is dropped in amidst the chaotic 'battleground', and 'terrified', runs for cover down an empty street (Ellroy 1987: 5). A 'high-pitched laugh' stops him in his tracks; an old man watching the riots from his porch calls out to Bleichert, 'You ain't the only one turned tail, you know' (Ellroy 1987: 6). Bleichert is immediately ashamed, though the old man softens the taunt by telling Bleichert, 'I don't blame you. Kinda hard to tell who to put the cuffs on, ain't it?' (Ellroy 1987: 6). Nevertheless, Bleichert attempts a measure of bravado, insisting that he will find 'some pachucos who need their order restored'. At this point, the old man 'cackles' again, and asks, 'Think it's that simple, laddy?' (Ellroy 1987: 6).

The old man's words will prove prescient: as the novel progresses, Bleichert will enter several more battlegrounds, and each will test his notions of manhood and cowardice. Second, the cackling old man on the porch resembles a 'wily version' of Bleichert's own father, a demented 'Nazi drool case' whose membership in a German-American Bund humiliates Bleichert and forces him, in order to maintain his standing with the LAPD, to snitch on 'some Japanese guys he grew up with' (Ellroy 1987: 4–8). Further, the old man's use of 'laddy' prefigures the favourite epithet of the corrupt patriarch Emmett Sprague, who refers to Bleichert several times as 'lad' (Ellroy 1987: 128, 289). Sprague himself will be another father figure who attempts to humiliate Bleichert, but as we will see, Bleichert will partially avenge himself on this father by recreating a battle scene and exposing Sprague's own cowardice.

By the time of the Zoot Suit Riots, Bleichert is already well aware of the limits of his own courage. As a former light-heavyweight boxer, his record was '36-0-0', but rather than work his way up to the more punishing heavyweight division, he consciously chooses to stay in light heavy, a division Bleichert describes as a 'no-man's land' (Ellroy 1987: 14). Light heavy is, if not neutral territory, 'safe', a way to earn 'guaranteed fifty-dollar purses without getting hurt' (Ellroy 1987: 14). Bleichert's career comes to an end, however, when his next opponent is Ronnie Cordero, an up-and-coming 'Mex middleweight ... with knockout power in both hands' (Ellroy 1987: 14). When Cordero issues a challenge to Bleichert in the local sports pages, Bleichert's reaction to the scheduled fight with Cordero prefigures his terror at the 'pachucos' and the Zoot Suit Riots. Bleichert knows that Cordero will 'eat [him] alive', and the fight would 'kill me' (Ellroy 1987: 15). In response, Bleichert chooses to leave boxing altogether. He considers joining 'the army, navy and marines', but then his father has a stroke, and he is 'given a hardship deferment' (Ellroy 1987: 15). Bleichert decides to join the LAPD instead, and has, in essence, fled another fight. Madeleine Sprague will later term Bleichert a 'draft dodger', and indeed, as a cop, Bleichert occupies a position that is akin to but not quite a soldier (Ellroy 1987: 316). Thus, when he and his soon-to-be partner Lee Blanchard subdue three rampaging 'jarheads' during the Zoot Suit Riots, turning them into a 'dress blue rubble heap', it is a temporary victory over the fight he once dodged (Ellroy 1987: 6).

Blanchard is himself a former professional boxer, '43-4-2' as a heavyweight, 'the Southland's good but not great white hope' (Ellroy 1987: 4, 6). When an LAPD exhibition bout pits Bleichert against Blanchard, Bleichert decides to throw the fight, betting against himself, and hoping to use the money to put

his demented father 'in a class rest home for at least two or three years' (Ellroy 1987: 26). But Bleichert is determined not to tank the fight too obviously; he plans to make it through at least eight rounds 'in order to keep' himself 'from feeling too much of a coward' (Ellroy 1987: 26). As it turns out, Bleichert will achieve a measure of redemption during the bout; in the first round, he knocks the bigger Blanchard down, and spurred on by the crowd's cheers, Bleichert impulsively decides to try and win the fight, sensing that he 'could cancel Blanchard's ticket plain and simple' (Ellroy 1987: 36). Ironically, once Bleichert decides to win, he will lose by a KO in the 8th, but when he comes to, he knows that he has now saved his father '– and *clean*' (Ellroy 1987: 39). Even in the loss, Bleichert has been cleansed, momentarily proving to himself that he could step out of the 'no-man's land' and hold his own against a heavyweight, and, at the same time, lift the weight of guilt and humiliation that his father, another cackling old man, represents.

But once the mutilated body of Elizabeth Short is discovered in a vacant lot, Bleichert, like Wambaugh's Hettinger, will find himself contending with departmental accusations of cowardice. In a desperate effort to close out the Dahlia case, the manipulative and ambitious district attorney Ellis Loew arranges for Bleichert and the thuggish Fritzie Vogel to interrogate four Dahlia murder confessors. Though the suspects hardly seem capable of the murder, they are taken to an abandoned meat-processing plant and forced to stand on chairs while their arms are draped over suspended meat hooks. When one of the suspects, 'the hepcat' Cecil Durkin, mocks Bleichert, he feels Vogel 'watching, measuring' him, and Bleichert punches Durkin, 'one-two'd him in the solar plexus, hard little shots' (Ellroy 1987: 191). With Vogel's eyes on him, Bleichert senses that his manhood is already suspect, and he responds by demonstrating his willingness to use force against the handcuffed Durkin. But this sadism is not enough for Vogel; Vogel complains that 'this kid gloves routine is getting us nowhere', and starts beating the helpless prisoners, 'left-right, left-right, left-right', moving in close to 'work' one of the suspect's 'ribs' with 'winged rabbit punches' (Ellroy 1987: 191–2).

When Vogel then reveals a female corpse made-up to look like the Dahlia, Bleichert stumbles away in horror and trips an alarm; like the first round of the Bleichert-Blanchard match, this will be another bout interrupted by the bell. In fact, several interrogation scenes in *The Black Dahlia* are couched in the language of boxing, again positioning them as tests of Bleichert's manhood. In Tijuana, when the gangster Bobby De Witt makes a crude comment about Kay Lake,



Bleichert charges him, and has to be forcefully pulled away. Bleichert passes out, and comes to 'thinking I'd been knocked down in a third Bleichert-Blanchard fight' (Ellroy 1987: 162). When the alcoholic Dahlia-suspect Joseph Dulange taunts Bleichert about his German background, Bleichert 'sucker punched' Dulange 'square in the chops', and 'Dulange went down like a ton of bricks' (Ellroy 1987: 186). It is telling that in these two scenes, and in the meat-processing plant scene, Bleichert reacts to insults and gibes with violence, but it is equally if not more telling that all three scenes have been orchestrated by Ellis Loew. It is Loew who approves the off-the-books interrogation of the Dahlia confessors in the meat-processing plant, Loew who sends Fritzie Vogel to Tijuana to locate De Witt, and Loew who prematurely leaked a story about Dulange's presumed guilt. Bleichert may be able to momentarily assuage his wounded manhood by lashing out at all these suspects, but in what will become a recurring pattern in the novel, he is always subject to and defeated by the invisible, institutional forces wielded by more powerful individuals than him.

Indeed, after the meat-processing plant incident, Bleichert is kicked off the Dahlia case and demoted back to foot patrol on Skid Row. On Skid Row, Bleichert develops a reputation as a 'sob sister', and is cited for his 'reluctance to employ sufficient force with recalcitrant misdemeanants' (Ellroy 1987: 196). Bleichert knows the uselessness of such force, and he earns the enmity of his fellow officers because he will not resort to violence against derelicts and 'winos'. Again, his masculinity and loyalty are called into question, and within the LAPD culture of sanctioned violence, 'departmental rumors' portray Bleichert as a 'backstabber, a Bolshevik, a coward and a fool' (Ellroy 1987: 196).

Bleichert's ostracization continues when he exposes Fritzie Vogel's corruption. Immediately placed on leave, Bleichert again hears hisses of 'Traitor' and 'Bolshevik' as he walks out of the Central Division station (Ellroy 1987: 213). He is first moved to Scientific Investigation Detail as a chemist, but eventually begs to be moved back on patrol, and is assigned to Newton patrol night watch. Newton Street Division, as Bleichert puts it, is '95 percent slums, 95 percent Negroes, all trouble' (Ellroy 1987: 250). It is a 'war zone', and in this battleground, he is determined to reclaim his courage and reputation (Ellroy 1987: 250). His first week is spent gathering information on who 'the *real* bad guys were', and Bleichert collects 'names to test my courage on. Names to make up for the main events I dodged' (Ellroy 1987: 251). Newton Street Division is yet another exhibition bout for Bleichert, and, as he eagerly employs violence against the 'real bad guys', he regains the admiration of his fellow cops (Ellroy 1987: 300). While



Bleichert uses his billy club to beat two illegal gamblers at a rigged card game, he has an 'audience' of 'bluesuits chomping sandwiches on the sidewalk' (Ellroy 1987: 252). An old sergeant, rumoured to 'hate' Bleichert's 'guts', enthusiastically applauds, yelling out that Bleichert is now 'an honorary white man' (Ellroy 1987: 252). Bleichert knows that in this moment he has been 'kosherized' (Ellroy 1987: 252); he is no longer a 'sob sister' or a 'traitor'. Bleichert has finally succumbed to the LAPD culture of violence, and having proven himself in the 'war zone', he now meets with departmental approval.

To completely prove himself, however, Bleichert must expose and defeat the bad father, Emmett Sprague, the corrupt land developer and wealthy patriarch. Horsley calls Emmett Sprague 'a figure equivalent to a gothic villain in his duplicity and in the extent of the damage he inflicts' (Horsley 2005: 148). When Bleichert confronts Sprague about the murder of Elizabeth Short, images of cowardice and war will again intersect. Determined to connect the Spragues to the Dahlia murder, Bleichert breaks into the Sprague mansion, and overhears Emmett Sprague telling his daughter Madeleine that Bleichert is 'a piss-poor excuse for a man' (Ellroy 1987: 288). Bleichert surprises the Spragues, and determined to make Emmett Sprague 'tell it all, whatever it took', he blasts Sprague's collection of fine art with his .45 (Ellroy 1987: 290). Bleichert transforms the Sprague bedroom into a 'battlefield' with 'cordite, muzzle smoke and plaster haze making the air almost unbreathable' (Ellroy 1987: 289).

In this battlefield, Bleichert will again attempt to prove himself, and as much as Bleichert desires to uncover the details of the Dahlia murder, he is equally invested in compelling Sprague to tell the truth of his First World War experience. Shouting 'coward!', Bleichert slaps Sprague with 'full force', causing Sprague to collapse; 'the hardcase Scotchman son of a bitch' breaks down, sobbing 'like a child' (Ellroy 1987: 291). Eventually, Sprague recants his earlier claim that he saved Georgie Tilden's life in the First World War; as Bleichert puts it, it was the shadowy Tilden who was 'holding off the Germans', while Sprague was 'turning tail and running like a goddamn chickenshit coward' (Ellroy 1987: 291). Sprague admits that Bleichert is right; Tilden saved Sprague by hiding him under a pile of dead soldiers, a story Sprague tells in a 'shell-shocked whisper' (Ellroy 1987: 292). When Bleichert enters the scene, he overhears Sprague disparaging his manhood, but by the end of the scene, in the 'battlefield bedroom', Bleichert has reduced Sprague to a sobbing 'child' and then a 'shell-shocked' soldier. Bleichert characterizes Sprague's cowardice as 'turning tail', the same phrase the cackling old man on the porch uses when Bleichert runs from the Zoot Suit riots.

Where Bleichert once ran ‘terrified’ from the Zoot Suit riots, he now exposes Sprague’s own cowardice and diminishes his power. Now Sprague, admitting his own failure in a ‘shell-shocked whisper’, becomes, at least momentarily, the traumatized male. Bleichert seems to have avenged the wounds he has suffered at the hands of several fathers. But Bleichert does not yet recognize that Sprague is manipulating him, and further, that his humiliation of Sprague is just one more iteration of the same patriarchal structures that both drives him towards and away from violence.

This irony will only become clear after Bleichert defeats his own perverse double: Georgie Tilden. Tilden is something akin to Jimmy Lee Smith’s Flea, a prowling, demented figure, his grotesque face ‘all scars’ (Ellroy 1987: 297). Bleichert, in despair at his failing investigation, describes himself as a ‘shitbird, has-been, never-was’ (Ellroy 1987: 282). Emmett Sprague uses the same kind of language to describe Tilden. At the dinner where Bleichert meets the Sprague family for the first time, Sprague describes Tilden as having ‘scads of odd talents’, but as Sprague puts it, Tilden never realizes his misty dreams and becomes ‘what you might call a never was’ (Ellroy 1987: 130–1). Further, Bleichert himself will call Tilden a ‘stumblebum’, a term often used to describe second-rate or failing boxers, and a term that might equally apply to Bleichert (Ellroy 1987: 107). Tilden even mirrors Bleichert’s distinguishing physical characteristics. In the climactic fight between Tilden and Bleichert, Tilden bares ‘his teeth’ and tears at Bleichert’s cheek and chin, a reminder of where Bleichert’s nickname, ‘Bucky’, comes from: his prominent buckteeth (Ellroy 1987: 297).

When Bleichert tracks Tilden down to one of Sprague’s empty Echo Park developments, he finds a house of horror: body parts are preserved in jars of fluid, and he discovers a notebook detailing the gruesome torture and murder of Elizabeth Short (Ellroy 1987: 296). Tilden then surprises Bleichert, lashing out at Bleichert with handfuls of ‘little hooked instruments, tools for cutting and probing’ (Ellroy 1987: 297). These instruments underscore not only Tilden’s macabre medical interests, but also his lack of masculine power. For all his animal-like ferocity, Tilden’s scalpels will only dispense ‘superficial’ wounds that require nothing more than ‘cleansing and bandaging’ (Ellroy 1987: 299). And ultimately, Bleichert unmans Tilden, first by stabbing him in the eye with a ‘big piece of glass’, and then, jamming his .45 in Tilden’s ‘eye hole’ and blowing ‘his brains out’ (Ellroy 1987: 297–8). Bleichert’s recovery of his weapon, and the charged language of placing it in one of Tilden’s orifices, clearly suggest penetration and sexual domination. As Josh Cohen has pointed out, the novels

of the LA Quartet 'are haunted by a recurring pattern of the mutilation of the eye', and Cohen connects this 'recurrent trope of blinding' in *The Black Dahlia* to the 'deranged masculinity that drives the events' of the novel (Cohen 1996: 171). Cohen cites the corrupt police officer Fritzie Vogel, who blinds two young black prostitutes by rubbing his syphilitic penis in their eyes (Ellroy 1987: 179). Lee Horsley also notes another example; Bleichert's father blinds his mother when he buys her moonshine that turns out to be poisonous (Horsley 1998:149). In both cases, aggressive men blind women. Of the Vogel story, Cohen writes that 'the structure of domination that characterizes visual relations between masculine subject and feminine object is here unpalatably realised' (Cohen 1996: 179). Bleichert's killing of Tilden is another violent realization of that pattern: Sprague scars Tilden's face when he discovers that Tilden is the true father of Madeleine. Cuckolded and humiliated, Sprague brutally assaults Tilden with a knife, reasserting his masculine primacy. In turn, Tilden blackmails Sprague into 'giving' him 'that girl', Elizabeth Short, leading to her horrific torture and death (Ellroy 1987: 292). In the end, Bleichert not only eliminates the man he believes to have killed Elizabeth Short, he feminizes and thus neutralizes him. At each turn of the cycle, men violently assert their manhood over other weaker men or women. To borrow Cohen's language, the 'structure of domination' between 'masculine subject and feminine object' is never resolved or stabilized, and the violence continues endlessly.

In vanquishing Sprague and Tilden, there is a fleeting sense that Bleichert has recovered his broken masculinity, and his killing of Tilden will even be sanctified by the good father. Bleichert confesses everything to Russ Millard, the veteran police officer Bleichert refers to as 'the padre' (Ellroy 1987: 112, 172, 195). Millard understands that justice for Elizabeth Short must be administered outside institutional processes. Millard takes Bleichert back to Tilden's Echo Park home, where he is 'shaken' by the scene, but remains 'ramrod stiff'. Millard burns the house of horrors down, telling Bleichert that the 'obscurity did not deserve to stand' (Ellroy 1987: 299-300). Millard's 'ramrod stiff' composure suggests the final restoration of masculinity, rectitude and justice. Once subject to the humiliations of his own father, the old man on the porch, and Emmett Sprague, Bleichert now has the blessing of the 'padre'.

But Bleichert's absolution and his victory are illusions, and like Wambaugh's Hettinger, he will soon discover that he cannot triumph over larger institutional forces. Bleichert attempts to bring the Spragues to justice, but the only immediate step he can take is to put a police hold on the Sprague's passports. Bleichert

himself acknowledges that this is only 'an impotent gesture' (Ellroy 1987: 300). Against the Sprague's wealth and influence, Bleichert is powerless and again essentially emasculated. Further, Bleichert's sense of impotence portends what will happen once he discovers that it was Ramona Sprague who actually killed Elizabeth Short. The knowledge creates a dilemma for Bleichert. If he arrests Ramona, he is 'shot to shit as a policeman'; he will have to reveal that he suppressed evidence during the earlier Dahlia investigation, and that he had a sexual relationship with Madeleine. But if he lets Ramona go, he is 'finished as a man' (Ellroy 1987: 314).

It will be this question of his manhood that pushes Bleichert to act. He overhears Madeleine telling a lover not only that she killed Lee Blanchard, but that her 'Daddy settled' Bleichert's 'hash'. Her father was a 'big hero in the First World War' and Bleichert 'was a draft dodger' (Ellroy 1987: 316). She then goes on to say that 'draft dodgers' should be 'hanged by the you know what' (Ellroy 1987: 316). Enraged, Bleichert draws his .38, fires through a window, and is ready to kill Madeleine, but the sight of Madeleine's 'nakedness made me empty my gun into the air' (Ellroy 1987: 316). Despite Bleichert's knowledge that Madeleine killed Lee Blanchard, and despite his humiliation at being once again feminized as a 'draft dodger', he is helpless, not just before Madeleine's sexuality, but also before her cool assertion of class and power. She is 'undaunted by the gunshots and flying glass' and speaks to Bleichert with a frosty 'savoir faire' (Ellroy 1987: 316). That 'savoir faire' is a reminder of her wealthy status, a status that proves more powerful than Bleichert's masculine rage. Madeleine essentially renders Bleichert impotent again; he can only fire his .38 harmlessly away from her.

This presages what happens once Bleichert actually books Madeleine for the murder of Blanchard. Once the 'legal machinery' takes over, it will be he who pays the price. Emmett Sprague will be indicted for 'health and safety code violations' connected to his properties, but faces no criminal charges (Ellroy 1987: 319). Madeleine Sprague will plead guilty to murder, but with the assistance of her lawyer, the 'great Jerry Giesler', she is found to be a 'severely delusional violent schizophrenic' and sentenced to 'Atascadero State Hospital' for an 'indeterminate period of treatment' (Ellroy 1987: 320). Madeleine may in fact be mentally ill, but her sentence is a relatively easy one, especially when compared with the fate of Tomas Dos Santos, who appears in the Zoot Suit prologue. During the riots, Blanchard recognizes Dos Santos as 'the subject of an all-points fugitive warrant' (Ellroy 1987: 7). Santos is wanted for manslaughter, having 'snatched a purse

off' an elderly woman who then 'keeled of a heart attack and croaked' (Ellroy 1987: 7). As Blanchard explains, there is no question that Dos Santos will 'face a gas chamber jolt', as that is the fate of 'spics' who commit manslaughter (Ellroy 1987: 7). But with the help of some legal manoeuvring, Madeleine Sprague, the wealthy, white 'brass girl', will avoid the death penalty. This is the realization of Jimmy Lee Smith's estimation of the legal system; 'rich white people' do not need to be troubled by a conscience. Unlike Tomas Dos Santos, they will always have a means of escape.

Finally, Bleichert himself will meet an end much like Hettinger's. After Emmett Sprague leaks details of Bleichert's affair with Madeleine to *Confidential* magazine, Bleichert will be 'fired from the Los Angeles police department on the grounds of moral turpitude and conduct unbecoming an officer' (Ellroy 1987: 319). As in Hettinger's case, the decision will be made by a 'specially convened board of inspectors and deputy chiefs', and again, the police hierarchy acts with little remorse or regard for the individual. Bleichert does not protest the decision, recognizing that the LAPD, Sprague's wealth, the legal machinery, have all won (Ellroy 1987: 319). As Ellroy has said, in most popular crime fictions, 'the hero bucks the system and wins'. But 'we know that doesn't happen,' Ellroy continues, 'the system wins. The system grinds you to dust' (Horsley 1998: 146). Whatever attempts Bleichert has made to assert his manhood, to fight against his own doubts and institutional suspicions, he is virtually impotent when compared to Sprague's influence and the power of the institutional LAPD.

Ellroy's books are frequently critiqued for their violence, and in particular, their violence against women. But in the portrait of Bleichert, it is possible to read *The Black Dahlia* as a critique of that violence, and an examination of the institutional forces that foster and sanction violence, especially violence against the feminine. Several critics have read Ellroy's work as at least subversive. Peter Messent, for example, writes that while *The Black Dahlia* resists 'any straightforward reading' as a critique of the 'social and political status quo', he does finally see the novel as a 'searing indictment of ... American white patriarchy and power' (Messent 2013: 188; 197). Andrew Pepper also argues that Ellroy's 'fiction could ... easily be read as a left-wing critique of right-wing politics' (Pepper 2000: 30). The ending of the novel bears out these claims. It is only outside the power of the patriarchy that Bleichert, Ellroy's traumatized policeman, can escape the cycle of violence. After being fired from the LAPD, Bleichert considers 'turning over' Ramona Sprague, the true Dahlia murderer, now dying of lupus. But he decides against this; he knows that if he reveals his information about Ramona Sprague, 'Russ Millard

might be compelled to admit what he knew and get hurt; Lee's name would get coated with more slime; Martha would *know*' (Ellroy 1987: 319). Martha is another member of the disturbed Sprague family, the 'pudgy-girl woman' and neglected daughter of Emmett and Ramona Sprague (Ellroy 1987: 300). By deciding against turning Ramona Sprague over to the LAPD, Bleichert may exercise a form of Wambaugh's 'terrible compassion'. While Horsley and other scholars have noted that Madeleine and Ramona Sprague 'emerge as victims of a corrupt patriarchy', little critical attention has been devoted to Martha Sprague (Horsley 1998: 148). At the end of Madeleine's trial, Bleichert reports that a 'front-page photo' in the *LA Daily News* features Emmett Sprague weeping, and 'Ramona, hollow-cheeked with disease', being led out of the courtroom by 'Martha, all good strong business in a tailored suit'. The photo, Bleichert continues, is a 'lock on my silence forever' (Ellroy 1987: 353). In maintaining his silence, Bleichert protects Martha from the destruction of her last illusion, the hope that her mother is less of a monster than her father or sister. Martha, the artist, has suffered as the unattractive but sensitive daughter of Emmett Sprague; she tells Bleichert, 'I've been underestimated all my life,' and she sees in Bleichert something of a kindred spirit: 'I always had a feeling that Maddy and Father were underestimating you' (Ellroy 1987: 301). Bleichert brushes aside the compliment, but there is some truth to it. Beside the glamorous, hyper-sexualized Madeleine, Martha is the Sprague family 'never was'. But Bleichert's decision to remain silent offers Martha a chance to overcome this lesser status; in the *Daily News* photo, the 'underestimated' Martha is 'all good strong business'. Protected by Bleichert's silence and his compassion, Martha has achieved some measure of strength, perhaps even escaped her family history to some degree.

Further, as I have written elsewhere, Bleichert does achieve a measure of rebirth and redemption in the epilogue of the novel (Mancall 2014: 36). Bleichert reunites with the pregnant Kay Lake in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the birth of their child, sometime 'around Christmas' promises a rebirth, for Bleichert, Kay and for Elizabeth Short (Ellroy 1987: 323–5). Bleichert and Kay's child will realize the dream of motherhood that Betty never realized. Similarly, near the end of *The Onion Field*, Karl Hettinger will realize an approximation of his dream of becoming a farmer. He and his wife Helen move to a nursery in the High Sierras, and once there, Wambaugh describes Karl and Helen diving naked into an ice cold lake. As the Hettingers splash in the lake, bluegill fish nibble at their legs, and Helen tells Karl that the fish are 'kissing us' (Wambaugh 1973: 489). Of this pastoral moment, Wambaugh writes that Helen and Karl are

'pressed together in the clear water. The sun had touched the High Sierras and there wasn't a flake of snow left on the ground' (Wambaugh 1973: 489). In their naked embrace, in the clear water, Helen and Karl Hettinger are both cleansed, reborn. There is the sunny promise of spring, and the implied restoration of sexuality and love.

For both Karl Hettinger and Bucky Bleichert, redemption can only exist far away from the corrupt institutions of Los Angeles and the violence of the LAPD. Andrew Pepper is wise to remind us that the 'moments of excess' in Ellroy's fiction 'disrupt and overturn' narrative convention and easy resolutions, and further, that it would be naive to suggest that Bleichert (or even Hettinger) can ever truly escape state or institutional forces (Pepper 2000: 28–9). Victories in Ellroy's fiction are always compromised and, partial, at best. In *The Big Nowhere*, the homosexual Danny Upshaw only finds release from the compulsory heterosexuality of the LAPD and LASD by committing suicide. But Mal Considine and Buzz Meeks redeem Upshaw's memory by following and completing his investigation on the Wolverine Killer. Ed Exley, in *L.A. Confidential*, kills the wrong men for the Nite Owl murders in a moment when he seeks to prove his masculinity, but eventually solves the case and confronts his own father's false narrative of heroic police work. In *The Black Dahlia* and *The Onion Field*, both Bleichert and Hettinger may have been exiled forever from the LAPD, and may never be able to restore their public reputation, but in their exile, they both return to a 'no-man's land', a neutral territory, a place that promises a healing respite, if not a full escape, from the debilitating cycle of masculine violence.





## Part Two

# Ellroy and Noir



## ‘Capable of Anything’: Dudley Smith’s Role in Ellroy’s LA Quartets

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Arrow published the last three volumes of James Ellroy’s LA Quartet, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz*, as ‘The Dudley Smith Trio’, revealing the dominance of the character of Smith over the series and within each individual narrative, with the exception of *The Black Dahlia*. Smith, I will argue, deserves this prominence, not the least because Ellroy’s police protagonists of the Quartet are very different men: Ellroy’s officers are tragic figures who are eventually destroyed or consumed by their ambition or their obsessions, whereas Smith’s internal drive and staying power come from a different source and are not hampered by feelings of guilt and regret which evoke, for Ellroy’s heroes, the reader’s sympathy.

It is possible to empathize with the failing figures of Ellroy’s world, but within its social web, success, despite its origins, has society’s admiration. Smith’s longevity as a policeman, his survival where others fail, gives him an air of legitimacy despite his evil deeds. Outwardly, he is a pillar of society: an officer with a successful career in the LAPD and a charming and appropriately religious husband and father. Smith carries a reputation as a loving father and righteous law enforcer whose actions are ‘in the name of justice and the church’ (Ellroy 1982: 130). But he is also an unflinchingly evil presence, with an insatiable thirst for money and power. Smith’s power is displayed in absolute terms in both sides of his character. Just as Smith’s convincing strength evokes heroic devotion in the LAPD, his dealings as a criminal inspire awe. He cuts deals with mobsters and betrays long-standing friends and business partners, including his loyal colleague Mike Breuning, when it becomes advantageous to him. By the end of the LA Quartet, he is positioning himself to become both the most powerful policeman on the force and the top organized crime figure

in LA, although his career is brought to an abrupt halt before this final ambition can be realized.

Smith's dual heights of criminal and career achievement are not reached by Ellroy's compromised heroes. Indeed, Smith is thrown into relief through other, also very flawed, characters. He serves as a foil to his opponents, and policemen Ed Exley, Dave Klein and Fred Underhill, to name just a few, who sense that ridding the world of Smith is their chance of limited redemption. Even Dave Klein and Ed Exley, who neutralize Smith, do not gain his crown in either domain. His comeuppance when it finally arrives, where he is incapacitated and committed to a sanatorium, hides his criminal genius from society while protecting his reputation as a policeman in a way that seems undeserving. Dudley Smith's shadow can be felt in many of Ellroy's novels as his influence extends beyond the LA Quartet.

Referring to the protagonists in the Dudley Smith trilogy, Jon Clay identifies the otherness Smith has in comparison to leading characters whose inner corruption should make them closer to him:

Their flaws include obsessive sex addiction, drug and alcohol addictions, cowardice, and closeted skeletons including murder and general corruption. They are also, perhaps more significantly, casually racist, misogynist, and homophobic; and these are just the protagonists, the 'white hats'. Many of the secondary characters (although it seems inaccurate to refer to Smith as a secondary character) are, on the whole, far worse. (Clay 2010: 90)

Smith is nearer to an idea of evil than a fully fleshed out character: it is by staying on the periphery that Smith maintains this mythological and diabolical status as if the demands of carrying the narrative would weaken his power. Although the Quartet has many narrators, the voice never shifts to Smith. In *Perfidia*, by contrast, he is one of the focalizers, but it still seems that his strength is not yet established, as the glimpses Ellroy offers of the younger Smith will ultimately lead to revelations about the character in the first Quartet. How Smith established his power base has become one of Ellroy's main preoccupations, but although the reader already knows the ultimate fate of the character, *Perfidia* has still delivered some surprises such as Smith's parentage of Elizabeth Short, his affair with Bette Davis and the beginning of his role in the intelligence services during the Second World War.

In Richard Price's *The Whites* (2015), 'white' is not an issue of race but 'alludes to the cases that haunt detectives through careers and post-careers. The white

whales. The ones that got away' (Connelly 2015). In the film version of *L. A. Confidential*, Ed Exley suggests Smith's Moby Dick-like nature when Smith asks, after the climactic shootout at the Victory Motel, who Rollo Tomasi is (the mythical name Exley has given to his father's unknown murderer). Exley replies, 'You are. You're the guy who gets away with it. Jack knew it and so do I' (Hanson; Helgeland 1997: 220). It is appropriate that Smith should be 'white' as he is a criminal who is without a stain on his record, socially unsullied. His status is self-perpetuating, as he is too well connected to be brought to justice. 'White' is also significant as the inherent racism in the LAPD allows the bigoted Smith to act with impunity as long as his crimes do not alter the white power structure on which its power depends. It is notable how the ending to the film adaptation of *L.A. Confidential* differs sharply from the coda of the novel where Ed Exley's father is not mentioned in backstory as a murdered character. In the novel *L.A. Confidential*, Preston Exley is a major character who ultimately dies by his own hand. The choice of screenwriters Curtis Hanson and Brian Helgeland to use Preston Exley as an unseen character who could shed light on Smith's evil, gives power to his tale, making him a mythological presence akin to Smith. Even though Smith did not murder Exley's father, he is still symbolically responsible for all of the crimes in Ellroy's fictional world.

The mystery of Smith's backstory and full breadth of his crimes is further bolstered by Ellroy's overarching narrative. Despite Smith first appearing in *Clandestine* (1982), which is set in 1950, he is notably absent from the first Quartet novel *The Black Dahlia* (1987), which begins in 1947 and covers events in the LAPD during which it is difficult to imagine Smith not being involved. While not part of the LA Quartet, *Clandestine* features some characters, including Smith, who reappear in Ellroy's later work. According to William Freiburger, 'By rights, *Clandestine* ought to be included with the later novels to make up an LA Quintet; some of the characters who appear in the Quartet series, such as the policemen/thugs Dudley Smith and Dick Carlisle, make their first appearances in this novel' (Freiburger 1996: 95). Whether or not *Clandestine* should be classified as a part of the Quartet, Quintet or as a stand-alone novel, Smith remains a major, albeit ambiguous, presence in the narrative. *Clandestine*'s policeman protagonist Frank Underhill has an awkward encounter with Smith when they are planning the interrogation of the murder-suspect Eddie Engels – an interrogation, which under Smith's supervision, soon descends into torture. Underhill's attitude towards Smith's amorality is ambivalent, and he is certainly fascinated by him: 'He squeezed my hand until I rewarded him with a wince,

then he winked and left me to contemplate madness and salvation' (Ellroy 1982: 126). Smith evokes contrasting emotions in Underhill, 'madness' and 'salvation' in a nod to Underhill's future realization of these opposing traits, but his encounters with Smith will only bring about the former. While it would be going too far to say that the scene is dripping in homoeroticism, the squeeze, wink and Underhill's wince reveal that Smith is certainly flirtatious with both men and women. Ultimately, Smith is turned on by the use and abuse of power.

Underhill knows that Smith is extremely brutal and clever in equal measure. Breuning, one of Smith's underlings, tells Underhill that many people consider Smith crazy, but he is in fact 'nuts like a fox', and Underhill agrees (Ellroy 1982: 107). In a comment more significant to the context of the Quartet, Breuning remarks, 'Dudley's still pissed off about the Dahlia' (Ellroy 1982: 107). When Underhill asks Smith about his involvement with the Dahlia case, the veteran detective tells the story of how he tried to find out who killed Elizabeth Short, namely by having the suspects re-enact the grisly murder using a dead female body in lieu of her, and that he 'made them fear me more than Satan himself' (Ellroy 1982: 124). The paternal instincts Smith displays here are elaborated further in *Perfidia* where Short is revealed to be his illegitimate daughter. And, true to his character, this paternalism is shaded with irony in that Smith invokes the devil in his genuine grief and desire for justice. Smith has a moral side which is different from his moral facade, because if justice has to be brutally enacted (not to mention perversely staged), then he is the man to do it.

The reader familiar with Ellroy's novels before the publication of *Perfidia* would doubt the veracity of Smith's account since in the novel *The Black Dahlia*, published five years after *Clandestine*, Smith is not present when four suspects are forced by policeman Fritz Vogel, with Bucky Bleichert present, to desecrate a female corpse in order to find out which of the suspects is the murderer. As with *Clandestine*, the post-mortem re-enactment fails to solve the case. Ellroy may have written himself into error by contradicting events in *Clandestine* through a later novel as, early in his writing career, he did not expect to create such a complex and expansive chronology in his fictional history of Los Angeles. It is also plausible, given Smith's methods, that he conducted his own, parallel investigation and *Perfidia* is the beginning of Ellroy's efforts to feature Smith more prominently in the Dahlia narrative.

Underhill tries hard to appear cool while being 'stunned. Speechless' by Smith's involvement in the Dahlia case (Ellroy 1982: 125). Again, he has a feeling of 'madness and wonder', a combination of two very different traits

that so perfectly characterizes Smith (Ellroy 1982: 104). Underhill gives a good assessment of Smith:

I stared at Dudley's florid, demonic face. He stared back.

'And, lad?' he said, mimicking my tone.

'And what, Dudley?' I managed to get out, my voice steady.

'And do you think Dudley's a lunatic, lad?'

'No, I think you're a master actor.'

'Ha-ha-ha! Well said. Is "actor" a euphemism for "madman," lad?'

'No, I just think sometimes you're not sure what role you're playing.'

Tiny brown predator eyes bored into me. 'Lad, all my roles are in the name of justice and all my roles are me. Don't you forget that.' (Ellroy 1982: 126)

Underhill has defined exactly what justice is to Dudley Smith, namely inhabiting roles for his own ends rather than for an inflexible and sacred law to be adhered to, but crucially Smith has absolute belief in every role he performs, 'don't you forget that.' Since he sees Smith as a 'master actor', he may also have doubts about his role in the investigation and, quite justified it turns out, the interrogation of Eddie Engels. 'Engel' is German for 'angel', which might be the direct opposite of what 'demonic face' Smith is, despite his outward lawman role, but then in biblical terms Satan is a fallen angel and Smith's moral role in events is always changing, capable of great evil but also of evoking sympathy through his charm and capacity to survive. In Smith's worldview it makes more sense to be brutalizing Engels than being the victim himself. Smith may act the 'lunatic' to hide another agenda, as he admits that 'actor' is a euphemism for 'madman', and vice versa. His obsession with justice is very likely only an act, but as acting comes so naturally to him it is by no means less sincere than any of his other emotions as 'all my roles are me'.

Smith plays the merry Irishman persona to perfection. He likes to perform old folk songs in a strong Irish accent which has not been diluted by years of living in the United States. His name hints at this fraudulent role. While Smith is a common surname in Anglo-Irish culture, Dudley or Dud, as he likes to abbreviate it, suggests fraud or counterfeit. Taken as a whole, his name suggests a counterfeit everyman, able to maliciously adapt to every situation and all of his roles.

At a later point, before the unofficial arrest of Engels, Underhill observes Dudley again: 'His tiny brown eyes were glazed over with something that went far beyond acting. This was the real Dudley Smith' (Ellroy 1982: 139). It is revealing

that he cannot describe this 'something' in more detail. After identifying the 'real Dudley Smith' Underhill never elaborates on who this is, as though behind his great charm and many roles there is really little to Dudley Smith.

Clay argues that Smith is 'rational and always in control' (Clay 2010: 98). But when Smith wants a greater role in the Engels case and it is denied to him, he becomes furious with Underhill in one of the few instances when he loses control. In this situation, though, Smith 'had gone beyond red to a trembling purple. His big hands twitched at his sides. His eyes were tiny pinpoints of hatred. Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth, but he didn't utter a sound' and he threatens Underhill and calls him 'Judas' (Ellroy 1982: 167). Underhill makes fun of Smith, imitating him, and it is difficult not to laugh at a man who compares his betrayal to that which led Christ to the cross. But Smith still wins their battle of wills. He punishes Underhill by shifting the blame to him when Eddie Engels commits suicide in custody, and it becomes apparent Engels was innocent of the accusations levied at him. Smith conspires to have Underhill fired by stealing Engel's diary which implicates Underhill. Although Underhill learns from Breuning that it was Smith who did all this to him, he does not attempt revenge or to obtain justice – everyone agrees, throughout the novels, that it cannot be done, and is tantamount to suicide. Indeed, Underhill's immediate response is to fall into a deep depression knowing the futility of his situation. Thus, Smith's relatively brief appearance in *Clandestine* is a warning to the reader as to what he is capable of. By Smith's second appearance in Ellroy's fictional universe in *The Big Nowhere*, a fuller picture is given of the extent of the character's malevolent power.

LAPD lieutenant Mal Considine gains a vivid impression of Dudley upon first meeting him in *The Big Nowhere*, knowing him previously only by reputation:

Mal shook the man's hand, recognizing his name, his style, his often imitated tenor brogue. Lieutenant Dudley Smith, LAPD Homicide. Tall, beefside broad and red-faced; Dublin-born, LA raised, Jesuit college trained. Priority case hatchet man for every LA chief of police dating back to Strongarm Dick Steckel. Killed seven men in the line of duty, wore custom-made club-figured ties: 7's, handcuff ratchets and LAPD shields stitched in concentric circles. Rumored to carry an Army .45 loaded with garlic-coated dumdums and a spring-loaded toad stabber. (Ellroy 1988: 13)

The many different and disparate fragments of Smith's life are alluded to here. Over the course of the novel, Smith is revealed to be responsible for the shooting



of a Mexican man named José Díaz at the Sleepy Lagoon reservoir. Díaz's crime was to date Smith's niece, and in Ellroy's version of events, the murder is pinned on several Latino youths. The events that result from Smith's murderous rage and the framing of innocent suspects include the formation of the activist Sleepy Lagoon Defence Committee and the Zoot Suit riots. Rumour and reputation not only assign Smith the part of a vigilante and enforcer, they also strongly suggest that, through the unintended consequences of his actions, Smith has a role in shaping the history of LA in the Quartet novels.

Smith's power is not diminished by the burden of conscience. This differentiates Smith from the protagonists who become obsessed with taking him down. One of these is Turner 'Buzz' Meeks. Meeks is heavily embroiled in the criminal underworld, but he becomes deeply affected by the death of Sheriff Danny Upshaw. Upshaw was driven to suicide by Dudley Smith after being framed for a murder and threatened to have his homosexuality exposed. Meeks feels remorse as he actually committed a murder Upshaw was accused of. His guilt-laden admiration for Upshaw (and his love for a woman, a frequent confluence in Ellroy's works) has brought about a change in him. This ability to recognize a line, as generously as it may be drawn, distinguishes him from Smith and, in the universe of these books, makes him unusually sympathetic. He has seen enough though, to realize that to bring Smith to justice, at least officially, is impossible: 'The powers that be would never let Dudley Smith stand trial for anything – his rank, juice and reputation were diplomatic immunity' (Ellroy 1988: 419). Meeks enacts justice by heisting a drug summit attended by high-level Mob figures Jack Dragna and Mickey Cohen which Smith is presiding over, offering protection to the gangsters for a cut of the proceeds. Like Upshaw and Mal Considine before him, Meeks will not survive this betrayal and humiliation of Dudley Smith. His fate is revealed in the prologue of *L. A. Confidential*:

Dudley Smith stepped through flames, dressed in a fire department greatcoat. Meeks saw his suitcase – ninety four grand, dope – over by the mattress. 'Dud, you came prepared'

'Like the Boy Scouts, lad. And have you a valediction?'

Suicide: heisting a deal Dudley S. watchdogged. Meeks raised his guns; Smith shot first. Meeks died – thinking the El Serrano looked just like the Alamo. (Ellroy 1990: 6)

As usual, Smith is prepared, protected and in complete control, which is remarkable as Meeks has killed many of Smith's men in the shootout leading

up to this point. The reference to the Alamo implies how the scene steps outside the noir genre for a moment as the carnage and dead bodies are more reminiscent of a Western film and Meeks of the doomed Alamo defenders fighting an unwinnable battle. The approach through fire, however, is more suggestive of supernatural horror as, in contrast to Meeks who is briefly lit in patriotic glory, Smith's appearance has satanic overtones. Clay writes, 'The sense of the supernatural here (Smith is impervious to fire) is immediately shut down through the detail of the fire department greatcoat, but by then it already exists' (Clay 2010: 94). Ellroy does not overstate references to other genres, especially ones that are, to his tastes, quite fanciful. At the same time, what Clay considers most 'interesting is the fact that [Dudley's] villainy is presented as the logical extreme of the dominant attitudes and dogmas of the society in which he exists. He is Man, and the novels' protagonists are all on a continuum with him. There are no "good guys" in these novels' (Clay 2010: 94). Nevertheless, Meeks, Klein and Exley find themselves engaged in a deadly game with Smith, and want to see him punished as a redemption for their own sins.

In *L.A. Confidential*, Dudley Smith ultimately eludes justice again, but the novel ends with Ed Exley gaining enough power in the LAPD to begin plotting a new way of bringing Smith down: 'I swear to you I'll get Dudley. I swear to you I'll do it,' Exley promises the gravely wounded Bud White (Ellroy 1990: 480). All three main protagonists of *L.A. Confidential*, Bud White, Jack Vincennes and Ed Exley, start working together when their cases, which are all connected, demand it. Collectively, they believe they can bring down Smith. While Ed Exley has been decorated for heroic acts from his wartime service, which he actually staged to cover up his cowardice under fire, Bud White uses violence instead of genuine detective work in order to solve cases, and Jack Vincennes has killed innocent bystanders while abusing alcohol and drugs. Pursuing the case means danger to their careers, since Smith has information on everyone: he knows everything about Vincennes' past, for example, and, since he likes to have protégés, he also restored Bud White to the force after the LAPD suspended him due to his role in the Bloody Christmas scandal.

Bud White is apprehensive of the extent of Smith's power, his charm and the danger he exudes. He knows that he is indebted to him for his police career and what that entails:

But when Dudley Smith brought you along you belonged to him – and he was so much smarter than everyone else that you were never sure what he wanted from

you or how he was using you – shit got lost in all his fancy language. It didn't quite rankle, but you felt it; it scared you to see how Mike Breuning and Dick Carlisle gave the man their souls. Dudley could bend you, shape you, twist you, turn you, point you – and never make you feel like some dumb lump of clay. But he always let you know one thing: he knew you better than you knew yourself. (Ellroy 1990: 152)

Despite White's many flaws, such as his propensity for physical violence, his determination to take on Smith makes him morally superior to other characters who have surrendered to corruption in Ellroy's world. White does not possess Smith's cunning or ability to bend, shape, twist, turn or point other men to his will. If Smith is charismatic and smart enough to never make White feel like a 'dumb lump of clay' it is because he knows that White secretly fears that he is just that and is not cut out for detective work. White's willingness to throw away his life and career, however, for his belief in justice, is a quality that Ed Exley grows to admire, despite tensions between the two men as Exley testifies against White's best friend in the department, Dick Stensland, over his involvement in Bloody Christmas, and Stensland is later executed for murder. Like White, however, Exley is also driven, sometimes to the point of madness, by his hatred of Smith's crimes and seeming invulnerability: 'Ed reeled in a line so he wouldn't scream DUDLEY ... DUDLEY past screaming – Ed held it down' (Ellroy 1990: 423).

Vincennes is killed trying to prevent a mass escape of prisoners from a convict train, and White sustains serious injuries in the same shootout and has to leave the LAPD. Exley relents to the advice of his superiors when he is told to leave Smith alone for the moment in spite of his absolute hatred and desire to rid the world of him:

Ed wanted to kill Dudley outright.

Gallaudet said, kill yourself instead, that's what you'd be doing.

They decided to wait it out, do it right. (Ellroy 1990: 463)

Exley is not willing to give his life, but he covets power and needs it in order to destroy Smith. His obsession with Smith continues into the next novel, *White Jazz*, and redeems him, in spite of his extra-legal methods and his unwillingness to throw everything away for this cause, in contrast to some of his colleagues. But it is precisely this calculated decision to shore up power and put aside emotion that makes him more like Smith, and also more likely to succeed.

Thus, Exley continues what he had begun with White and Vincennes and enlists corrupt policeman Dave Klein, who is almost as ruthless a criminal as Smith, to help him. Even this deeply flawed man, who is weighed down by murder and incest on his conscience, is willing to risk all he has to bring down Dudley Smith after Smith frames him for murder and Klein learns the extent of his criminal ties, sexual perversion, latent racism and inherent sadism. When asked by Exley what he thinks of Smith, Klein answers:

‘He’s brilliant and obsessed with order. He is cruel. It’s occurred to me a few times that he’s capable of anything.’

‘Beyond your wildest imaginings.’ (Ellroy 1992: 278)

It is Smith’s obsession with order and power that puts him at odds with the protagonists fighting him, since they become obsessed with some form of meaning and justice in their crusade against him, a crucial difference in the Quartet’s moral universe. Whatever they have done, Smith has done worse, but he thrives. He does not care for justice in its truest sense, but the power his position and the word ‘justice’ give him. Exley, although he still has his career, does not have much of a life outside it as evidenced in the closing line of *L. A. Confidential*: ‘Gold stars. Alone with his dead’ (Ellroy 1990: 480). When visiting Exley’s house, Klein notices a ‘showroom living room, catalog perfect’, indicating that Exley has not made it his own, spending little time there, preferring just to accumulate the possessions favoured by the upper middle class which does little to relieve his loneliness (Ellroy 1992: 278). Yet Exley’s tidy domesticity also smacks of Dudley’s order, albeit on a personal level. Exley neglects his private life because everything he does is driven by and directed at Smith. Lee Horsley argues that this rivalry creates parallels between the two men, ‘[Smith is] ultimately brought down by Exley, he is also a dark double whom Exley increasingly comes to resemble’ (Horsley 1998: 154). Dave Klein tells Exley, ‘I *know* it must get you to look in the mirror and see Dudley’ (Ellroy 1992: 280). While Klein points out the similarities, the differences between them are crucial for Exley. He needs Smith as a much worse antagonist to justify his own questionable actions. As Lee Spinks writes of *L. A. Confidential*, the ‘law, in the hands of Dudley Smith or Preston Exley, has become a form of legalized crime’ (Spinks 2008: 137). Exley, and many of the other protagonists in Ellroy’s novels, desperately need to make this distinction between Smith’s law and the written law, if only for themselves, with them on one side and Smith on the other. This shows Dudley’s immense power, even if ultimately it leads to his downfall, by

triggering the protagonists' outrage that leads to their willingness to give all. Dudley's power shows in the fact that he forces Exley to become like him in many ways in order to fight him.

For Klein, too, bringing down Dudley becomes an obsession. He knows too much about him; for instance, he learns that 'Post World War II: Major Dudley Smith, OSS, sells black-market penicillin to escaped Nazis ... Dudley returns to L.A. late in '45 ... Abe Voldrich calls in Dudley Smith ... Joan Herrick delivers her baby; Dudley strangles it three days old' (Ellroy 192: 362). These actions alone would establish him as the ultimate evil. As Peter Wolfe writes:

No outsider could guess the calculation and ambition, the cruelty and love of power, lurking behind Dudley's Irish bonhomie. Assigned to investigate the 22 June 1937 shotgun deaths, he had traced the brew that blinded the shooter to Kafesjian and Herrick. But rather than booking them, he agreed to squelch the investigation in exchange for a cut of the take. (Wolfe 2005: 186)

As Wolfe points out here, the extent of Smith's crimes is staggering as his evil is matched only by his ambition. All Klein can do, however, is to enlist the deranged burglar, voyeur and murderer Wylie Bullock to help him. Bullock's parents were shot dead by the man blinded by the bootleg alcohol. After learning of Smith's role in quashing the investigation, he becomes obsessed with taking revenge on the man who cost him everything, while also developing a psychopathic hatred of negative fathers leading to his murder of the Herrick family. Smith's amorality spreads misery far beyond the confines of his intended victims. Bullock, though, is quite literally mad enough to physically attack Smith even if he pays for his revenge with his life. Smith survives Bullock's attack, but is injured so severely that he has to spend the rest of his life in a sanatorium. Most of the time he is not lucid, indicating Smith may not even remember his track record of horrific crimes. His reputation stays intact, however, since Exley will not risk his career with a department scandal, and he even arranges a special pension to cover Smith's medical costs. Dudley Smith remains a legend in the LAPD, but the former criminal mastermind loses everything through the complete breakdown of his mental powers. Wolfe writes, 'Dudley suffers the condign punishment doled out to some of Dante's sinners in the *Inferno*: the former evil genius must expiate his crimes by living as an imbecile. In another irony, the person who dimmed the wits of this evil genius was the mentally backward Wylie Bullock' (Wolfe 2005: 193). Most ironical of all though is how his face after the attack resembles that of the murdered Black Dahlia Elizabeth Short, whose biological

father he is revealed to be in *Perfidia*, 'the blade ripped Dudley's mouth ear to ear' (Ellroy 1992: 334).

Despite paying lip service to justice and revenge, when Smith was at the peak of his powers, he played the system to his individual benefit, abusing it and hiding in it. He took advantage of the LAPD's inherent racism to promote his drug dealing to poorer sections of Los Angeles that are heavily populated with African-Americans, a racist containment policy. He is a fake version of what is popularly identified as a good policeman, a defender, a priest and a father all wrapped up in one persona; as Horsley writes:

[Smith] in a sinister sense, the spiritual father of the LAPD (everyone on the force is 'Lad' to him, and he exercises a pervasive influence throughout the L. A. Quartet). Although he makes only brief appearances, Smith is a dominating presence, the driving force behind much police corruption. He pursues objectives which are a more malevolent version of the ambitions of Preston and Edmund Exley, competing with Exley, for example, for the position of chief of detectives, but at the same time aiming to take control of the L. A. rackets. ... Smith is the 'unnamed bad guy' behind many of the crimes committed. (Horsley 1998: 154)

Despite the feelings of parental intimacy between Smith and his 'lads', which, for example, cloud Bud White's response to Smith once he realizes the extent of his evil, Smith is impossible to know or predict. His power over others is exerted linguistically and symbolically, as when he offers Buzz Meeks a priestly valediction, and his knowing exploitation of the police ideal leaves men awestruck. Smith not only draws on police symbols, he also reflects the worst possible version of the LAPD as well as the city of Los Angeles. But just as his power within the department threatens its legitimacy, his unseen efforts stir in his police audience, his surviving victims, nobler feelings: a warped sense of purpose, an obsession, an aim or the illusion of one in destroying him. Smith is 'the case', just as much as he is the department he works for. He is the most important of all the cases Ellroy's protagonists have ever worked on. Unlike them, Smith lacks moral self-awareness or even a recognition of right and wrong. As Clay writes, 'Smith, however, is not only beyond redemption but also would not recognize himself as in need of redemption' (Clay 2010: 93).

Taking down the glorified, white-washed Smith offers a redemption for the protagonists, the department and even the city that has protected him. The detective skills required to catch the master criminal against the codified social and moral backdrop allow otherwise selfish and tainted characters to show courage and sacrifice alongside their obsession. To be good detectives gives

direction, as Josh Cohen puts it, for their 'violently fractured subjectivities' in the disorienting, 'destabilizing' city:

The *L.A. Quartet*, spanning some twenty-three years in the life of the city, intricately maps its post-war boom, playing out gothic dramas of criminal excess within the context of the reshaping of its built landscape by the convergent forces of land development and mass cultural spectacle. The tortuously labyrinthine plots of the novels reveal these phenomena to be underpinned by a confluence of explosive political and economic interests that functions as a violent inversion of the seamless semiotic façade Los Angeles projects outward, via the media. The destabilizing experience of this merciless logic of creative destruction is expressed principally in the crisis-ridden masculinity of the *Quartet's* protagonists. (Cohen 1996: 1–2)

Dudley Smith is not affected by this 'crisis-ridden masculinity'; he knows how to play the system to further his own agenda. For the protagonists, however, the absolute evil they see personified in Smith is arguably the only absolute in their lives.

That Ellroy revisits Smith in *Perfidia*, a prequel to the original *Quartet* which shows Smith nine years before he first appeared in *Clandestine*, is both a testament to Smith's power and the flexibility of Ellroy's narrative world, which had hitherto precluded Smith from *The Black Dahlia* novel, and largely the Dahlia investigation by extension. In *Perfidia*, Smith is one of the lead protagonists for the first time, but the reader learns few new details about the character. He is still largely characterized through the eyes of others, for instance Kay Lake, as will be discussed in more detail later, and through his actions. The link between his past and present is tenuous. Smith's role in the rebellion against British forces in the Irish War of Independence is alluded to (Ellroy 2014: 45). This indicates a sense of loyalty to an ideal bigger than himself; however, once in America, his only loyalty is to money and authoritarian order and, greater still, the pursuit of power. Clay's observations on Smith's use of language highlight the character's assumption and application of power. The 'controlled formality of Smith's speech,' especially in contrast to some of the protagonists, marks Dudley as 'rational and always in control' (Clay 2010: 98). Smith's language, used either to charm or terrify, always reflects this power. Clay points out the contradiction between Dudley's nationality and the nature of his speech:

Smith's Irish brogue and habitual use of 'lad' place him as a character hailing from a minor people, the Irish, who have spent centuries under the dominance of a major power: Even he is not entirely the pure Man he would appear or desire

to be. It could be argued, in fact, that Smith's excessively latinate, formal, and apparently cultured speech is, precisely, excessive and thus has become a parody of majoritarian speech patterns. (Clay 2010: 98)

Clay's argument that Smith's speech is a parody indicates how the character uses language as a shield which hides any clue or knowledge that could be gained about him and potentially expose weakness. But his decision to maintain the informal greetings and slang of an oppressed group also put the listener at ease. Smith clings to this humble beginning and does not set himself up as a source of power, but it is a mirage as he would never allow himself to be weaker than anyone he was in business with.

Despite his racist declarations and his use of race when it suits his ends, Smith goes into business with anyone who looks promising, no matter their background or affiliation. One of his business partners in *Perfidia*, Ace Kwan, is Chinese, and Smith puts aside his trademark racism as the war, by necessity, has made the two countries allies:

'It is a great day, Dudster. The Chinese man and the U.S. Caucasian will align to slay the Jap beast.'

Dudley bowed. 'Yes, but we must not lose perspective on our German *Kameraden*. They remain our first line of defense against the Reds and the Jews.' (Ellroy 2014: 107)

Thus, Dudley seems to have a 'hierarchy' to his bigotry and obsession with power. However, he undermines this in practice as he sleeps with Claire 'the Red Queen' DeHaven, a communist, and he also works for the Jewish-American Mob bosses Benjamin Siegel and Mickey Cohen.

Dudley profits from Ace: his meetings are being catered by Ace's restaurant, and Dudley likes to visit and indulge an opium habit on the side. He, in turn, helps Ace kill his enemies from a rival gang after they murdered Ace's niece, a crime which portends his later involvement in the Sleepy Lagoon case and suggests just a hint of an altruistic side to Smith. Again, he works with criminals who should be major targets of law enforcement, and protects them if he sees a business opportunity. He brokers drug deals, since lives, especially those of minorities, do not mean much to him and narcotics is where the major profits are. He kills for money to finance his 'projects' and employs criminals to funnel the profits to him. Smith always seems unfazed by his actions, wooing film star Bette Davis while juggling several criminal deals, but this does eventually lead to a display of weakness and almost his downfall.



Smith's affair with Davis reflects his 'many lives'. Marriage and fatherhood may be part of his carefully cultivated persona; after all, he hardly sees his family, and his wife is barely mentioned in the novels. Thus, while he tells Underhill in *Clandestine* that 'a family is something to cherish, lad', he does so at a comfortable distance from the responsibility that comes with it (Ellroy 1982: 119–20). He prefers to spend time on his extra-marital affair with Bette Davis and with his illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth Short, who is about to achieve her own form of dubious fame due to her grisly murder. Going out with the two women is one of the high points of Dudley's life, even though it is revealed that it is Davis who holds all the power in the relationship as she can subtly manipulate him as the best lovers do and Smith conforms to many of the natural traits of romantic relationships in this regard. Smith accepts the intelligence and self-respect of Davis, 'She upbraided him last night. He faltered. She made herself soft and tried to rescind the rebuke. She saw weakness in him' (Ellroy 2014: 435). Even though the relationship is adulterous and ultimately doomed, he is granting Davis a status he would never allow with a man and moves closer to Ellroy's lead protagonists who are 'bad men in love with strong women' (Rich 2008: 185).

His secret life revealed in *Perfidia* is important and powerful; Davis was among the most desired women at the time, and since patriotic fervour has turned her against the Japanese, Smith shoots a random Japanese victim just to impress her. His illegitimate daughter is strikingly beautiful, and, in her own way, as glamorous as Davis with aspirations of becoming a movie star. Smith uncharacteristically loves her and gets very emotional in her presence: 'Beth described Will Rogers Park. Dudley welled up. His fair child and fifty-foot palm trees. Such inexplicable love' (Ellroy 2014: 579). He claims that she resembles him, both in looks and personality, 'Her hair had gone to his shade' (Ellroy 2014: 578). This powerful love for his illegitimate daughter almost creates an illegitimacy with the daughters from his marriage: 'He loved Beth more than his full-fledged daughters. She possessed the skewed will that they lacked. She affirmed his bent for the illicit. She did not plague him with the mundane' (Ellroy 2014: 581). There are hints that this love might involve sexual attraction as well, as Ellroy blurs the distinction between Bette and Beth in Smith's mind. When Bette turns away from him, avoiding his hand, he looks at his daughter and mourns the fact that she is too far away for him to 'touch her or tell her sweet things' (Ellroy 2014: 583).

Although Smith's sexual preferences might seem questionable, he is not as liberal towards others, and uses his extensive knowledge of peoples' dirty secrets

to blackmail them into submission. He is feared and watched by his bosses, on whom he has spent years collecting incriminating material to blackmail them with if needed: 'He had grand dirt' on William H. Parker (Ellroy 2014: 40). LAPD chief Clemence 'Call me Jack' Horrall gives the command of an important case to Parker in the hope it might curtail Smith's powers:

*I want his job. Dudley and I tend to clash. He probably wants a leash on Dud. He's more afraid of him than of me.*

Call-me-Jack opened his eyes. 'You oversee the job, Bill' (Ellroy 2014: 102)

Thus, the LAPD makes tentative attempts to limit Smith's influence, but it is still at his mercy. He blackmails the district attorney into convicting the suspect he presents to him. However, unlike Ellroy's earlier novels, it is not a policeman but Kay Lake, who also can see the pure evil in Smith, who becomes as obsessed with him as men are traditionally obsessed with femme fatales in hard-boiled fiction, but in this case it is an obsessive hate and, unlike Bette Davis, she will not try to level or humanize him. Kay sees Smith's influence on figures in the LAPD such as Lee Blanchard, and how murder has become a routine method of business:

Dudley Smith and his confluence of criminal cases, his collusive relationship with Ace Kwan, his land grabs and war-profiteering schemes, up to and including the distribution of 'Anti-Axis' pornography ... Dudley Smith, so given to casually expeditious murder. He operated at an astoundingly complex level of deception. He adhered to family loyalty ... Those killings derived from his fatherly ethos and desire to avenge a ravaged young woman. (Ellroy 2014: 545)

Kay's narrative voice suggests a tinge of admiration beneath the contempt which attests to Smith's complexity and his charismatic sway on people, even his opponents. Instead of meting out justice, Smith will use his deductive abilities to find ways to worm his way into all kinds of crimes. After uncovering the motive behind the Watanabe family murder, Smith uses it to his advantage, forcing Preston Exley and Pierce Patchett to cut him into their 'land grab' deals.

Smith's 'confluence of criminal cases' brings him an ever-widening circle of powerful contacts such as Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy's business dealings with Smith stretch back to Prohibition which first lured Smith from Ireland to the United States. Kennedy gets Smith into the LAPD after hiring him to hurt a rival Jewish banker in Boston whom Smith ultimately kills after the beating, as it did with Engels, gets out of hand (Ellroy 2014: 45). When his son John F. Kennedy

visits Los Angeles, Smith chaperones him and supplies female company. The increased focus on Smith's sexual magnetism is exemplified by the draw he has on the homosexual police chemist Hideo Ashida. Ashida sums up these qualities of Smith's, 'No man should be so deadly. No man should be so handsome. No man should be so adroit and debonair' (Ellroy 2014: 605). Smith's dangerous charm gets him what he wants, even convincing suspects into confessing their crimes: 'His soft brogue seduced suspects. The gas chamber ensued' (Ellroy 2014: 69). This trait harks back to Smith's first appearance in *Clandestine* when the interrogation of Engels is the genesis for Underhill's hatred of Smith, and it also brings about the obsession in other Quartet characters to stop and destroy him. Some cannot harm him because they too would be implicated. He picks protégés who have nothing to lose and whom he then corrupts so that they have no choice but to stay with him. In *Perfidia*, it is Lee Blanchard, whom he uses to kill a witness as a favour to a leading Mafia boss. The murder leaves Blanchard and the boss indebted to Smith. Blanchard, however, cannot handle the guilt and falls apart; Smith remains unaffected. Others are too ambitious to risk their careers, such as William H. Parker in *Perfidia* and Ed Exley in *L. A. Confidential* to confront Smith directly. The more dangerous characters are also the most obsessed ones who are willing to risk it all, such as Dave Klein and the lunatic Wylie Bullock, but even for them there is no legal way to bring him down, and Smith knows that. Death or serious bodily harm is the only possibility, and the latter will stop Smith for good in *White Jazz*. It is telling that he does not die; the corruption and LAPD spirit that he symbolizes are thus still alive, even if only in the background. In *Perfidia*, Kay's attempt to beat Smith to death wounds him severely. The wounds he suffers both tie him to the ones inflicted on Elizabeth Short and prefigure the ones he suffers through the beating in *White Jazz* that incapacitates him. Here too, he is cut, but is still able to protect his face, 'A knife came down. This thing stabbed him. This thing raked his arms and his neck. He hid his face. This thing stabbed him. He had no voice. This thing cut him – his back, his legs, his feet' (Ellroy 1992: 682). Smith lives, but never fully recovers. He is a survivor, mythical in his indestructibility, as if protected by the God he claims so fervently to believe in. But rather than being saved by grace, Smith's longevity is also depicted with satanic undertones. In *L. A. Confidential*, he walks through fire at the Victory Motel, and in *Perfidia* he 'bay[s] at the moon' (Ellroy 2014: 191).

*Perfidia* has given the reader a more intimate look at Smith, but whether his sexual liaisons will limit his power in Ellroy's second Quartet is yet to be seen. The

carefully constructed persona, and his use of language, information and symbols to shore up power can only reach a zenith if the facade remains complete. The danger in the second Quartet, and Smith's central role in it, is that Smith gains power by being evasive, the 'white whale'. The favours he inevitably does while climbing to power within and outside the LAPD only threaten to expose him. How Ellroy will walk the line of telling the backstory and maintaining the myth that surrounds Smith is yet to be seen. But the fact that Ellroy has returned to Smith, and placed him in a role of such prominence, suggests the possibility that one day the two LA Quartets could be renamed the Dudley Smith Octet or an even grander title depending on how much life is left in the character.

## ‘Geography Is Destiny’: Cinematizing the City in the LA Quartet

Nathan Ashman

When asked why his fiction continually exhibits a preoccupation with cinematic techniques and visual technologies, James Ellroy’s answer was unambiguous: ‘I love movies, and I’m a voyeur’ (Powell 2008a: 158). Indeed, Ellroy’s indebtedness to cinema is stylistically palpable in his fiction. His frequent uses of montage and quick-cutting techniques imbue his work with both a syncopated quality and a distinctly visual aesthetic. Ellroy’s ‘cinematic’ prose style has been examined by several critics; however, the larger thematic significance and impact of both viewing and visual culture in Ellroy’s fiction is still relatively unexplored. This is particularly true of Ellroy’s LA Quartet, a four-volume criminal and political history set against the backdrop of post-war Los Angeles’s urban development. Steven Powell argues that in terms of both ‘plotting and prose’, cinema is one of the integral ‘crossover themes that transitions from novel to novel’ in the LA Quartet (Powell 2015: 152). In Ellroy’s novels, the phantasmagorical topography and broader cinematic milieu of the city becomes inextricably linked not only to a pervasive ‘crisis of ocularcentrism’, as Martin Jay would put it, but also to a deterioration of the boundaries between the cinematic and real, and public and private (Jay 1994: 301).

In his critical text *The Cinematic Society*, Norman Denzin diagnoses the dominance of the screen in American culture and subsequent proliferation of images in American technological and social exchange as a rapid and ongoing process of ‘cinematisation’ (Denzin 1995: 1). Denzin defines the postmodern as a decidedly ‘visual cinematic age’, a contemporary social formation that knows itself and its past ‘through the reflections that flow from the camera’s eye’ (Denzin 1995: 1). Tracing the development of visual culture back to the rise of the American film industry, Denzin argues that Hollywood’s cinematic

renaissance in the early twentieth century ushered American society into a new scopical regime, one which privileged the 'visual over the aural' (Denzin 1995: 14). This subsequently triggered a new mode of cinematic realism, the displacement of the 'human eye with the scientific image' (Denzin 1995: 25). Yet, rather than scientifically capturing and accurately reproducing the social world as intended, these cinematic technologies ultimately distorted the sense of reality that was being produced. For Denzin, this exponential erosion between the paradigms of real and unreal has led to a contemporary situation in which the reciprocity between the cinematic and the everyday has ultimately problematized the very notion of concrete or object reality:

The cinematic imagination is now asked to work between two versions of reality; the cinematic and the everyday. Yet the everyday is now defined by the cinematic. The two can no longer be separated. A single epistemological regime governs both visual fields. (Denzin 1995: 36)

For Denzin, any notion of authentic reality is eroded by the fluid exchange between the cinematic and the everyday. Although cinema propagates the authority of the visual image as 'the ultimate arbitrator of truth' by, for example, equating seeing with knowing, the unstable line between reality and the image has destabilized the objectivity of a sight-centred epistemology. As Denzin suggests, 'there is no truth beyond the image' (Denzin 1995: 37).

### Los Angeles: A seen by scene environment

One of Ellroy's central preoccupations in the LA Quartet is the representation of post-war Los Angeles in the process of spatial, economic and cinematic expansion. In these texts, the trajectory and subterfuge of twentieth-century America's political, criminal and cultural history becomes deeply rooted in the cartographic logic of LA's cinematic landscape. The cinematic 'scenery' of the city continually haemorrhages into the experience of everyday reality, confusing the distinctions between authenticity and fantasy. Born in LA, Ellroy has suggested that from an early age he was fascinated by what he perceived as the city's schizophrenic nature, the sense that there was a murky, clandestine underworld operating beneath the ostentatious and superficial glitz of the spectacular and visible exterior world. Ellroy attributes much of this yearning for the city's 'real secret shit' to his father Armand, a 'sleazebag on the edge

of the movie bizz', who introduced Ellroy to the decadence, debauchery and sordid gossip of the Hollywood scandal rags (Duncan 1996: 73). These cheap, mass-produced magazines offered sensational speculation and salacious sleaze on 'a whole cast of – usually very good looking – men and women', stimulating Ellroy's 'voyeuristic curiosity about people's sex lives and inner moral workings' (Duncan 1996: 73). As Ellroy suggests, 'All I want to know is who's a homosexual, who's a nymphomaniac, who's impotent, who's the peeper, who's the prowler, who's the pimp, who's the pederast and who's the panty sniffer?' (Duncan 1996: 73). Despite the comic, almost trivialized representation of celebrity culture here and potentially criminal sexual subculture, Ellroy's appropriation of journalistic intrigue and alliterative 'scandal rag' patois has become a consistent feature of both his historical novels and wider oeuvre, suggesting that for Ellroy these voyeuristic, sleazy magazines represented more than just derision and cheap thrills.

In his essay 'I've Got the Goods', Ellroy implies that the scandal rags were characteristic of a new visual imperative, an emerging desire to look and know catalysed by the saturation of cinema and celebrity culture:

We want the goods

Who knows who. Who blows who. Who's got the pull and the gelt.

Who's got the habit.

Who's got the appetite

We're the vigorous vultures of verisimilitude. We feed off the luridly authentic. It makes us feel alive.

...

The Glamour World was a confluence. It publicly cohered in the '50's. The scandal rags linked the divergent strands and mythologized the players. The rags built the world from photo files and innuendo. Socialites. Film stars. Politicians. Jazz horns and playboys. Mobsters with crossover appeal. The celebrity matrix. Revised and deconstructed for rude readers of a distinct demographic. (Ellroy 2005c: 169–72)

While being complicit in the facilitation of this incipient fascination with the spectacle of celebrity culture, for Ellroy the scandal rags also obliquely articulated the double nature of the city, rendering partially visible the 'real L.A.' of 'crime, sex and outré pathology' (Ellroy 2006b). Ellroy demarcates the real LA as a clandestine world 'camouflaged' by an external 'perceived L.A.', the latter

being a superficial screened representation ‘considered real’ only by the ‘square workday’ population (Ellroy 2006b). For Ellroy, the exterior, visible Los Angeles is a public phantasmagorical ‘shuck’, the truth of the city obscured and barely perceptible like ‘malign messages swirl[ing] in smog particles’ until reality is no more than contrasting fictions (Ellroy 2006b).

This perception of Los Angeles as a holographic fantasy space is intimately connected to the city’s historical and cultural development, particularly its symbiotic affiliation with Hollywood cinema. The Hollywood studios and the city’s urban environment were developed in reciprocal and incestuous ways, distorting the differentiation between the cinematic and the everyday:

Los Angeles became a city through the act of seeing and its industrial transmission all over the world. Because so many pictures were shot in L.A., we were seeing its streets, its ocean and desert, its cars, trees, and light. Before ordinary people ever dreamed of travelling vacations, L.A. was the ideal place to go.

Of course people never went. They stayed in their seats in the theatre. (Thomson 1992: 325)

As Thomson suggests, Los Angeles became fashioned and solidified in the cultural consciousness through these forms of visualization. It was a city that was simultaneously and paradoxically the manufacturer and product of images disseminated by the big screen. This dialogic interchange between the city and the cinema was increasingly reflected in the ambiguous architectural overlap between the ‘real’ structures and edifices of LA and those produced by the movie studios. The development and fabric of Los Angeles’s city space were intermingled with billboards and Hollywood backlots, so that the ‘two realms – local architecture and movie set architecture – seemed hardly distinguishable’ (Fine 2000: 18). This blurring was epitomized by the three-hundred-foot Babylon set constructed for D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), the detritus of which remained on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Drive for a number of years after the film was completed and released, precipitating a bizarre process of fictional ruins falling into literal disregard (Fine 2000: 18). The simulated history of the Babylon set chimed flawlessly with the city’s topographic logic, an eclectic pastiche of historic architectural styles ranging from Victorian wood to Spanish stucco. As William Brevda suggests, California’s indeterminate melding of authenticity and reproduction made the ‘decidable opposition between the real and the fake so difficult to maintain that it became a literary theme’ (Brevda 2011: 186).



In many ways Ellroy's LA Quartet can be seen as a continuation or replication of this literary theme that situates Los Angeles at the epicentre of unreality, corruption and violence. From the dissimulative spectacle and dismantling of the Hollywood sign in *The Black Dahlia* to the construction of the Dodgers Stadium in *White Jazz*, the landscape of the city becomes a metaphysical and spatial manifestation of America's repressed criminal and political history. *The Big Nowhere*, in particular, reiterates the perception of Los Angeles as a locale of unreality and absence, a 'nowhere space' that symbolically prefigures the limitations of knowledge and truth so central to the text itself. In one of the early sections of text, Deputy Detective Danny Upshaw's drives around the city encompass the spatial topography of deterioration, scepticism and superficiality so indicative of the Los Angeles noir tradition:

Dusk started coming on, rain clouds eclipsing late sunshine trying to light up Negro slums: ramshackle houses encircled by chicken wire, pool halls, liquor stores and storefront churches on every street – until jazzland took over. The loony swank amidst squalor, one long block of it.

Bido Lito's was shaped like miniature Taj Mahal, only purple; Malloy's Nest was a bamboo hut fronted by phony Hawaiian palms strung with Christmas-tree lights. Zebra stripes comprised the paint job on Tommy Tucker's Play Room – an obvious converted warehouse with plaster saxophones, trumpets and music clefs alternating across the edge of the roof. The Zamboanga, Royal Flush and Katydid Klub were bright pink, more purple and puke green, a hangarlike building subdivided, the respective doorways outlined in neon. And Club Zombie was a Moorish mosque featuring a three story tall sleepwalker growing out of the façade: a gigantic darky with glowing red eyes high-stepping into the night. (Ellroy 1988: 44–5)

Ellroy's vivid depiction of the endless urban sprawl littered with crumbling houses is characteristic of noir's visual fixation with the 'decaying urban setting'. The city is the rotting corpse beneath the spectacle of a 'rapidly emerging consumerism' (Pepper 2000: 26), where collapsing 'storefronts' and 'ramshackle houses' are replaced by the ludicrous neon facades of all-night bars and clubs. Of course, Ellroy's juxtaposition of the dilapidated 'Negro slums' with the 'loony swank' of Hollywood 'jazzland' is inherently ironic. The abstraction between these two spaces is ultimately illusory, with the gaudy colour of the nightclubs functioning as a spectacular extension of the degradation and 'squalor' of the decomposing urban slums. The eclectic pastiche of various types of fantasy architecture that

Upshaw observes encapsulates Ellroy's fixation with the indeterminate blurring between the cinematic and the real in the LA Quartet. Reminiscent of studio backlots, the bar strip is constituted of a random collision of 'phony' external facades fashioned like autonomous film sets. A miniaturized Taj Mahal shares spatial proximity with both a Hawaiian log cabin and Moorish style mosque, producing a confusing conglomeration of architectural, cultural and temporal demarcations. Ellroy's focus on the deceptive plasticity of LA's urban landscape reiterates the city as a space of illusoriness and absence, a locale where distinctions between 'the real and the unreal, history and movie, place and set, signifier and referent' become severely disordered (Brevda 2011: 184).

This representation of the city as cinematic is further enhanced through Upshaw's act of driving, an experience that in Ellroy's work is often analogous of cinema spectatorship (Dussere 2014: 55). This accelerated form of urban mobility converts the physical experience of the city into an optical, cinematographic effect, the constantly (often rapidly) shifting external environment distorting spatial and temporal boundaries. The windscreen becomes a movie screen through which Upshaw panoramically views the city, transforming it into a landscape constituted of mere surfaces and signs. The topographic logic of 'jazzland' is geared towards enhancing this cinematic effect of driving, the eclectic orgy of electric images and 'plaster' surfaces blurring together to form one continuous 'neon haze' (Ellroy 1987: 5). James Tweedie argues that the city begins to 'assume the form of cinema', as the concrete reality of 'brick' and 'concrete' is superseded by a neon scenery constructed of 'gas-filled tubes twisted into the shape of words or symbols, charged with electricity and set aglow' (Tweedie 2010: 89). Upshaw's movement through the city resembles that of cinematic 'montage', where 'enduring monuments' are supplanted by a swiftly fluctuating landscape of 'signs and momentary flashes of attention' (Tweedie 2010: 89). The privileging of this rapid flow of images ultimately precipitates the reduction of the urban experience to that of a visual spectacle. As a consequence, the physical environment 'loses its tactility and is continually subjected to optical distortion' (Jacobs 2006: 224).

It is in this disorientating strip of superficial opulence that Upshaw attempts to search for leads connected to a string of (homo)sexually motivated murders. However, the potency of this confusing abundance of images does not dissipate when Upshaw proceeds on foot. He describes walking into Bido Lito's as like 'entering an hallucination' and is bombarded by a profusion of 'pastel satin' walls, 'baby spotlights', 'garish' fabrics and a 'sparkly cardboard bandstand backing

recreating the Egyptian pyramids' (Ellroy 1987: 45). This malleable, chimerical barrage of images persists as Upshaw traverses from club to club questioning possible affiliates of the murdered Marty Goines. The spectacle of the strip confuses and elides clear distinctions between both fantasy and nightmare and reality and unreality, causing a disorientated Upshaw to stumble 'sweat[ing]' and 'shiver[ing]' outside into night air, surrounded and numbed by 'pulsating neon assaulting his eyes' (Ellroy 1987: 50).

Upshaw's sense that the spectacle of the city is somehow violently 'assaulting' or distorting his vision is emblematic of what Josh Cohen identifies as a broader preoccupation with optical mutilation – symbolic and literal – that runs through both *The Big Nowhere* and the 'L.A. Quartet' as a whole (Cohen 1998: 133). This allusion to violence against the eyes not only symbolically foreshadows his imminent meeting with the disguised Coleman Healy (the murderer of Marty Goines whose modus operandi is disembowelment and removal of the eyes), but also elucidates a broader tension between seeing and knowing that continually re-emerges in Ellroy's texts. As Peter Messent suggests, 'to see clearly' ultimately refers to one's ability to 'command a visual field through the dominance of the eye'. Sight is the 'sense making ability', charged with realizing both the external world and 'the individual sovereign subject' (Messent 2013: 61). The 'assault' on Upshaw's eyes is emblematic of his inability to assert visual authority over the spectacle of the city. The disorientation and confusion caused foreshadows the broader patterns of epistemological uncertainty that he will encounter later in the text, in regard to not only the truth behind the homosexual slayings, but also his own sexual identity.

The dissimulative and hypnotic effects of the cinematic city are at their most pervasive in Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*, where this process of cinematization not only is manifested in the physical structures of the city, but percolates into every aspect of 'reality'. The fantasy world of Hollywood 'dreamland' permeates the text, and is at the heart of the corruption, violence and duplicity of the city's historical underworld. Ellroy provides access to this world through the conduit of 'trashcan' Jack Vincennes, a minor celebrity himself who supplements his police income through his work as 'technical adviser' (Ellroy 1990: 21) on *Badge of Honor* – a police procedural show valorizing the exploits of the LAPD based on the real-life television series *Dragnet*. While appearing in the media as an archetype of LAPD integrity and expertise, Vincennes also secretly receives kickbacks for his participation in extortion rackets for *Hush-Hush* magazine. This usually entails the illegal entrapment of notorious celebrities or political

figures followed by highly publicized, simulated arrests. This is exemplified when Vincennes assists *Hush-Hush* reporter Sid Hudgens in the unlawful ensnarement of actors 'Rock Rockwell' and 'Tammy Reynolds':

His stage was waiting – Maravilla cordoned off, two bluesuits by Sid Hudgens' Packard, their black-and-white up on the sidewalk. The street was dark and still; Sid had an Arclight set up. They had a view of the Boulevard – Grauman's Chinese included – great for an establishing shot. Jack parked, walked over.

Sid greeted him with cash. 'She's sitting in the dark, goofing in the Christmas tree. The door looks flimsy.'

Jack drew his .38. 'Have the boys put the booze in my trunk. You want Grauman's in the background?'

'I like it! Jackie, you're the best in the West!'

Jack scoped him: scarecrow skinny, somewhere between thirty-five and fifty – keeper of inside dirt supreme. He either knew about 10/24/47 or he didn't: if he did, their arrangement was lifetime stuff. 'Sid, when I bring her out the door, I do not want that goddamned bay spot in my eyes. Tell your camera guy that.'

'Consider him told'

'Good, now count twenty on down'

Hudgens ticked numbers; Jack walked up and kicked the door in. The Arclight snapped on, a living room caught flush: Christmas tree, two kids necking in their undies. Jack shouted 'Police!'; the lovebirds froze; light on a fat bag of weed in the couch.

The girl started bawling; the boy reached for his trousers. Jack put a foot on his chest. 'The hands, slow.'

The boy pressed his wrists together; Jack cuffed him one-handed. The blues stormed in and gathered up evidence; Jack matched a name to the punk: Rock Rockwell, RKO ingénue. The girl ran; Jack grabbed her. Two suspects by the neck – out the door, down the steps.

Hudgens yelled, 'Grauman's while we've still got the light!'

Jack framed them: half-naked pretties in their BVD's. Flashbulbs popped; Hudgens yelled, 'Cut! Wrap it!' (Ellroy 1990: 23–4)

The extortion is fashioned like a movie set, with 'cordoned off' streets, 'arclights', choreographed camera shots and Sid Hudgens parading as director. Once again, Ellroy deliberately confuses the distinction between the city and film setting. The streets and buildings of Los Angeles such as Grauman's Chinese theatre are

flattened into glossy aesthetic scenery, a phantasmagorical urban backdrop to Vincennes's artificial 'stage'. Crucially, the proximity between the theatre and Hudgens's constructed film set functions to symbolically dramatize this spilling over of the cinematic into the everyday. Vincennes performs the role of heroic police enforcer as the scene unfolds cinematically, beginning with an 'establishing shot' and ending with Hudgens's directorial call to 'Cut!' and 'Wrap it!'

The extract elucidates what Denzin describes as the cinematization of contemporary life, the transformation of American society into a visual culture that 'knows itself through cinema and the reflections of itself that the television and film camera project back on theatre and home TV screens' (Denzin 1995: 138). Denzin argues that the 'metaphor of a dramaturgical society or "life as theatre" has now become an interactional reality', with these theatrical aspects not only seeping into everyday life but ultimately defining it (Denzin 1995: 138). This notion that art no longer only mirrors real life but ultimately structures and reproduces it is potently dramatized in *L.A. Confidential*, where the fictions of Hollywood storytelling are so infused in American cultural exchange, that reality becomes a similarly 'staged, social production' (Denzin 1995: 32). Vincennes's 'real life' police work is ultimately a simulation of cinematic law enforcement, a facsimile of the Hollywood sensationalism disseminated on the set of *Badge of Honor*.

### Seeing is (un)believing: Cinematization and the crisis of ocularcentrism

Vincennes's cinematic extortion racket is part of the broader patterns of simulation and blurring between reality and fiction that saturates the Quartet as a whole. From the Disneyesque hologram of 'Dream-a-Dreamland' to prostitutes surgically altered to resemble film stars, the spectacle of the city becomes synonymous with the production of false images, false realities and false histories. As mentioned previously, one of the effects of this pervasive cinematization of both the city and reality in the LA Quartet is a widespread 'crisis of ocularcentrism', a deterioration of the association between sight and knowledge. In his text *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martyn Jay argues that prior to the twentieth century, the hegemony of vision within Western intellectual thought continually located sight as the principle source of knowledge about the world, as opposed to

Denzin's view that it was in fact 'aural'. Yet, the emergence of photography in the twentieth century and the consequential establishment of a dialogic interchange between media and technologies of vision led to an exponential oversaturation and overexposure of images within contemporary culture. Not only has this widespread proliferation, replication and inundation of various forms of visual spectacle problematized notions such as truth and reality, it has ultimately led to a scepticism within postmodern intellectual thought towards the efficacy of a sight-centred epistemology, or what Jay describes as an extensive 'denigration of vision' (Jay 1994: 15).

This denigration of sight precipitated by the oversaturation of the image is a key preoccupation in the LA Quartet. Ellroy's characters continually lose control of their vision, unable to interpret or assert visual authority over the cinematic image world of Los Angeles's urban milieu. In *The Big Nowhere*, Upshaw's use of 'Man Camera' precipitates an irreparable rupturing of his scopic regime. Described as an investigative tool developed by criminologist Hans Maslick, the technique involves recreating crime scenes cinematically, by 'screening details from the perpetrators' point of view' using 'actual camera angles'. The investigator's eyes become a 'lens capable of zooming in and zooming out, freezing close ups, selecting background motifs to interpret crime scene evidence in an aesthetic light' (Ellroy 1988: 94). The Man Camera is theoretically designed to function as an objective, 'documentary' device, an extension of Upshaw's obsession with forensic methodology and scientific observation (Mancall 2014: 32). In this sense, the technique is almost a throwback to the 'Holmesian' methods of objective, analytical perception.

Yet as Upshaw is drawn deeper into the homosexual subculture of the city, he begins to experience 'Man Camera malfunctions', losing control of the device and consequently his scientific detachment:

Danny pressed his face to the window and looked in.

That close he got distortion blur, Man Camera malfunctions. He pulled back so that his eyes could capture a larger frame, saw tuxedos entwined in movement, cheek-to-cheek tangos, all male. The faces were up against each other so that they couldn't be distinguished individually; Danny zoomed out, in, out, in, until he was pressed into the window glass with pins and needles localised between his legs, his eyes honing for mid-shots, close-ups, faces.

More blur, blips of arms, legs, a cart being pushed and a man in white carrying a punch bowl. Out, in, out, better focus, no faces, then Tim and Coleman the alto together, swaying to hard jazz. The pins and needles hurting; Tim gone,

replaced by a blond ingenue. Then shadows killing his vision, his lens cleared by a step backward – and a perfectly framed view of two fat, ugly wall-flowers tongue-kissing, all oily skin and razor burn and hair pomade glistening. (Ellroy 1988: 168)

Upshaw's identity crisis becomes increasingly manifested in these Man Camera 'blips', a sporadic interplay of fantasy, reality and memory merging with the pornographic violence of crime scenes. Ungoverned, the Man Camera conjures images of 'guts', 'bruised penises' and other 'mutilations in wraparound technicolour' (Ellroy 1988: 111), projecting Upshaw's 'tormented identification' with sexual violence (Mancall 2014: 32). Yet, as well as magnifying Upshaw's repressed homosexual desire, this scene ultimately operates to further exemplify the fraught dynamic between sight and knowledge in the LA Quartet. As with his previous travels around the city, Upshaw is unable to control his viewpoint, and is bombarded by a disorientating barrage of 'blips', jolts and 'distortion blur'. The camera – as a symbol of objective vision – is ultimately unable to capture the surreal imagery before Upshaw's eyes, which once again obscure and assault his vision. As Julian Murphet suggests, Upshaw's cinematographic voyeurism through the window of the Château Marmot illustrates the 'collapse of private into public under the immense weight of consumerism and spectacle' (Murphet 2001: 53). In the cinematic society, this breakdown of the demarcation between public and private space means that everything is transformed into a 'recordable commodity' (Denzin 1995: 176). Functioning as a pseudo-camera, Upshaw magnifies this collapse, indicating that within the logic of the consumer market, all private experience is potentially visible and consumable.

Haunted by the desire to know 'WHY', these ruptures in Upshaw's vision become increasingly paralleled in his frustrated epistemological search (Ellroy 1988: 39). As his visual agency falters, his ability to observe and interpret the world around him deteriorates in tandem. This crisis of ocularcentrism is further exemplified in *White Jazz*. Arguably the most stylized and complex volume in the Quartet, Ellroy magnifies his clipped, fragmented narrative style to new proportions. A partial re-establishment of the aural through its mix of rhythmic jazz and 'bebop' syncopation, Ellroy has described the narrative voice of *White Jazz* as a 'paranoid tone, a stream of consciousness style' that is uniquely suited to Dave Klein, a 'terrible man whose life is burning down' (Silet 1995: 48). *White Jazz* is saturated with this form of urgent 'brain Jump' narration, a frenzied, often incoherent, transitioning between staccato riffs, that imbues the text with both a startling immediacy and a distinctly cinematic

quality (Ellroy 1992: 59). The first-person narration acts as a semi-telegraphic hallucinatory montage that discontinuously transitions from image to image (Fine 2000: 149). Klein's voice is distinctly reminiscent of Danny Upshaw's skewed vision of reality when personifying the 'Man Camera.' Through Klein's cinematic 'Man Camera' narration, Ellroy deliberately exploits and deconstructs the analogy of the detective as a scopic reasoning machine, one that is able to read and interpret all objects and clues that enter the field of vision. Rather than exalting sight as a conduit to knowledge and truth, Klein's narration ultimately erodes the epistemology 'which assumes that truth can be discovered through a logical process of cause and effect deduction; and knowledge gained through visual means' (Denzin 1995: 7). The phantasmagoric image world that Klein inhabits ultimately frustrates his ability to interpret reality via a sight-centred epistemology. As Mancall suggests, the 'world of *White Jazz* is one of endless pix' (Mancall 2014: 207), an environment saturated with images that steadily intrude upon and decentre Klein's narration. As the text develops, Klein's field of vision is increasingly encroached and blurred by confusing 'flashes' and 'blips', an indeterminate 'swirling' of hallucination, reality and fantasy (Ellroy 1992: 161).

The failings of Klein's scopic regime are perhaps most aptly exhibited when he visits the Griffith Park observatory. Using the mounted telescope, Klein panoramically gazes on to the set of Mickey Cohen's anti-communist propaganda movie *Attack of the Atomic Vampire*, as well as the surrounding topography of LA's cinematic landscape:

Time to kill. Stone's throw: Silverlake to Griffith Park. I drove up the east road to the Observatory.

Smog clearing, a view: Hollywood, points south. Coin telescopes mounted by the entrance: 180-degree swivels.

Time to kill, pocket change – I aimed one at the set.

Glass blur, asphalt, hills. Parked cars, up, over: the spaceship.

Crank the lens, squint – people.

Look:

A trailer door embrace. Touch and Rock Rockwell. Over right: Mickey C. spieling extras. Metal glare – Glenda's trailer, Glenda.

Glass blur, sun streaks. People walking by – dark obstructions. Hard to see, easy to imagine.

...



Sun Spots, eyestrain. Twist the scope – a wino fistfight – pratfalls gouging.

The lens clicked off – my time was up. My eyes hurt – I closed them and just stood there. Images hit me rapid-fire:

Dave Klein, strikebreaker – teeth on my truncheon.

Dave Klein, bet enforcer – baseball bat work.

Dave Klein, killer – hung over from cordite and blood stench.

Meg Klein, sobbing: 'I don't want you to love me that way.'

Joan Herrick: 'Long history of insanity in both our families.'

Somebody, please: give me one last chance to know. (Ellroy 1992: 299–300)

Here Ellroy deliberately evokes and deconstructs the classic paradigm of the detective as a figure of surveillance and 'omnipotent, unseen vision' (Goulet 2006: 128). Located high up in the observatory overlooking the Los Angeles basin below, Klein establishes a fixed, panoptic position, a view from above with 'axial visibility' making it possible to 'see constantly and recognise immediately' (Foucault 1995: 200). Like Bentham's central observational tower, Klein's swivelling, panoramic telescope reinforces Ellroy's engendering of the panoptic gaze. As a technology of vision, the telescope functions as an extension of Klein's interpretative framework, a symbol of his privileging of sight and unshakeable faith in the capability of either direct observation or the transparency of 'the lens' to authentically reproduce reality (Denzin 1995: 6). At a fundamental level, the architectural figure of the panopticon functions as a tool for exercising power, or as Gail Mason terms it, a 'practical means of observation that literally renders a whole group of people visible' (Mason 2002: 14). Yet Mason goes on to suggest that the basis for this observation is as much epistemological as it is driven by the desire to control. She elucidates, 'The key to the panoptic problem is found in the nexus between knowledge and visibility, in the idea that to render something visible is to make it knowable' (Mason 2002: 140). In this sense, panopticism is deeply rooted in an ocularcentric epistemology; it is a voyeuristic system of surveillance, an apparatus that valorizes and transmits the hegemony of vision.

Yet, as Klein peeps through the telescope, these sight-centred panoptic principles such as 'visibility' and 'comprehension' become severely problematized. Instead he finds it increasingly 'hard to see', the transparency of the lens and intelligibility of the images realized continually rendered opaque by 'glass blur', 'sun spots' and 'dark obstructions' (Ellroy 1992: 299). Klein is incapable of establishing a crisp, clear image and steadily loses control of his vision, erratically

twisting the telescope and quick cutting between unfocused, distorted frames. The blinding and blur that Klein experiences exemplifies his lack of visual agency, thus reinforcing his status as an impotent voyeur. By evoking and then subverting the principles of the panopticon, Ellroy enacts and elucidates Klein's disempowerment and continued failure to interpret and understand through visibility. Eventually the lens clicks off, and Klein pulls away from the telescope, his eyes strained and 'hurt[ing]' from his frustrated attempts at exerting visual authority (Ellroy 1992: 300). Here *White Jazz* continues the pattern of violence against the eyes established in the previous volumes of the Quartet, a motif of optical assault (both literal and allegorical) that emblemizes the fraught dynamic between sight and knowledge in Ellroy's fiction. Yet even when Klein closes his eyes in an attempt to escape the disconnected and disorientating bombardment of hazy visuals witnessed when gazing through the telescope, he is once again subjected to a pulsating, 'rapid fire' blitz of images (Ellroy 1992: 300). Here the objectivity of Klein's vision-orientated, hermeneutic framework is destabilized, as images from Klein's memory and subconscious invade his sight. As Mancall suggests, Klein steadily 'loses control of his imagination', precipitating a crisis of perception characterized by a veritable swirling of fantasy, memory and reality (Mancall 2014: 207). With his optical mastery failing, a desperate, inconsolable Klein breaks down, pleading for 'one last chance to know' (Ellroy 1992: 300).

### 'Feast Your Eyes': Plastic surgery and the denigration of vision

This frustrated pursuit of knowledge through vision in the LA Quartet is further exacerbated by a plethora of characters who undergo transformative reconstructive surgeries, often in an attempt to conceal horrifying crimes, but in Ellroy's narratives it also precipitates them. The deceptive effects of plastic surgery are a prevalent motif throughout the Quartet, further underlining Ellroy's preoccupation with the denigration of vision within 'postmodern paradigms of knowledge and social experience' (Crutchfield 1999: 277). Plastic surgery functions as an extension of Ellroy's fascination with violence against the eyes. Of course in this case it is not manifested as literal violence, but rather as a kind of allegorical assault: a form of visual deception that reinforces the erosion of the relationship between sight and knowledge precipitated by the cinematic logic of Los Angeles's social and cultural milieu. Like the disorientation caused

by Upshaw's inability to exert visual authority over the spectacle of the city, these surgically altered characters similarly frustrate and obfuscate optical comprehension and mastery. Crucially Ellroy associates plastic surgery with historical repression, an embodiment of the horrifying crimes and corruption of the American past that have been concealed by the hypnotic effects of the Hollywood dream factory.

Central to this alteration of the past is plastic surgeon Terry Lux. First appearing in *The Big Nowhere*, Lux manages the 'Pacific Sanatorium', a 'booze and dope' rehabilitation centre located in the 'foothills' of Malibu Canyon (Ellroy 1988: 192). Lux's 'dry-out farm' provides shelter to 'RKO juicers' and celebrity 'hopheads', sparing them 'jail jolts and bum publicity' in exchange for kickbacks (Ellroy 1988: 193). This enterprise helps subsidize his other vocation as 'plastic surgeon to the stars' (Ellroy 1988: 193). Lux is a further example of Ellroy's continual juxtaposition of the glamour and allure of the Hollywood Dreamworld with the violence and perversion of the criminal underworld. As Lee Horsley suggests, the plastic surgery 'performed by the Lux clinic is used both to conceal ghastly secrets and to create desirable faces in the Hollywood mould; it also, however, produces monsters' (Horsley 1998: 150). One such 'monster' created by Lux's surgical alterations is the serial killer Coleman Healy. Initially Lux operates on Healy so that he will resemble his father, Reynold Loftis. This is to provide Healy with 'special protection' from Dudley Smith (Ellroy 1987: 427), after he witnessed the manipulative and ruthless detective murdering José Díaz at the Sleepy Lagoon reservoir. However, this surgery precipitates a sordid, incestuous affair between father and son. The narcissistic Loftis is 'so enthralled by his on screen image' that his estranged son becomes a conduit to enacting a 'fantasy love affair with himself' (Sunderland 2011: 153). After Healy is eventually rejected by his father, Lux alters his face again with 'heavy weighted boxing gloves', transforming him unrecognizably from his previous look (Ellroy 1988: 462). Disaffected and seeking revenge, Healy disguises himself as Loftis and carries out a string of sex killings to implicate his father in the murders.

Plastic surgery takes centre stage once again in *L.A. Confidential*, as Disneyesque animator Raymond Dieterling pays Lux to physically alter his crazed and disaffected son Douglas as a means of concealing his involvement in the notorious Loren Atherton Case; a string of child sex mutilations and murders. Crucially, Lux's surgeries allow repressed secrets, unfathomable desires and appalling criminal acts to hide within plain sight, reiterating the denigration of vision that permeates the Quartet. Besides the obvious oedipal connotations,

Healy's mutilation and removal of his victim's eyes is also a figurative taunt, an oblique message to his pursuers that in the 'decentred world of L.A.', no one 'can see reality clearly' (Ellroy 1990: 61). As Foster Hirsch suggests, the 'masquerade motif' associated with plastic surgery becomes a metaphor for the buried history of Los Angeles as a whole, a deceptive and dreamlike 'city of illusions' (Hirsch 1999: 140).

In *L.A. Confidential*, Pierce Patchett's pornography and prostitution ring 'Fleur-de-lis' – with its slogan 'whatever you desire' – reiterates Ellroy's anchoring of 'America's wish fulfilment' in the imaginations and myths of 'Hollywood film' (Wolfe 2005: 8). High-class hookers are sold as bogus copies of Ava Gardner, Veronica Lake, Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth. While on a stakeout, Vincennes secretly watches a Fleur-de-lis party through an open window and witnesses the constructed facsimiles of Hollywood celebrities that the brothel service offers:

Five cars: classy, no Fleur-de-Lis bags on plush front seats. The house: bright windows, silk swirls. Jack walked up and looked in.

He knew he'd never forget the women.

One almost Rita Hayworth a la *Gilda*. One almost Ava Gardner in an emerald green dress. A near Betty Grable – sequined swim suit, fishnet stockings. Men in tuxedos mingled – background debris. He couldn't stray his eyes from the women.

Astonishing make believe. Hinton on Patchett: 'He sugarpimps these girls to look like movie stars.' 'Made up' didn't cut it: call these women chosen, cultivated, enhanced by an expert. Astonishing. (Ellroy 1990: 180)

What Vincennes witnesses is an extension of the theme park mentality, a kind of perverse Universal Studios where 'men in tuxedos' are given free rein to imitate their sexual, cinematic fantasies. The clients are not really seeking simulated sexual encounters with particular actresses, but rather with certain cinematic fantasy figures such as the eponymous seductress from the classic film noir *Gilda* (1946). In the cinematic society, as M.W. Smith suggests, 'movies as representations of real life empty into real-life simulations of movies – not real movies being filmed, but the simulation of real movies' (Smith 2001: 56). As with Vincennes's cinematic drugs bust, the screen no longer merely reflects reality, it constructs and defines it. The Fleur-de-Lis party is indicative of the extended logic of simulation that permeates the LA Quartet, a hyper-reality of 'astonishing make believe' where reality is continually effaced by the image. The Fleur-de-Lis prostitutes are what Palmer describes as 'simulacra of simulacra, surgically

designed simulations of Hollywood celebrity' that magnify the instability of the differentiation between reality and fantasy (Palmer 2009: 61). Existing as 'holographic layers of simulation' shorn free of their original referents, these facsimiles become symptomatic of a theme of 'double existences' that permeates Ellroy's novels as a whole (Palmer 2009: 61). In the world of the LA Quartet, seeing is no longer believing.

Significantly, this scene in which Vincennes peers through the window also reiterates the commodification of private experience within the extended logic of cinematization. Due to the pervasive and invasive reach of media technologies, everything is potentially viewable and consumable (Denzin 1995: 176). Almost identical to the scene in which Upshaw uses his Man Camera to secretly peer in on a homosexual sex party, this scene of window peeping becomes emblematic of the invasion and commodification of private space as a result of the irresistible and omniscient forces of consumer capitalism and mass media. Framed by the window, in both instances these private, interior scenes are transformed into exposed public spectacles. Crucially, window peeping becomes analogous to that of cinematic spectatorship. Either through Upshaw's Man Camera or Vincennes's voyeuristic gaze, the window functions as a stand-in movie screen, one that emblemizes the transformation of all aspects of contemporary life into potential cinematic objects of media scrutiny and consumption. Significantly in the LA Quartet, private existence is no longer private at all, but is instead strictly within the remit of mass media and consumer spectacle.

### 'They'll believe anything we can get on the screen'

While plotting the development of a string of anti-American movies in *The Big Nowhere*, the 'Red Queen' Claire De Haven describes cinema as the 'new opiate of the people', asserting that the public will believe 'anything [they] can get on the screen' (Ellroy 1988: 63). Through the abstracted lens of post-war Los Angeles, the LA Quartet reflects on the problematic status of knowledge, particularly historical knowledge, in a world constructed by the cinematic gaze. The dissimulative, hypnotic urban landscape becomes symptomatic of the more holistic 'cinematisation' or 'disneyfication' of both the reality of post-war Los Angeles and of its past. Just as the tactility of the urban landscape is substituted by hollow and imagined spectacles, the truth of history is replaced

by correspondingly sterilized 'official' narratives. As such, the multiple failings of visual mastery become symbolic manifestations of a more holistic preoccupation with the indeterminacy of sight as a practical method of obtaining knowledge in such a hallucinatory object world.

The topography of the LA Quartet ultimately enacts an indeterminate blurring between the cinematic and real, one that Denzin sees as characteristic of contemporary American experience. As a consequence, the detective is continually incapable of establishing visual agency, and the very mechanisms designed to enhance and increase visual control instead further illuminate the deterioration of optical objectivity. From Upshaw's malfunctioning 'Man Camera' to Klein's temperamental telescope, these instruments of vision mislead and obfuscate, symbolizing the erosion of the relationship between the seen and the known in an increasingly digitalized, cinematized world. In the LA Quartet, Los Angeles's cinematic environment is inseparable from the individual and historical narratives it produces. For Ellroy, 'geography is destiny' (Ellroy 2005a: 262).

## Part Three

# ‘America Was Never Innocent’: Underworld and Government Power Structures





## Between Althusser and Foucault: Power Relations in James Ellroy's Underworld USA Trilogy

Rubén Peinado Abarrio

As a crime writer James Ellroy is critically regarded as a revisionist chronicler of recent American history and the American experience. According to his, not ungenerous, estimation of his own work, Ellroy's novels transcend the 'crime fiction' genre label often applied to them by publishers, critics and scholars alike (Duncan 1996: 77). Between 1995 and 2009, Ellroy authored three aesthetically and thematically related novels exploring the darkest corners of fifteen years of US history. The Underworld USA Trilogy, comprised of *American Tabloid*, *The Cold Six Thousand* and *Blood's a Rover*, combines real historical figures of the period 1958–72 with fictional characters whose viewpoint provides subjective third-person narration of both hidden events and subversive accounts which contradict the established historical record. The very opening words of the trilogy – 'America was never innocent' (Ellroy 1995: 5) – set the tone for and intimate the ambition and scope of a project that resolutely drives the reader from threatening back alleys of Chicago to the sacred havens of political power in Washington D.C.

Ellroy's version of history comes from below, or 'from the gutter to the stars', in his own words (1995: 5). Events as momentous as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy or the Vietnam War provide the tapestry for the shadow-like actions of a number of morally dubious, 'the actual men you're supposed to dig' – operating from the margins of society (Powell 2013). This chapter provides an examination of this group of novels drawing on the notions of ideology, discourse and power as explored by French philosophers Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. This discussion is structured around two movements that transition from Althusser to Foucault: from ideology to

discourse; from repression to interconnection and resistance. Although it is the Foucauldian conception of power relations that more convincingly sheds light on Ellroy's narrative, it will be argued that the work of both philosophers provides a theoretical context to address a novelistic enterprise eager to explore the intersections between public policy and private desire in a period of social and political upheaval.

## Ideology, discourse and power in Althusser and Foucault

A debated concept in Marxist theory – not least because Marx himself never attempted an exhaustive definition – ideology has broadly been pictured as a central element in the superstructure of a society. As such, the ideological is shaped by the modes of production and aimed at ensuring the reproduction of the means of production. The structural Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser discusses the question of ideology in his examination of the reality of the state. Althusser begins his exposition with the notion of the state as 'a "machine" of repression, which enables the ruling classes ... to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion' (Althusser 1970: 106). This is, in essence, the Marxist theory of the state apparatus which describes the state as a force of repression. Taking his cue from Antonio Gramsci, who first advanced the idea of the institutions that supplement the state apparatus, Althusser makes an important distinction in the way the state secures the reproduction of relations of production, which are relations of exploitation.

For Althusser, the state exerts control over its subjects through both the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Althusser 1970: 110). The RSA – equivalent to the Marxist state – subsumes the government, the police, the army or the administration. The RSA is a unified apparatus belonging to the public domain, and it acts predominantly through violence, functioning only secondarily by ideology. On the other hand, Althusser lists several specialized institutions which constitute the ISAs, including families, schools, newspapers, trade unions or political parties. The dispersed ISAs belong, for the most part, to the private sphere, and they function predominantly by ideology, and secondarily by repression; hegemony over them is required to preserve state power. Ideology works on individuals as subjects, who act as good subjects according to the 'practices governed by the rituals of

the ISAs' (Althusser 1970: 135). Both the RSA and ISAs regulate the formation of social bonds and buttress certain mechanisms of dominion, hence perpetuating the social order.

However, Michel Foucault questions the usefulness of the notion of ideology and urges to go beyond the Althusserian conception of power as repression (Foucault 1978: 10). In Foucault's post-structuralist theory, it is discourse rather than ideology that better conveys the relational character of power in society. Discourses, where power and knowledge are joined together, recognize the existence of multiple subjectivities, reflect the multidirectional nature of power relations, and allow for a transcendence of the class question to account for considerations of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Foucault opposes the reductionist formulation of power as centralized repression epitomized by the state apparatus:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1977b: 120)

Essentially different from, although many a time confused with, an institution, a structure or an individual strength, power, which extends beyond the limits of the state, is in fact the name attributed to 'a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1978: 93). Focusing on the micro level of social relations, Foucault emphasizes the productive role of relations of power, which neither spring from a central point nor work exclusively in a top-downward fashion. Power relations are immanent in other types of social relationships (e.g. economic, sexual, knowledge relationships). Rather than working in a comprehensive, homogeneous way from a superstructural position, they materialize in a multiplicity of power sites and generate potential areas of resistance which extend across social and individual boundaries. In such a model, the effects of domination can never be entirely stable. Crucially, Foucault discards the identification of a single source of revolt that acts as a reaction to the force of oppression, a great Refusal fighting a great Power, emphasizing instead the mobile and multifarious nature of the diverse points of resistance. In the following section of this chapter the theoretical framework provided by Althusser and Foucault, and particularly the ideas of ideology, discourse and power, are applied to the fictional world of James Ellroy's novels.

## Power-knowledge: From ideology to discourse

Ellroy's depiction of the United States of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s seems to beg for a study that focuses on the restrictive, negative workings of institutionalized power. Different parts of the RSA play a crucial role in the trilogy, such as the Kennedy administration, the CIA, the FBI and the police departments of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Dallas. However, it is worth noting that Ellroy's approach to these constituents challenges the Althusserian notion of a unified apparatus. Rather than supporting one another for the greater objective of securing the relations of exploitation and maintaining state power, they more often than not pursue independent goals, sabotaging the others when necessary. The result: collisions and turbulence, from the violent yet relatively low-key confrontation between Dallas and Las Vegas police officers Maynard Moore and Wayne Tedrow Jr. in *The Cold Six Thousand* to the rather spectacular plots devised by FBI and CIA operatives to assassinate John F. and Robert F. Kennedy – the events with which *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* end, respectively.

The plots also give prominence to ISAs, from tabloid journalism to the Ku Klux Klan. They work through ideology, circulating particular notions regarding, for example, white supremacy or the Red Scare. The ideological messages spread are as simple as they are effective: socialism is unfair, communism is anti-American; black people are lazy and lascivious, civil rights laws threaten US free enterprise. The prominence of these historically informed conceptions of the world in Ellroy's fiction supports Jonathan Walker's evaluation of *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* as 'reflexive narratives about the construction (and attempted, partial deconstruction or subversion) of narratives' (Walker 2002: 194). What I contend is that approaching these narratives as Foucauldian discourses which produce a particular knowledge – or in the words of Foucault, create a regime of truth – will enrich our understanding of the novels (Foucault: 1977b: 132).

To undertake such a study of Ellroy's work there needs to be an examination about who says what, why and to what effect about the Red Scare or white supremacy, what knowledge has been produced, what institutions have sponsored which discourses, or what discourses are authorized in the narratives. In short, an identification needs to be made of how these issues are put into language, in order to locate the 'polymorphous techniques of power' (Foucault 1978: 11). In the simplest of terms, black and white lives do not have equal value in the universe depicted by Ellroy. This is made clear by the law enforcement officials who interrogate Wayne Tedrow Jr. on account of the murder of three

black drug dealers: 'Let's talk turkey. It's not like you killed three white men' (Ellroy 2001: 176).

However, 'the three white men' can be tainted as Reds even if they are of more social worth than black men at the time. The main fighter of communism in Ellroy's novels is J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director from 1935 to 1972. 'All left-wingers should reside in captivity,' Hoover asserts only half-jokingly (Ellroy 2009: 32). For almost half a century, including the years covered by the Underworld narrative, Hoover battled communism in a number of ways: gathering data, planting informants, spreading rumours through scandal magazines or defaming socialist sympathizers like Martin Luther King. Regardless of Hoover's personal convictions, a self-serving interest lies at the heart of Ellroy's portrayal. Once the American people have been convinced of the threat posed by home-grown communism, the FBI becomes the self-appointed institution to fight against it, thus justifying its demands for increased public resources and earning prestige and social legitimacy along the way.

The fact that the trilogy's Mob leaders share Hoover's hate for communists proves the transversal nature of the Red Scare discourse. This is hardly the consequence of moral and ethical stances. Fidel Castro's nationalization of hotels and casinos cut off the profits of the Mob-led gambling scene, which explains why Santo Trafficante and related Mafia figures 'all hated Commies. They all loved Cuba. They all hated the Beard [Castro]. Money and turf – dual agendas' (Ellroy 2001: 17). This reasoning leads to an expected conclusion: 'Let's pluck the Beard. Let's repluck our casinos' (Ellroy 2001: 17). Key characters in the novels, including hit-man Pete Bondurant and mercenary Jean Phillippe Mesplede, carry out a professional underground war fuelled by anti-communist feelings, taking action in Cuba or Vietnam. Their deeds are informed by the (hypermasculine) Red Scare discourse that permeates through the trilogy, which in the words of Ellroy stages the 'last gasp of pre-public accountability in America where the anti-Communist agenda ... justified everything' (Walker 2002: 200). Much as more pragmatic characters reject this discourse as 'right-wing bullshit' (Ellroy 2009: 182), for anti-communist fighters like Bondurant, 'it was all CUBA. It was *le grand putain* Fidel Castro and the Cuban Freedom Cause. There was JFK's Bay of Pigs betrayal. There was LBJ's Commie appeasement. There was America's sissified accommodation and the Caribbean as a Spreading Red Lake. There were brave men willing to die to quash the Red Tide' (Ellroy 2009: 107).

In these characters, toxic masculinity and Americanness are interconnected discourses that highlight the exceptionalism of the United States in gender

terms. Compromising with 'Commies' reveals a 'sissified' approach that hinders the spread and influence of US ideals – resulting in an anti-masculine and anti-American way of being in the world. But the perverse sense of entitlement sported by the likes of Bondurant and Mesplede will be called into question in a narrative twist that momentarily pictures them as mere pawns in a game too large for them to comprehend. In *The Cold Six Thousand*, Bondurant and Mesplede are recruited for a mission sanctioned by CIA operative John Stanton and sponsored by the Mafia. The plan consists of cooking heroin in Laos and selling it in Saigon and Las Vegas, in order to finance anti-Castro raids in Cuba. But Ellroy is willing to reveal the counter-hegemonic effect of the Red Scare discourse that such a mission conceals. As the novel is coming to a close, Bondurant finds out that Stanton has been selling heroin to US troops, while most of the profits of the operation have been funnelled to the Castro government, so as not to interfere with the economic interests of the CIA and the Mafia in the island. These games of intrigues and double-dealing confirm that ideology has become subservient to profit for all but a small number of 'stupes and ... true believers' (Ellroy 2001: 563).

The end of ideology and the embrace of realpolitik are most easily discernible in the evolution of the Mafia: from the counter-revolutionary institution that opposes Castro when his nationalization acts prove to be bad for business to the corrupt but pragmatic organization willing to collaborate with the Cuban revolution and to shape home and foreign policy: 'Business targets. Fund-financed. Potential takeover prey. Let's extort said businesses. Let's build foreign casinos. Let's buy a President. Let's shape policy. Let's reverse 1960' (Ellroy 2001: 414). In this manner, the Underworld USA Trilogy underscores how the Red Scare masks the principles and practices of American imperialism, since characters resort to anti-communist rhetoric when they perceive that this would help them improve their business opportunities in Central America and Asia. In the end, Ellroy's chronicle of the collapse of the Mob's pre-Castro gambling empire, and their various failed attempts to revive it shows how discourses can work for and against power.

### Power relations: From repression to interconnection and resistance in the role of informants

The relationship between those characters described by Ellroy as 'bad white men, soldiers of fortune, shakedown artists, extortionists, legbreakers' and their

informants exemplifies the workings of the repressive state (Duncan 1996: 78). In *American Tabloid* readers witness the implementation of the FBI Top Hoodlum Program. The priority of the programme is 'the suborning of informants' to collect information about the illegal activities of organized crime (Ellroy 1995: 53). With a role similar to that of the proletariat in the Marxist state, informants are valued for their knowledge capital and exploited as providers of information for the benefit of the agents of power, but even with this mandate there is a great deal of cynicism at stake. Hoover only created the Top Hoodlum Program after begrudgingly admitting the existence of the Mafia, and for all its coercive power it did not lead to many prosecutions against the high-ranking Mob figures it was supposed to be investigating. The status of Ellroy's low-level thugs depends on the extraction of a surplus of information from their snitches. The relationship is purposefully unequal: Ellroy's rogue cops hold two principles sacred: 'PROTECT YOUR INFORMANTS' and 'COW YOUR INFORMANTS' (Ellroy 1995: 121, 123). The question of protection has little to do with the lawman's minimum responsibility for a prisoner or suspect in his custody. Rather, it is aimed at keeping open the channel of communication that leads to power and knowledge. On the other hand, the idea of cowing your informant is based, first, on violence – or the threat of violence. In Ellroy's novels informants are regularly beaten up until they reveal what they know or swear their loyalty. But Ellroy's extortionists, acting as metonymies of the Althusserian state, work through both violence *and* ideology.

The sense of exploitation is strengthened by a crucial feature shared by many of the informants. Unlike those in power, they embody instances of marginalized and/or subordinate masculinities, mainly black and homosexual, so that they are readily victimized by the representatives of the hegemonic models of masculinity. Ellroy's fiction reproduces the array of material practices, such as political and cultural exclusion, racist and homophobic abuse, and legal and street violence, which ensure the dominance of the white, straight man (Connelly 2015: 76–8). On the other hand, non-hegemonic male characters struggle to land on their feet in a hierarchized, hypermasculine white world of binary opposites, where the alternative to being 'a white man' is being 'a weak sister' (Ellroy 2001: 44). Examples abound in the trilogy: two homosexual and non-WASP real-life figures like film actor Sal Mineo – 'talented and given to Greek profligacy' (Ellroy 2001: 530) – and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin – 'both a Communist and a homosexual, which marks him as a *rara avis* by all sane standards' (Ellroy 2001: 140) – become the target of the agents in need of insider information. Likewise,

the first informant of agent Ward Littell in *American Tabloid* is comedian Lenny Sands, Jewish and gay. The nature of Littell's mastery over Sands is explicit in his warning: 'You're a homosexual and a murderer. You have no rights' (Ellroy 1995: 135).

It may be argued that, within the grand scale of things, Littell, Sands's handler, is as downtrodden as his informant. In *American Tabloid*'s survival race, the odds seem to be against him: at any rate, he comes across as a man of faith and ideals rather than of action, more skilled at planting wires than at punching thugs. In contrast to Pete Bondurant's hyper-violent, macho persona and the perennial cool and charm of Kemper Boyd, Littell is initially depicted as a pious character easily emasculated by colleagues and rivals. However, as he becomes further tangled up in conspiracies and duplicitous activities, he comes to embody a different type of masculinity, to the point of having Bondurant declare, 'We know you're the smartest and the strongest now' (Ellroy 1995: 562). This reassertion of his masculinity depends on the continuing oppression of other male characters such as Sands, who is strong-armed into serving as an informant and celebrity dirt digger for all three point-of-view characters in the novel. As such, he facilitates the shakedown of JFK, which eventually prompts him to take his own life. But instead of going down in defeated silence, he exposes the wiretap operation against the president, which hastens the occurrence of the fall of the agents of oppression. What is more, his suicide note provides an ominous sense of fulfilment to Littell's warning. 'I am a homosexual,' Sands writes in blood on the wall of the hotel room where he kills himself (Ellroy 1995: 514). His words turn suicide into an improbable act of resistance, in which he proudly flags the sexual identity that contributed to the abuse he suffered.

While the story of Sands emphasizes his sexual orientation, more so than his Jewish heritage, in one of the storylines of *Blood's a Rover* the race question complicates the portrayal of sexuality even further. The central figure in this subplot is Marshall Bowen, a black police officer and a closeted homosexual coerced into becoming an FBI informant. As part of the FBI Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) aimed at organizations and activities deemed as subversive, Bowen is used as a plant guy infiltrating black nationalist groups. He supplies information to operatives Dwight Holly and Wayne Tedrow Jr., who unscrupulously use Bowen's sexuality as an element of coercion. Tedrow pushes Bowen – literally and figuratively – into creating internal friction within the African-American community in the following terms: 'Wayne pushed him into the fence ... . "You're going to ... pick a public fight with Jomo. ... You're



going to call him a ‘punk-ass, evil, no-account nigger’, and I’ll be there to watch you do it. ... You’ll do it. I’ll tell the world that you’re a faggot if you don’t” (Ellroy 2009: 337). The key point being that, in the case of Bowen, a particular discourse on sexuality – which can be roughly identified as heteronormativity, or compulsory heterosexuality – is used by other characters to exercise their control. The subject position of a character such as Bowen is particularly shaky given the homophobia of the two systems he is forced to wade through: the Los Angeles Police Department and the Black Power movement. The novel thus hints at the importance of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in the analysis of the investigator–informant relationship, which prefigures the shift from Althusser to Foucault. After all, one of the reasons that incited the latter to transcend an Althusserian approach to the issues of ideology and power was what he perceived to be the excessive reliance of Marxism on economic questions and class struggle. These were necessary to address the question of power, but not enough. The theory of Foucault addresses other categories of the individual, such as sexuality, gender or race, of whose importance Ellroy’s characters are fully aware.

## Compartmentalization and paranoia

Another essential concept in facilitating a transition from an Althusserian to a Foucauldian approach to power relations in the *Underworld USA Trilogy* is ‘compartmentalization’. In the network of conspiracies and undercover missions where Ellroy’s ‘bad men’ operate, compartmentalization becomes a way of life more than a professional practice. Not only business associations, but also memories, affections and desires are enclosed. There is a rationale behind this practice: if they remain independent from one another, they will yield a profit more easily. In *American Tabloid*, Kemper Boyd is the master compartmentalizer. His plethora of affiliations, is eloquently described by John Stanton less than one-fourth into the novel: ‘You were an FBI agent on Tuesday, a prospective pimp for Jack Kennedy on Wednesday, and a McClellan Committee investigator on Thursday’ (Ellroy 1995: 130). As an FBI operative blessed with the ‘skills of dissembling and duplicity’, Boyd follows Hoover’s instructions to sabotage John F. Kennedy in the months prior to the presidential elections (Ellroy 1995: 24). Once he enters the sphere of influence of the Kennedys, Boyd first procures prostitutes for JFK and then works as his security manager. He also joins Robert

F. Kennedy's crusade against organized crime in the McClellan Committee, and against racial exclusion in the Department of Justice. These roles do not inhibit him from collaborating with the CIA and the Mafia against Castro and JFK, while he facilitates the connection between the CIA and the Ku Klux Klan. In the words of Ward Littell, Boyd has 'the Kennedys and Cuba and God knows what else wrapped in tidy little packages that only he knows the logic of' (Ellroy 1995: 440). But that logic will soon crumble. From start to finish, the shadow of Hoover looms large over his actions.

In her analysis of *American Tabloid*, Isabelle Boof-Vermesse points out that 'compartmentalization is evidence of the agency of some kind of mastermind and indicates the presence of a superior perspective' (Boof-Vermesse 2004: 101). Therefore, its success would have implied, at least to a certain extent, an Althusserian conception of the repressive state, with its pyramidal hierarchy and fundamentally restrictive purpose. Only a figure with the sway of the panopticon – designed by Jeremy Bentham and subsequently adopted by Foucault as a model of disciplinary power – could control a system of relations as unstable as that in which Boyd is enmeshed. J. Edgar Hoover has the qualifications to be such a figure. As the closest to a mastermind in the trilogy, he 'alter[s] the course of American history everyday' (Ellroy 2009: 218). Indeed, all the main characters end up working for him sooner or later – knowingly or not. He is like the artist for Flaubert: everywhere felt but nowhere – or hardly ever – seen, impacting on those within his reach. The system of control that ensues is as efficient as Bentham's. Hoover's agents mirror the inmate 'who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it', therefore assuming 'responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself ...; he becomes the principle of his own subjection' (Foucault 1977a: 202–3). The actions of Boyd, Littell or Bowen are guided by the uncertainty of whether Hoover – or any of his many agents – is watching. But Ellroy makes a point of finishing his project with the death of the now physically and mentally impaired Hoover. The decline of Hoover, along with the succeeding Watergate scandal – which Ellroy chooses to leave out of his narration, aside from the faintest of allusions (Birnbaum 2001) – is foreshadowed by the conservative downfall epitomized by the American catastrophe in Vietnam and the success – insufficient as it was – of the civil rights movement.

The limited autonomy of the individual, the variety of sources of power and the multiplicity of power relations make compartmentalization a failure. Characters who believe in and practice containment tragically fail to grasp that

‘each individual, separate, selfish plot influences the others’, which leads Boof-Vermesse to explore the social history offered in *American Tabloid* through chaos theory – based on a self-organized system where interdependency is a factor of efficiency – instead of through conspiracy theory – which requires effective compartmentalizing (Boof-Vermesse 2004: 100–1). In other words, Ellroy’s fiction is propelled by interconnection, which is also what always interested Foucault, rather than ‘the primacy of this over that’ (Foucault 1982: 254). As Jim Mancall argues, compartmentalization ultimately ‘leads to collapses and breakdown’ (Mancall 2014: 49). That being so, the destiny of Kemper Boyd is sealed when he steals a large supply of Mob heroin sent by Raúl Castro. With typical understatement Hoover notes that Boyd is ‘ubiquitous and quite overextended’, and this state of affairs will prove fatal (Ellroy 1995: 457).

The plot that leads to Boyd’s fall from grace, and eventual murder, is by no means exceptional. Different as Ellroy’s approach to Boyd and to Ward Littell is in terms of background information and character development, their storylines present noteworthy parallelisms and share a similar endpoint. Littell is first introduced as Boyd’s colleague and friend soon to become his competitor and enemy. He is the third narrator of *American Tabloid*: an ex-Jesuit seminarian and expert wireman with a law degree, assigned to the FBI Red Squad as a close observer of the activities of harmless leftists. Then, with the help of Boyd, he is temporarily upgraded to the Top Hoodlum Program. After performing poorly and being downgraded again by Hoover, Littell devotes himself to large-scale dissembling. He becomes an undercover informant for Robert F. Kennedy through Boyd while he tries to gain possession of the accounting books of the Mafia, which reveal the existence of a pension fund used to finance the Mob’s rackets, and it also details the organized crime connections of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. In order to do so, he sets up a network of informants, unknown to one another, funded with money stolen from criminals. Along the way, his increasing socialist sympathies earn him a pro-communist profile. Like most of the agents in the trilogy, Littell keeps falling in and out of favour with Hoover, but is constantly monitored by the FBI director regardless of his position.

Shortly after getting hold of the pension fund books, and as he distances himself from Boyd and Robert F. Kennedy, Littell becomes the lawyer of mobster Carlos Marcello. That is only the first step in a chain of alliances that turn him, both in *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand*, into the de facto Mafia lawyer. Laundering money in Latin America and selling Las Vegas casinos to Howard Hughes stand out among the Mob’s most profitable operations, which

do not preclude him from having an active participation in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, tacitly endorsed by Hoover. However, the ever-increasing layers of ruthlessness and corruption have not completely erased Littell's idealistic and religious side. Thus, tormented by the guilt of having been involved in the execution of three charismatic leaders whom he has admired at one point or another – 'The Triad: Jack/King/Bobby' (Ellroy 2001: 668) – he commits suicide. Even in atonement, he chooses an act of violent permanence.

According to Boof-Vermesse, Littell gets caught into 'a complex crisscross with loops going backwards, or with unexpected lateral connections', kick-started when he established his web of informants – which he 'had planned to be a linear "string" of relays' (Boof-Vermesse 2004: 102). Although he manages to compartmentalize and survive ten years of juggling his roles in both the FBI and the Underworld, he meets a violent end, putting a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger. The arc of Littell's emotional and physical journey and his death highlight the predicament of Ellroy's men: handlers and informants, social leaders and drifters, they are all trapped in the same quagmire. In a peculiar example of democratic fiction, the assassination of the president is tackled as yet another occurrence in an entangled pattern of actions, as an event with little more iconic significance than the anonymous death of any downtrodden snitch – a distinctive approach, to say the least, given the status of figures such as JFK or MLK within the American imaginary, 'the assassination was but one murder in a long series of murders' (Duncan 1996: 78).

Of all the characters, few are able to survive and surpass the weave of competing discourses. J. Edgar Hoover survives the longest, sitting at the top of an apparatus that assures the success of the state of permanent surveillance, and his death symbolizes the end of the Underworld era, more so than the political assassination of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King which shock the nation. Don Crutchfield, a real-life private investigator of the period, becomes the triumphant character of the trilogy by causing the death of Hoover. The first-person narrator of the opening and closing sections of *Blood's a Rover* who has 'window-peeped four years of our History' (Ellroy 2009: 9), Crutchfield discovers the mutilated body of a woman and, from that point on, will be involved in a number of plots concerning, among others, the Los Angeles Police Department, the anti-Castro cause and Mafia collaboration with Joaquín Balaguer's regime in the Dominican Republic. Crutchfield often finds himself at a loss, navigating an unfathomable world of unlikely affiliations and double crosses to the best of

his skills. Yet unlike Holly and Tedrow, the other two main narrators of the final volume, he not only survives, but also performs the role of the implicit narrator of the entire Underworld series, an alter-ego of Ellroy. As such, he has the opportunity to project himself outside the realm of personal and social relations drawn by this fictional world, and eventually, to act and speak with the freedom that detachment grants.

Indeed, Crutchfield voices the final remarks of the last volume, the text appearing in italics, echoing the prologue to *American Tabloid* in which Ellroy directly addresses the reader, and the plan for the trilogy is laid out. Through this identification between Ellroy and Crutchfield, the latter brings Hoover's intradiegetic mastery to a metafictional level, arising as the owner of the totalizing vision which seeks to develop a master-narrative of US history – a totalitarian project hinted at by Boof-Vermesse (2004: 100) and Walker (2002: 184). It is no coincidence that Crutchfield strikes the final blow at Hoover, who suffers a heart attack when he finds out that the private investigator has burned his cache of confidential files (Ellroy 2009: 634). At the core of Crutchfield's success lies the understanding that, in a world ruled by desire and vicissitudes, 'it's all connected': 'Convergence. Connection. Confluence. ... *It's who you know and who you blow and how you're all linked*' (Ellroy 2009: 453, 618). This realization allows him to impose his voice over that of more intrepid but less perceptive characters.

While the commented-on alliances of Kemper Boyd illustrate connectionism in the trilogy, the human entanglements that woven together create the network of power relations in *The Cold Six Thousand* provide an even more powerful example. Mormon tycoon Howard Hughes, plans to buy from the Mafia a large number of Las Vegas casinos through his lawyer, Ward Littell, who also works for the Mafia and plans to rip off Hughes on their behalf. Hughes wishes to keep the African-American population of Las Vegas under control, which can be accomplished by selling in black neighbourhoods the heroin manufactured by the Mafia. Two ex-cops, Wayne Tedrow Jr. and Pete Bondurant, manufacture the heroin in Vietnam, in an operation directed by a CIA agent. Tedrow and Bondurant had met in Dallas immediately after the JFK hit, which had been financed by Tedrow's father. Tedrow Sr. has connections with the Ku Klux Klan, and as a right-wing, Mormon businessman, he is also on good terms with both Howard Hughes and J. Edgar Hoover. Early on in the novel, Hoover implements a plan in which Ward Littell will infiltrate the circle of trust of Martin Luther King to discredit the civil rights movement. Soon after, Dwight Holly, also FBI

with Klan connections, starts planning the assassination of Martin Luther King, with the tacit approval of Hoover. Such a summary barely covers the essentials of the six-hundred-plus-page volume, but it gives a sense of the novel's portrayal of a detailed social system where power ebbs and flows.

Lee Spinks identifies in Ellroy a paranoid style, in which 'the multiplicity of narrative contexts ... exceeds the capacity (or the point of access to information) of the reader as private citizen' (Spinks 2008: 140). It could be added that the vertigo of facing the sphere of power operations at work in the Underworld USA Trilogy afflicts both readers *and* characters alike. The diary of left-wing revolutionary Karen Sifakis in *Blood's a Rover* attests to this: 'Everyone knows everyone else and suspects everyone else and *needs* everyone else as well. Political agendas and personal agendas shift along those lines' (Ellroy 2009: 126). In the same volume, Wayne Tedrow Jr. assumes the task of the attentive reader, trying to chart connections between characters: 'Wayne linked boxes. His wall graph was Op Art. Boxes and arrows off at odd angles. Boxes and arrows' (Ellroy 2009: 406). Ellroy's protagonists, as members of an array of institutions with very different goals, including the Mafia, the CIA, the FBI, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a number of police departments, influence one another in unexpected ways. The result is what Spinks calls the 'seamless continuity between law and crime' in which social actors play a game that takes place beneath the official version of history (Spinks 2008: 137). From and around them, power stems and rebounds, shifting shape, meaning(s), and objective(s).

The workings of institutions collide with personal and professional desires, producing unfathomable consequences. As Foucault asserts, 'Neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society' (Foucault 1978: 94). These words lead to the question of resistance. Foucault emphasizes that 'where there is power, there is resistance', which 'is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault 1978: 95). He identifies a multiplicity of points of resistance, present everywhere in the power network. Ellroy's novelistic project can be interpreted in itself as an antagonizing strategy. If the manipulation of historical truth is understood as a means of control by the powerful, then the production of counterfactual narratives and alternative histories becomes a form of contestation.

In the plots of the Underworld USA Trilogy, resistance crystallizes in many forms – for example, as the violent opposition posed by those 'wiretappers and soldiers of fortune' who, according to Ellroy's prologue to *American*

*Tabloid*, 'secretly define their time' (Ellroy 1995: 5). They choose to ignore the admonition, 'We must not interfere with men who are so much more powerful than we are' (Ellroy 1995: 478). Their claim to history breeds violence, with the macro-political result of the assassination of the representatives of both the RSA (John F. and Robert F. Kennedy) and the ISAs (Martin Luther King) – bringing about (the illusion of) immediate sociopolitical change. Ellroy also depicts the sacrificial and solitary resistance of the constantly victimized informant, such as Lenny Sands. Before committing suicide, Sands brings to light Boyd's conflicting affiliations, thereby destroying his good relationship with the Kennedys, hence proving how the actions of disreputable characters may have a direct impact on the members of the dominant class.

## Resistance and social transformation

In the *Underworld* series the most defiant acts of resistance take the form of subversive, anti-hegemonic discourses with an eye on social transformation. The discourses on white supremacy and the criminalization of black nationalism play an important part in Ellroy's account. A striking articulation is the FBI-sponsored conservative backlash known as 'Operation Black Rabbit', whose objective is to create 'distrust within the civil-rights movement' and to engender 'distrust and resentment' against Martin Luther King (Ellroy 2001: 355). Although these discourses are hegemonic and based on repression, they are also dynamic and spring from a variety of power knots: thus, racist discourses are promoted by Hoover – representative of a governmental institution – by Hughes – representative of the media as owner of the *Hush-Hush* rag – or by the Ku Klux Klan. But at the same time, as a consequence of repressive politics and actions, there emerges a multifaceted web of resistances, whose figurehead is the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Foucault points out that 'the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible' (Foucault 1978: 95–6). In this case, that revolutionary resistance materializes in the civil rights movement and the rise of militant organizations such as the Black Panthers. The subsequent schism in the social fabric represents the effects of oppression, in a Foucauldian fashion. Instead of producing silence and negation, the COINTELPRO activities against black nationalist leaders and institutions

radicalize their position and bring them closer to their goals: the more powerful the racist discourse, the stronger the response. However, this interplay is not to be mistaken as a discourse and a counter-discourse aimed at nullifying each other, but as different discourses with different objectives. Accordingly, the triumph of the discourse of challenge hinges on its being primarily concerned with the self-affirmation of the African-American community.

This chapter has sought not to incur the danger of bending a fictional world to make it fit a particular epistemology or model of social interactions. After all, much as his work has attracted the attention of historians such as Jonathan Walker, Ellroy is first a novelist. What I have proposed is a different approach to Ellroy's fictional universe in order to discern the extent to which it can illuminate our understanding of social processes. The attempts of Althusser and Foucault to grasp the workings of social relations may bear little apparent resemblance to Ellroy's narrative and aesthetic preoccupations. But the writings of these three authors help us rethink the links between ideology, (public and private) history, subjectification or social transformation in the present times. Despite being repeatedly labelled 'nihilistic' – an adjective he rejects (Walker 2002: 193) – Ellroy's approach to the configuration of power relations offers, at the very least, one auspicious sign. It shows that acts of resistance are not only possible but necessary to restrain the forces of the powerful, despite the great personal and social costs attached. Some of the 'bottom-feeders' that inhabit his novels may succeed because they are fictional characters that have been extended the privilege of working on the fringes, outside social norms instead of 'in the strategic field of power relations', the only place where there can be resistances according to Foucault (Foucault 1978: 96). We are all subject to the norms of society and the construction and dissemination of power, even if we are actively defying them, which makes success in real life a bit more difficult. Nevertheless, Ellroy's prose allows the reader to view reality from an uncompromising perspective, underscoring how important it is to acknowledge the polymorphous relations of power that define contemporary societies.



## *White Jazz: Paradoxes of Race in the LA Quartet*

Joshua Meyer

James Ellroy's *LA Quartet* details a post-war Los Angeles shot through with racist invective, and crowded with racial stereotypes. Here, racial otherness is treated as a form of criminal disorder that must be brought under control by the city's ostensibly orderly institutional powers, not least by means of the criminal investigations pursued by the Quartet's detectives. In this context, writing on Ellroy's work has tended to frame his treatment of race in terms of an oppositional relationship between an authoritative, majoritarian, and monolithic whiteness on the one hand and a criminalized racial alteriority on the other. Nevertheless, this oppositional structure is subject in turn to its own internal schisms, and generative of a series of disruptive potentials, because the systems of racial difference by which the urban power structure maps out criminal identities in the Quartet are themselves fundamentally paradoxical. This chapter examines the ways in which Ellroy's treatment of race in the Quartet thus appears at once to affirm a discourse of racial essentialism at the origins of the detective genre, and to subvert that discourse by aligning it with some profoundly paradoxical and contradictory patterns of racial signification. It tracks these paradoxes and contradictions through the Quartet's representations of race and criminal identity, paying particular attention to the ways in which these representations are mediated by the subjective engagements of the novels' investigators with the racialized inhabitants of Ellroy's Los Angeles – with non-white bodies, and the threat of violent and sexual mayhem these bodies are taken to pose. It is by way of these subjective engagements that the Quartet implicates us, its readers, in these problematic patterns of racial signification, by inviting us to rely on misleading racial clues in our attempts to solve its criminal mysteries – an affective implication that opens the texts to a critique of the racial essentialism that they might otherwise appear to affirm.

In the opening pages of *The Black Dahlia*, Officer Dwight 'Bucky' Bleichert is driven by a troop carrier into the heart of downtown Los Angeles. Bleichert is one of a division of patrolmen assigned to police the 'Zoot riots': a series of racially charged attacks by US servicemen on Mexican Angelinos, which escalated into violent clashes between these groups and the police, in downtown LA, in May and June of 1943.

Hundreds of in-uniform soldiers, sailors, and marines descended on downtown LA, armed with two-by-fours and baseball bats. An equal number of pachucos were supposed to be forming ... Every Central Division patrolman was called in to duty, then issued a World War I tin hat and an oversized billy club known as a nigger knocker. At dusk, we were driven to the battleground in personnel carriers borrowed from the army, and given one order: restore order. (Ellroy 1987: 11)

Bleichert's narration of the riots is the Quartet's first description of Los Angeles, and it captures much of what is essential to Ellroy's city as it appears in the series – an overtly historicized urban scene awash with racial violence, in which the detective is charged with the task of upholding the seemingly orderly imperatives of the state against the supposed threat of the non-white populace (the gang of pachucos who are 'supposed to be forming' remain unseen and purely suppositional here). In this latter respect, it is instructive that Ellroy's retelling of the riots focuses on the militarization of the police, both in detailing their equipment (tin hats, personnel carriers), and in the language of Bleichert's description, in which downtown LA becomes a 'battleground'. This superficial resemblance signals a deeper alignment between the policemen assigned to 'restore order', and the military personnel 'descend[ing]' on the city in pursuit of racial violence – as do their tools of regulatory force, the 'nigger knocker[s]'.

Nevertheless, Bleichert's narration runs counter to this project of racial control, attesting to the inequity of the violence on the streets: 'soldiers and jarheads overturned cars parked in front of a bodega while navy youths in skivvies and white bell-bottoms truncheoned the shit out of an outnumbered bunch of zooters on the sidewalk' (Ellroy 1987: 12). Moreover, with 'chaos ... coming down from all sides' (11), 'gunshots and flaming palm trees' (15), and 'marines in dress blues systematically smashing streetlights' (12), 'it was', as Bleichert relates the scene, 'almost impossible to distinguish zooters from GIs' (Ellroy 1987: 11–15). As the symbolic implication of this last detail suggests, the visual confusion of the scene registers the collapse of an assumed moral order in

which racial difference may be relied upon as a marker of criminal disorder and moral wickedness – as Bleichert puts it, in a phrase that betrays its own starkly racist assumptions, ‘I was terrified because the good guys were really the bad guys’ (Ellroy 1987: 12). But when an elderly resident watching the chaos from his porch sympathetically observes that it’s ‘kinda hard to tell who to put the cuffs on’, Bleichert’s blustering response that ‘there’s some pachucos that need their order restored’ is telling, and not only for its omission of the GIs (Ellroy 1987: 12). Bleichert understands as soon as he gets out of the personnel carrier who the real ‘bad guys’ are. His retort to the old man functions as an attempt, in the face of overwhelming disorder, to bolster his own resolve by adopting the voice of the authority he represents. That is, by naming the situation in a way that ignores the criminal violence of the state (or at least those wearing its uniforms), and casting their non-white victims as a disorderly criminal class, Bleichert is simply saying what he thinks the LAPD would say. Thus, when his interlocutor asks if Bleichert really ‘think[s] it’s that simple’, Bleichert’s reply gives voice to a white urban power structure whose idea of order relies on the criminalization of racial difference: ‘I’ll make it that simple’ (Ellroy 1987: 12).

This example might seem historically discrete. After all, the ‘zoot riots’ really did take place, and their description in *The Black Dahlia* (however embellished) is freighted with the hard-boiled reality effect Ellroy claims for his fiction by his inclusion of other real historical figures and events (like the murder of Elizabeth Short, the eponymous Black Dahlia), and his descriptions of an evocatively periodized urban landscape. It is also part of his work’s examination of specific forms of power in mid-twentieth-century America. But the Quartet’s opening scene also articulates a logic of racial classification and control that has been bound up with detective fiction from its inception.

Since the birth of the modern detective story, race has been central to the genre’s representations of crime and criminal identity. This is partly a product of the generic form, which demands the inclusion of seemingly reliable and visible signs of identity, in order that we may distinguish the criminal (or criminals) from the confusing array of suspects who populate the story. But it is also because this narrative project of identifying criminality is itself historically entwined with cultural anxieties about the racial other, and with the empirical aspirations of nineteenth-century discourses on race.

As Walter Benjamin notes, ‘The menacing aspect of the masses ... is at the origin of the detective story’ (Benjamin 1938: 40). It was after all in the ‘disquieting and threatening’ space of the newly bustling, mid-nineteenth-

century Paris (Benjamin 1938: 40) that Poe, an American, set his originary *Tales of Ratiocination*, which – together with the generic urform represented by his ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840) – established the standard by which the detective’s quest for meaning and order was set against the murderous potentials of what Charles Rzepka has called in this context, ‘the modern city of strangers’ (Rzepka 2005: 38). Of the strangeness of these strangers the case has often been made that the first of Poe’s *Tales* – ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841) – figures the story’s simian killer in its brutish animality, its apparent unreason, its unintelligibility and its uncanny near-humanity as ‘the threatening savage foreigner that had to be contained’ (Thomas 2003: 52).

If racial otherness thus entered the detective story as a form of strangeness so frightful, so inhuman, as to warrant physical and narrative containment, it is also the case that the rationalizing force of the detective, and the narrative of investigation, were at least historically congruent with a range of classificatory practices designed to bring under control the threat that such strangeness was apparently taken to pose. Here, too, Benjamin offers a suggestive observation, noting that the first detective stories appeared during the ‘great period’ of another genre – the ‘physiology’, which aimed to classify all the bodies in the city, and so develop an exhaustive taxonomy of urban ‘types’ (Benjamin 1938: 35). As Ronald Thomas has observed, the ‘fantasies of social control’ offered by the emergent genre of detective fiction coincided with the flourishing of a range of bogus pseudo-sciences like phrenology and physiognomy, which attempted to classify individual subjects according to their physical attributes, and which were instrumental in the development of new systems of criminological classification based on purportedly essential and embodied racial characteristics. Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* (1876), which posits an atavistic basis for criminal dispositions, as well as a distinct criminological phenotype, is perhaps the most famous of these attempts at classification (Thomas 2003: 4). Here, as Thomas argues, ‘Constructions of the criminal body around a “science” of racial typing ... [found] a fitting cultural imaginary in the new literary form of the detective story’ (Thomas 2003: 5). Thus the classic detective story can be seen to have established an oppositional discourse on race, in which the mysterious racial other was cast as a locus of criminal disorder, while the practice of racial classification – together with the rationalizing force of the hermeneutic narrative itself – was deployed as a strategy by which to dispel criminal disorder by policing the limits of race.

Of course, the putative set of relations among race, crime and the bodies of strangers set out in *Criminal Man*, and discernible in ‘The Murders in the Rue

Morgue', is far from implicit in the genre. Detective fiction's narrative project of identifying criminals lends itself to broader explorations of identity, and of the ways in which criminal identities in particular find form at the intersections of a number of social discourses – of law, class, race, gender, sexuality, medicine and so on – that are not always congruous with one another. The complex intersubjectivities involved with Chester Himes' Harlem detective novels – which draw on the tonal and stylistic elements of hard-boiled fiction to describe his black detectives' investigations of mostly black neighbourhoods – and Mala Nunn's more recent Emmanuel Cooper novels – which investigate Apartheid South Africa through the eyes of its mixed-race investigator passing as white – offer just two historically disparate examples of the genre's openness to revisions, inversions and problematizations of the fractious binaries of racial difference that were written into its early texts. Indeed, a good deal of critical debate on the genre has focused on the extent to which it may be defined by its traditionally conservative operation, or by its radical and subversive potentials. Such tensions in the genre's representations of racial difference speak to its particular sensitivity as a register of evolving social anxieties, criminal realities and attitudes to the knowability of the world: a 'valuable barometer', in Dennis Porter's words, 'of society's ideological norms' (Porter 1981: 1). So perhaps it is in part because of the doubled historical commitments of Ellroy's LA Quartet – set in the 1940s and 1950s, but published between 1987 and 1992 – that the novels' figurations of racial difference are fraught with paradoxes and contradictions.

Limning the critical responses to Ellroy's representations of race, Jim Mancall notes the way writers on the subject have been drawn to 'the vexing contradictions that surround the treatment of race in his books' (Mancall 2014: 165). Mancall's overview repeatedly returns to the question of how we are to read the racism of Ellroy's characters, including, and especially, his detective protagonists. Reading Ellroy, it is difficult to avoid such questions. As Ellroy himself puts it, describing his 2001 novel, *The Cold Six Thousand*, his work is 'written largely in the language of racism ... seen from the perspective of racist characters bent on enforcing a racist agenda' (Birnbaum 2001). But is this racism in the service of historical verisimilitude, a 'demythologizing' as Ellroy has called it, of post-war America (Ellroy 1995: 5)? Is the hyperbolic racist language and racial violence in his writing parodic? Or does his fiction simply articulate a racism that its historical settings ultimately fail to justify or conceal?

Mike Davis offers a remarkably direct assessment of Ellroy's racial attitudes in the *Chicago Review*, calling the author 'a neo-Nazi': 'It's racist ... and it's

not because he's trying to display an actuality. ... James Ellroy is one of the worst examples of ... a more literally fascistic culture than Nazi Germany was' (Frommer 1993: 39–40). Other writers have identified a series of tensions and oppositions in Ellroy's writing on race. Julian Murphet sees in Ellroy's work 'a primary opposition between a dominant, white administrative centre and the streets of race and class otherness' (56). In Murphet's view, Ellroy's work projects an impossibly nostalgic wish-image of the 'synthesis' of these opposing elements in his 'experimental prose in which the two contradictory tendencies ... are driven feverishly into each other' (Murphet 2001: 57). Jon Clay's Deleuzian reading of race in Ellroy's fiction is similar in its focus, although the conclusions at which it arrives are perhaps more optimistic. For Clay, the 'majoritarian' whiteness embodied by Ellroy's police detectives is set against a 'minorisation of language' that takes place when their speech is inflected with the language of 'their adversaries ... criminals, black and Hispanic people, and homosexuals' (Clay 2010: 95, 97). Andrew Pepper identifies 'race in Ellroy's *LA Quartet* ... [as] perhaps the crucial axis of social division' (Pepper 2000: 43). Pepper points to the way the urban power structure of Ellroy's *LA* figures blackness as 'a signifier of mindless savagery' in a bid 'to secure and legitimise white hegemony', but argues that this diegetic figuration of black criminality is ultimately 'shaken up' by, among other things, the novels' prominent inclusion of aberrant white characters (Pepper 2000: 44).

In thinking through the conflicts and contradictions surrounding race in Ellroy's works, these writers have produced a series of readings of a diegetic society and its ideological implications, exploring the novels' figurations of race and racism by focusing on the racist language of their protagonists, and examining the ways in which this language might be seen to relate to the attitudes of the LAPD, which employs them, and the broader systemic and discursive order of Ellroy's *LA*. What I shall consider here are the crucial ways in which Ellroy's treatment of racial difference – and the tensions and contradictions it involves – are bound up with the problems of criminal identity posed by the *Quartet*'s narratives of investigation. In this context, examining race in the *Quartet* means tracking the interactions of the novels' detectives with the racialized subjects they encounter in the course of their search for the criminal, the ways in which they read, and describe as clues, these subjects' performances of racial difference, and the violent criminal and sexual possibilities they invariably seem to detect in the presence of non-white bodies. Naturally, these engagements constitute the chief site of contestation between the city's violently oppressive, largely

white institutional powers (which, despite some important acts of resistance, *are* broadly reified in the Quartet's detectives), and the racialized criminal subjects of Ellroy's LA. And because the detectives' engagements with the diegetic world are also the mechanism of the stories' narration – especially in the first-person narration of *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz*, but also in the heavily focalized third-person narratives of *The Big Nowhere* and *L.A. Confidential* – their readings of race are structurally inseparable from the formal composition of the Quartet and the advance of its hermeneutic narratives.

What is initially striking about Ellroy's treatment of racial difference is that the oppositional discourse on race at the foundation of the genre – which casts racial otherness as a criminal mystery in need of often-forceful resolution – precisely describes the attitude of the urban power structure that controls Los Angeles in the Quartet. And this includes the police detectives who instrumentalize that control by way of their violent imposition of geographic, discursive and bodily strictures of race. *White Jazz* opens on a raid on a 'bookie mill' in a black neighbourhood (Ellroy 1992: 11). Its narrator, Lieutenant Dave Klein, describes the scene: 'Perfect: a Niggertown street cordoned off; bluesuits guarding the alley ... Porch loafing jigs with voodoo eyes' (Ellroy 1992: 11). Thus, we enter a physically circumscribed racial space that is also, and reciprocally, a criminalized zone. This is presumably what Klein thinks is 'perfect' about the crime scene – that it is 'cordoned off' not only in the sense that the criminals inside it are unlikely to escape it, or innocent civilians to enter it, but also in the sense that, in Ellroy's Los Angeles, an isolated 'Niggertown street' is precisely where crime is supposed to take place, and is committed by precisely the people by whom it is supposed to be committed. Of the six arrests that follow the raid, only two arrestees are described as 'a nigger coughing glass. A pachuco minus some fingers' (Ellroy 1992: 12).

Correspondingly, Ellroy's detectives' negotiations of the urban geography tend to figure perceived transgressions of racial limits in terms of criminal disorder. One of *Perfidia's* central crimes – the murder of a Japanese family, staged to look like a ritual suicide – sends the LAPD clamouring to find a Japanese suspect, guilty or otherwise. And this is largely in response to the racial tensions provoked as the bodies are discovered on the day prior to the attack on Pearl Harbour. This institutional response – which explicitly criminalizes racial otherness – is mirrored by the screaming white crowd that mobs outside the victims' house, a crowd whose outrage is at least partly engendered by the very presence of the Watanabes in a neighbourhood that is otherwise, as one

character tellingly puts it, 'white and clean' (Ellroy 2014: 61). And it is perhaps suggestive that this outrage at the Watanabes' perceived transgression of racial limits survives the Watanabes themselves, and lingers as a collective, white animosity towards the mere corporeal presence of non-white bodies. Thus, as with the first line of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, which opens on 'one of the mixed blocks over on Central Avenue ... that are *not yet* all Negro', Ellroy's writing intimates a persistent concern with the threat of encroachment, and the perceived destabilization of racial limits (Chandler 1940: 7 my emphasis). Here, diversity in the urban environment reads as criminal disorder.

Nor, as this example begins to suggest, are the cordons that delimit racial difference in Ellroy's LA wholly material. The physical barricade of 'bluesuits' guarding the alley by the bookie mill in *White Jazz* is effectively buttressed, for example, by the discursive force of the term 'Niggertown'. In this respect, the scene is typical of Ellroy's relentlessly racist post-war Los Angeles, in which the necessity of traversing the city in search of answers calls repeated attention to its racial segregation, linguistically enforced by names like 'Niggertown' and 'Darktown' – names that, in their capitalizations, mark the outward authority of such divisions, conferring on them the apparent propriety of proper nouns. In *White Jazz*, these segregations also work to structure the text itself, which is divided into parts with titles like 'Darktown Red' and 'Money Jungle' – titles that conspicuously evoke the anthropological and the ethnographic through their invocations of African blood and the 'dark continent'.

In a similar way, the system of racial differences staked out by the geographic and discursive segregation of the street seems to be borne out by the bodies of its black residents. The apparent immobility of these bodies, denoted by the phrase 'porch loafing jigs', invokes the racist stereotype of African-American indolence by grounding that invocation in the racialized body. Even more suggestive, perhaps, is the sense of embodied racial identity delivered by the phrase 'voodoo eyes'. Here, the division of urban space along racial lines appears to correspond to a system of racial differences written on the body – a correspondence that, like the criminological classifications of the nineteenth century, positions race as a fixed and immutable marker of identity, around which may be traced seemingly unproblematic geographic and discursive limits. But the scene also points to one of the central paradoxes involved with Ellroy's treatment of race. Plainly, the police barricade that hems the street and the social and discursive segregations marked out by terms like 'Niggertown' are not essential corollaries of blackness, but represent the mercenary imposition of racial barriers, barriers



that are deployed as though race were fixed and essential, but which, by their very existence, belie the fact that they are not. Put another way, if there is no threat of transgression, what is the use of the barricade?

Ellroy's work is full of such paradoxical figurations of race, and contradictory institutional anxieties about the stability of racial limits. In the LA Quartet, these paradoxes and contradictions find their most sustained expression in the criminal machinations of Dudley Smith, the Quartet's chief antagonist, whose obsession with racial classification and control is crystallized in his assessment of Hitler as 'a bit unruly', and his plan to sell stolen heroin to 'keep the Negro criminal elements sedated' (Ellroy 1992:156, 279). Indeed, Smith – a ranking policeman – personifies the institutional power that is so often revealed to be the true seat of villainy in the Quartet, and the source of its most hysterical racial paranoia.

Elsewhere, in Ellroy's Underworld USA trilogy, the shadowy figures of J. Edgar Hoover, Howard Hughes and Wayne Tedrow Sr. present a similar sort of hegemonic villainy. Their crimes are motivated as much by their pathological racism and their fears of various forms of (mostly) racial contamination as they are governed by more straightforwardly political and economic interests. The final two novels of the trilogy, *The Cold Six Thousand* and *Blood's a Rover*, in particular are concerned with the criminal plotlines that emanate from and converge in 'the FBI's war on the civil rights movement and ... Mr. Hoover's rabid racial animus', and throughout, Hoover is figured as the one who 'possesse[d] the power' (Ellroy 2009:460). As one character puts it, in a phrase that palpably evokes the forms of racialized criminality at the origins of the genre, 'Mr Hoover ... had created a myth ... it posited the unseen other as epidemically everywhere' (Ellroy 2009:460). Tedrow Sr. (who, like Hoover, is involved in the Kennedy and King assassinations) uses his position on the Nevada Gaming Board to aid his distribution of racist hate 'tracts' – 'Martin Luther Coon ... fat Jews with fangs' (Ellroy 2001:113). And (without too much effort) Ellroy casts Howard Hughes as 'a delusional xenophobe' obsessed with 'devis[ing] a policy to ensure that [his] hotels remain Negro- and germ-free' (Ellroy 1995: 494).

Of this vitriolic institutional racism, it is useful to note the physiological emphasis of Tedrow's racist pamphlets, Hughes's equation of African-Americans with bodily contamination, and the fact that Dudley Smith's plan to run Los Angeles's heroin trade centres on the hypodermic penetration and regulation of black bodies en masse. That is, much of this anxiety concerns the integrity of racialized bodies, and a corresponding institutional drive to regulate and

control the ostensibly transgressive potentials of the racial other. In this respect, the institutional powers that structure crime and punishment in Ellroy's world act according to a fundamentally paradoxical view of race, since the feared possibility that non-white bodies will trespass racial limits by definition relies on an essentialist model of racial difference that renders transgression impossible. Nevertheless, these hegemonic figures unerringly treat race as fixed and essential, even as they mobilize a host of proscriptive measures against the apparent threat of racial transgression.

The centrality of this paradox to Ellroy's representations of institutional racism might be read as parodic, as a critique of the absurd racialist logic that informs systemic power in Ellroy's world – all the more so for its inculcation in the criminally corrupt and violently oppressive forms of villainy represented by Smith, Hoover, Hughes, Tedrow and others like them. But this paradoxical anxiety about non-white bodies is not exclusive to Ellroy's tyrants. Rather, it suffuses a broader institutional discourse on the apparently criminal threat these bodies are taken to pose. Deputy Danny Upshaw encounters a telling rendition of this discourse in *The Big Nowhere*, in which Upshaw's cross-jurisdictional investigation of a series of murders is complicated by the conflict between the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) – a conflict that in part derives from the latter's ties with Jewish gangster Mickey Cohen. So, when Upshaw visits the LAPD's Hollywood division station about halfway through the novel, he finds pinned to the wall of the muster room '[a] cartoon ... Mickey Cohen, fangs, skullcap and a giant hard-on, pouring it up the ass of a guy in an LASD uniform. The deputy's pockets were spilling greenbacks; Cohen's speech balloon said: "Smile, sweetie! Mickey C. gives it kosher!"' (Ellroy 1988: 301). The point of the cartoon, of course, its joke, is the seemingly axiomatic way in which Cohen's criminal contamination of the LASD is conflated with the violent and sexual contamination implicit in his racialized body, a conflation that is deliberately naturalized by the attribution of metonymic physiological markers: 'Fangs', 'a giant hard-on'. By virtue of these markers, Cohen's Jewishness is presented as not simply suggestive of, but rather inseparable from, vampirism, sexual violation and dirty money. His fangs and erection lend rhetorical weight to the discourse of criminalized racial transgression by, paradoxically, grounding that discourse in the supposed ontological security of the racialized body. Nor are the Quartet's detectives easily separable from this paradoxical racial logic. Indeed, they are more often than not the instruments of its regulatory violence. Such is the case,

for example, with Bud White's confrontation with a troublesome passing figure in *L.A. Confidential*.

In the novel, White's investigation of a series of 'hooker snuffs' brings him into contact with Dwight Gillette (222), a pimp identified as 'high-yellow' passing as white (Ellroy 1990: 191). As one of Gillette's former prostitutes, Sinful Cindy, puts it, 'He lives in ... Eagle Rock. It's white only, so he plays it that way' (Ellroy 1990: 191). As a device for disguising criminal identity, passing of various kinds often has direct bearing on the Quartet's investigation narratives, as it does in detective fiction more broadly. But passing is of course itself a kind of contradictory discourse on race – a transgression of racial limits that depends upon the fixity and the visibility of those limits in order that there should be any meaningful difference between the racial type that is passed from and the type that is passed into.

Like many of the Quartet's passing figures, Gillette functions as a locus of indeterminacy, whose frustration of stable racial categories is bound to his criminality – not least by virtue of the ways in which this indeterminacy seems to threaten the pursuit of a major criminal investigation, and the subjectivity of the detective who pursues it. When White knocks on his door, Gillette refuses to give up his evidence (a 'whore book' that includes a list of his former prostitutes, among whom, White suspects, is included at least one of the dead women whose murders he is trying to solve) (Ellroy 1990: 193). Instead, he lunges at White with a knife. Indeed, White might have anticipated this response. After all, he has already learnt that Gillette's rap sheet gives the aliases 'Blade' and 'Blue Blade', and he has been told by Sinful Cindy that the knife is Gillette's weapon of choice (Ellroy 1990: 191). Thus, Gillette is at least doubly identified with an instrument of bodily penetration. His very name marks out this penetrative capacity, and the threat to bodily integrity that it entails – both by his actual name, and by the criminal aliases that pun on it. And while the threat of violence is perhaps the most prominent connotation here – and is itself by no means free of racial inflection – it also evokes familiar anxieties about the threat to the integrity of racial limits posed by penetrative black masculinity. In this respect, Gillette represents not only the symbolic threat of miscegenation – a consistent focus of racist paranoia in the Quartet – but also, as a person of mixed race, its fearful outcome (just as White's name identifies him with a seemingly authoritative and unproblematic racial identity). There is a suggestion of racial essentialism here, in the sense that the symbolic implications of his name seem perfectly to align with his enactment of race and criminality – he actually tries to penetrate

a policeman named White. Nevertheless, Gillette's very conformity to type is paradoxical: it is precisely the threat of transgression that marks his position squarely within the symbolic limits of race.

On the other hand, and despite the implications of Sinful Cindy's claim that Gillette merely 'plays' at whiteness while actually *being* something else, Bud White treats Gillette's body as a symbolic field in which race is open to performative revision. White's response to the knife attack is to feed Gillette's hand into a garbage disposal unit until his fingers are chewed off, and press the 'stumps to the burner coils' of a stove (Ellroy 1990: 193). This violent reshaping of Gillette's criminally indistinct form functions as a demonstration of White's classificatory power over the signifying surfaces of Gillette's body, and, specifically, the agentic hand. But it is also, and crucially, a literal blackening of this body. In this sense, Gillette's apparent performance of whiteness is directly counterposed to White's violent, state-sanctioned imposition of blackness. Here the paradoxical nature of White's classificatory violence is perhaps most apparent. There can be no stripping away of Gillette's 'false' whiteness, or revelation of 'true' blackness. White's blackening of Gillette's body is performative – a question not of race but of racing. Indeed, not only does the threat of racial transgression seem everywhere to rely on a racial essentialism that contradicts it, the Quartet presents the repeated, and, in this context, highly subversive suggestion that race is a discursive construction produced by the very representatives of institutional power who treat it as an intrinsic quality of the racialized subject.

Along these lines, Andrew Pepper has argued that the demonization of racial alterity by the white establishment in the Quartet – and particularly the discourse around criminal blackness produced by the LAPD – is so overt and pervasive that it effectively functions as a constructivist critique of racial difference: 'By making these strategies explicit, by intensifying the racist rhetoric of his various white-cop protagonists almost to the point of parody, Ellroy shatters any pretense that what he is representing is somehow either invisible or natural' (Pepper 2000: 45). Yet the Quartet is absolutely full of black junkies and pushers, Jewish communists and shysters, Mexican hoodlums and Irish and Italian thugs of various kinds. Set against the 'demythologizing' force of the texts (whatever their drive to historical verisimilitude), this glut of racist criminal stereotypes works to affirm the reliability of racial difference as a system of criminal identification in Ellroy's LA. The naturalization of associations between racial alterity and crime thus derives not only from

the Quartet's white characters, but also from the novels themselves. By way of these associations, non-white bodies are persistently made to appear monstrous and threatening. And because these bodies find form in a series of detective stories, they are significant not only in their diegetic corporeality, but also, and reciprocally, in their role as integers in a hermeneutic code, as clues – in which capacity they all too often function as reifications of narrative and epistemological disorder.

Despite his mutilation by White, Gillette still refuses to give up the 'whore book'. Instead, he lies to White about its location and, when White leaves the room in search of it, Gillette takes out the book and begins to eat it. With this act, Gillette consumes a text of taxonomic clarity into a body whose most prominent characteristic is its referential instability. His passing form becomes the mechanism by which he attempts to conceal the identities of those connected to the murders White is attempting to solve. Thus, in its near-literal obstruction of justice, Gillette's racialized body is itself presented as fundamentally criminal. For the same reason, it also produces a temporary disruption of the investigation narrative – exactly the sort of delay that Barthes identifies as the locus of 'disorder' in the hermeneutic code (Barthes 1970: 119). Nevertheless, Gillette's occlusion of the vital clue turns out to be only partial and temporary: 'Choke hold: Gillette spat out a half-chewed page' (Ellroy 1990: 193). The names listed on this page do eventually help White to solve the 'hooker snuffs'. But contact with Gillette has already rendered the 'whore book' tainted evidence: 'Bud picked up the wad, stumbled outside, burned flesh making him gag. He smoothed the paper out ... smeared, two [names] legible' (Ellroy 1990: 193). White's reading of this clue is enmeshed with the material traces of Gillette's contaminating racial identity – the smell of his flesh in White's nostrils, his saliva on the 'whore book', smearing the text.

What is essential here is that this convergence of legal, physiological and hermeneutic disorder in Gillette's racially indistinct form is not an action performed by White. Nor is it purely a discursive construction of his racist agenda. Though its description is inflected with White's disgust at coming into contact with Gillette's interior, this is a direct narratorial description of racial alteriority as an embodiment of crime and disorder. Thus, despite the plainly pragmatic classificatory violence that White imposes, his interaction with Gillette lays bare the central problem involved in the paradoxes of race that run through the Quartet, which is that the crucial distinction between reading race and constructing it is unstable.

In *White Jazz*, the story of Dave Klein's informant, Lester Lake, suggests an even deeper, and more paradoxical reticulation of supposedly innate racial characteristics with the modes of state-sanctioned violence that seek to regulate and control these characteristics in the city's non-white subjects. Driving south into 'Darktown', Klein reminisces about his history with Lake, which begins with an offer made to Klein by a Hollywood studio executive to kill Lake, for ten thousand dollars, because Lake has been sleeping with the executive's white girlfriend.

I said no ... don't kill him ... take the nigger someplace, cut his vocal chords. ... I grabbed Lester Lake at his crib: get cut or get killed – you call it. Lester said cut, fast, please ... Lester's voice went baritone to tenor – he chased jig poon strictly now. (Ellroy 1992: 50)

Lake's story reiterates the centrality of the sexualized body to Ellroy's representations of race. Like Gillette, Lake's sexuality is defined by a capacity for racial transgression, and his perceived infraction is met with similarly proscriptive violence. While Klein spares Lake's life, the cutting he inflicts is still deeply invested in marking out the limits of racial identity. Through the slicing of his vocal chords, Lake's body and his voice are permanently inscribed and regulated by the injunction not to have sex with white women. Indeed, we might read this act as an allegorical castration, by way of the associative cutting, and the emphasis on the elevated pitch of Lake's singing voice.

Here, the violence wrought by the detective succeeds in delimiting Lake's sexuality ('he chased jig poon strictly now'), and it also restricts his speech – 'he talked spook to the spooks' (Ellroy 1992: 50). But what is crucial here is the way in which Lake is made complicit in the strictures that are imposed on him; after all, Klein forces Lake to choose his mutilation – 'get cut or get killed – you call it' – and despite the horror of the act, Ellroy's treatment of the relationship between Lake and Klein naturalizes the assault. He even has Lake call it 'that old neck-slicin' time' (Ellroy 1992: 53). Here, then, it is not only the perceived characteristics of racial type that are inscribed onto the body; the authoritative violence that polices racial limits is itself treated as a natural component of the racialized body.

The Quartet offers a number of similarly suggestive encounters in which Ellroy's detectives treat race as fixed and essential not only as they construct it, but through, as it were, that construction. Consider the black bodies by the bookie mill. To Klein they appear as racist caricatures, lazily 'porch loafing'. It

seems not to occur to him that these residents might have been drawn to the street by the presence of police cars, reporters and detectives with shotguns outside their front doors – that is, by the same police activity that has put Klein in the very position from which they appear to him as stereotypes. We might note the same potential in Klein's description of their 'voodoo eyes', which is a racializing not only of their bodies, but also of their collective gaze, and an implicit reduction of their subjectivity to an already Africanized point of view. It might equally well be read as the watchfulness of a group of people who – in a black neighbourhood of Los Angeles, in 1958 – are used to police harassment, and who have opened their doors to find their street crowded with heavily armed policemen, when they are observed by Klein, the officer in charge of the operation. In this sense, what is particularly telling about Klein's description is the way it effaces the duality of the gaze; because these 'voodoo eyes' are not only watching, they are being watched. Indeed, they are, at a fundamental level, Klein's own subjective construction.

Here, Ellroy's writing of race presents a profoundly subversive possibility. If, as Thomas argues, 'constructions of the criminal body around a "science" of racial typing' found form in the detective story, this was not least by means of its central and defining figure, the literary detective, whose role as an agent of social control was necessarily bound up with the perceptual mastery he or she brought to bear on the process of detecting criminal bodies (Thomas 2003: 5). It is in this context that Jon Thompson calls C. August Dupin, the hero of Poe's originary 'tales of ratiocination', 'a figure whose omniscience is comparable to that of a panopticon' (Thompson 1993: 44). So it is significant that, over the course of the LA Quartet, the detectives' perceptual relationship with the world around them appears to become progressively erratic and unstable. Indeed, as the novels go on, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the ways in which their descriptions of the material world are modulated by the often-compromised subjectivities of their protagonists.

Both *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz* are first-person narratives told by damaged men, men whose traumas consistently manifest in perceptual slippages, doublings and hallucinations that are registered in their respective narrations. This is especially true of *White Jazz*, as seen in Dave Klein's narration of the scene in which he is drugged and coerced into the murder of Officer Johnny Duhamel: 'Get him, cut him – wild swings, misses. Johnny weaving ... Miss, hit, miss – pale skin ripped ... Hit, rip, rip – an arm gone, socket spray' (Ellroy 1992: 204). This sort of perceptual distortion is particularly noticeable where it is registered

in the first-person narrations of *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz*. But although *The Big Nowhere* and *L.A. Confidential* are third-person narratives, they are at times so heavily focalized, and inflected with the interior voices of their damaged protagonists, that they border on free-indirect discourse. Thus the apparently authoritative voices that modulate the Quartet's criminal tales suggest that their own descriptions of race as a fixed and indelible mark of criminality may themselves be subject to disorder, to slippages and transgressions.

This suggestion carries a particularly forceful affective implication in terms of the ways we read Ellroy's work as consumers of detective fiction. Overwhelmingly, the voice of disclosure in the detective story belongs to the detective. This is often most apparent in 'hard-boiled' fiction, in the wry narratorial tone that discloses truth to the reader, and which is typified by Marlowe's narration of Chandler's detective fiction. But even Watson's external, past-tense narration reserves for Holmes the privileged discursive space of the disclosure, and makes clear Watson's secondary status as a truth-teller. Likewise, Poe's narrator in the Dupin stories is constantly amazed by his companion's deductions, which are relayed, through dialogue, directly to the reader. Moreover, if the game of armchair detection is to be fairly played, we imagine, we must surely be able to rely on descriptions of the textual world that at least make clear those parts of it that are clues. So we are positioned by generic convention – and indeed by the generic form itself – to invest the detective's voice with ontological authority. Thus, when it comes to the LA Quartet, in which the detectives' readings of race appear to function – and function well – as an index of criminal identity, our attempts to solve the novels' criminal mysteries draw us into a hermeneutic process that prioritizes a rigid demarcation of racial difference, and invites us to work from the assumption (formed in response not only to the Quartet's narratorial descriptions of racial otherness, but also to its protagonists' interactions with non-white subjects) that race is the series' most reliable clue system. As we scan the textual world for clues, that is, we are forced to base our deductions about criminal identity on the racist descriptions we encounter there. However mindful we might be of the problematic and morally dubious nature of this sort of racial profiling, any attempt to solve the Quartet's criminal mysteries necessitates our participation in it. And here is the subversive possibility: because we are thereby complicit in the Quartet's racist constructions of criminal identity, the paradoxes and contradictions that work to disrupt these constructions work on *us* – not only at the remove of diegetic critique, but also directly, on our own investigative assumptions.



The Quartet's central mystery plots actually hinge on subverting apparently assured and unambiguous connections between race and crime. When Lee Blanchard is murdered in *The Black Dahlia*, we are led to believe in the possibility that he has been 'chopped up with an axe' by a broadly drawn stereotype of Latin volatility named Delores Garcia (Ellroy 1987: 270). Thus, we are forced to at least consider in our hunt for textual evidence, clues that adhere to this stereotype, and to read the textual world according to this apparent possibility. And it is our readerly investment in this possibility that underwrites the shock of the discovery that 'Delores Garcia' is in fact Madeline Sprague, the novel's femme fatale, who is otherwise treated as essentially non-racial in her whiteness, but who has in her murder of Blanchard appropriated racial signifiers in order to pass as Latina.

A similar pattern emerges in two of the Quartet's other central crimes: the murder of José Díaz in *The Big Nowhere*, and the mass shooting at the Night Owl Café in *L.A. Confidential*. In the case of the Díaz murder, apparently committed by a gang of Mexican youths, Ellroy positions us to accept that the murder weapon, the penetrative zoot stick (a two-by-four affixed with razor blades), is a stable sign of Latino identity. Similarly, the Night Owl murders produce a series of clues that invite us to attempt to solve the crime on the basis that the animalistic, apparently motiveless, violence of the murders is a reliable marker of a distinctively African-American form of criminality. The effects of this stereotyping are suggestively akin to the murders in the Rue Morgue: very little money is taken (seemingly ruling out a 'rational' profit motive), and the corpses are left faceless and heaped in 'a blood-soaked pile on the floor' of a walk-in food cooler (Ellroy 1990: 109).

Of course, reading these clues in this way is unlikely to persuade any but the most latently racist readers that, for example, black criminality *really* is more animalistic than white criminality. Even so, simply to accept, while we read, that Ellroy's LA is a racist world in which characters behave like racist stereotypes is to structure our own analytical engagement with that world as we would if we genuinely believed that people were aptly defined by the most malignant racial caricatures. That is, to read the LA Quartet with any intention of solving its criminal mysteries is to be forced to think like a racist. And that is precisely what drives the affective force of the revelation that, as with Blanchard's murder, the field of semiotic relations generated by these crimes – which are structured around a seemingly axiomatic relationship between particular racial identities and specific modes of criminal violence – is radically restructured by

their solutions. Both Diaz's murder and the Night Owl killings turn out to have been committed not by gangs of black or Latino youths, but by Dudley Smith, the vicious and profoundly orderly police detective whose ostensibly non-racial whiteness is inseparable from his position as the embodiment of hegemonic villainy in the LA Quartet.

Indeed, these murders are central to Smith's hyper-vigilant policing of racial limits. His murder of José Díaz is yet another instance of the violent prohibition of miscegenation by members of the LAPD – retribution, in this case, for Diaz's sleeping with Smith's white niece – which Smith conceals by inscribing the young man's body with the racialized 'zoot stick', framing race for his crime. His orchestration of the sextuple homicide at the Night Owl Café is a strategic move in his plan to establish a criminal empire built on "contained" organised crime ... strictly Niggertown' (Ellroy 1992: 279). This scheme relies on him planting false evidence intended to incriminate a group of young black men (who are later killed as a result of Smith's ploy). In each case, the revelatory twist is that the clues we have been given, and which seem to mark out specifically non-white criminalities, turn out to be the meticulous constructions of the uniformly white, institutional powers who attempt to police racial limits against the threat of a criminalized racial other, even as they are themselves constructing that racialized criminality. Thus, the shocking revelations of institutional guilt that punctuate the Quartet are also, and reciprocally, profound destabilizations of our own assumptions about the way race has operated as a sign of criminal identity throughout the novels.

For Ellroy 'demythologizing' does not simply mean dispelling the nostalgic myths of post-war America, or exposing the forms of exploitation and oppression on which they relied. It also means showing, in unrelenting detail, how these myths are constructed by the sorts of men who, for Ellroy, reify the hegemonic forces of history. It means Dudley Smith down in the dirt, carving out racial difference with a zoot stick. But these men are often also the detectives who examine race in their quest to solve crimes and, when they're not, they are so closely aligned with them – in their violence, their whiteness and their institutional power – that the crucial distinctions between them are not always easy to discern. It is therefore with these men that we are coerced into alliance in our search for answers among the neon signs of violence, all pointing to a seemingly criminal underclass of racial alteriority. Although this search leads the reader to a series of narrative revelations that forces us to restructure our readings of race and criminality, and to account for institutional whiteness as

the true source of crime in Ellroy's world, these revelations cannot finally efface the Quartet's violent and ubiquitous racism, or the implications of the racial essentialism on which it relies. Nor does it allow for a reading that, to quote Dennis Porter, 'confer[s] meaning on a work by adopting the point of view of its end' (Porter 1981: 228). Instead, the contradictory energies of these opposing discourses on race remain, in fraught and disharmonious relationship, even after the Quartet's closing pages.

# The Divine Violence of the Underworld USA Trilogy

Rodney Taveira

## Paper knowledge/power

*Paper serves as a figure for all that is external to the mind – the world on paper – as well as all that is proper to it, the tabula rasa.*

(Gitelman 2014: 3–4)

James Ellroy's Underworld USA Trilogy comprises *American Tabloid* (1995), *The Cold Six Thousand* (2001) and *Blood's a Rover* (2009). His novels, bought in the millions and critically acclaimed, are famous for complex crime plots delivered in urgent and unadorned prose, and infamous for their racial invective and the unblinking representation of bad men doing bad things. Labyrinthine conspiracies involving different government agencies, the Mafia, communist cabals, Hollywood, hate groups and larger-than-life individuals intersect on great historical events, such as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam War. Historical figures, including Howard Hughes and J. Edgar Hoover, appear as pivotal secondary characters.

The books are built on research Ellroy employs assistants to perform. They produce summaries from which he extrapolates events into narrative. To this end, he also litters the novels with 'Document Inserts', which appear, mainly as imagined extracts from local newspapers, as early as the stand-alone novels *Clandestine* (1982) and *Killer on the Road* (1986). In the LA Quartet (*The Black Dahlia* (1987); *The Big Nowhere* (1988); *L.A. Confidential* (1990); *White Jazz* (1992)), Ellroy includes invented pieces from scandal rags, especially *Hush-Hush* magazine. This favoured device was first used in *L.A. Confidential*, then appeared

across subsequent novels and some short stories before history proscribed its use in *Perfidia* (2014), which is set in 1941–2, before the advent of the celebrity gossip magazine.

In the Underworld USA Trilogy, the document inserts are titled as such, dated, and offset in a different font to the body text; a Courier, typewriter look increases their verisimilitude. The range of inserts expands in *American Tabloid* to include transcripts of covertly recorded telephone conversations (often with the prefix that they have been requested by FBI director Hoover), personal notes (such as between Hoover and Howard Hughes), personal letters, teletype reports (such as between the intelligence divisions of the LAPD and the FBI), Justice Department memoranda and extracts from FBI files. In *The Cold Six Thousand*, even more sorts of inserts are included: ‘Internally circulated FBI intelligence reports’; pouch communiqués (one, for example, summarizes the geopolitics of Vietnam); ‘Covert Intelligence Dossiers’; body-wire transcripts; and hate-mail extracts (Ellroy 2001: 73, 285). Lastly, some inserts in *Blood’s a Rover* feature redactions. These black and blanked sections of the text power some of the plot as two characters attempt to strip the redactions with chemical agents, instantiating a material impediment on the page that, by the rhetorical suspense of aposiopesis, engagingly breaks the frame between what is narrated and who does the narrating.

The sheer length, documentary form and documented history of Ellroy’s novels create a powerful reality effect. I argue that this engrossing verisimilitude, in its historically rooted but fantastic extrapolations, traces the development of the post-war American security state and its imbrication with what Timothy Melley calls the ‘covert sphere’. The ‘covert sphere’, writes Melley, is ‘a cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state’ (Melley 2012: 5). Fiction is *vital* – both for clandestine operations and for the public to give image to these operations. Ellroy builds fiction on a ground of violence rooted in research and represented in a brutal American romance. Beginning with *American Tabloid*, the violence, I argue, moves – ‘progresses’ is not quite the right word – between the different kinds of violence conceptualized by Slavoj Žižek following his encounter with Walter Benjamin’s famous, richly suggestive essay, ‘Critique of Violence’, towards the ‘divine violence’ of *Blood’s a Rover* – a work of revolutionary love that coincides with Ellroy’s enduring approach of working his personality and his life into his fiction.

The protagonists of the Underworld USA Trilogy are double and triple agents working for the FBI, CIA, local police forces, Cuban loyalist groups, leftist

revolutionaries and the Mafia. *American Tabloid* (and thus the trilogy) begins with an italicized prologue that acts as a mission statement:

*They were rogue cops and shakedown artists. They were wiretappers and soldiers of fortune and faggot lounge entertainers. Had one second of their lives deviated off course, American History would not exist as we know it.*

*It's time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars. It's time to embrace bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time.* (Ellroy 1995: 5)

Kemper Boyd, Pete Bondurant, Dwight Holly, Ward Littell and Wayne Tedrow Jr. operate across the first two novels. They are the musculature of the state apparatus, sometimes acting reflexively, oftentimes manipulated by a distant, almost untouchable central intelligence, such as FBI director Hoover or Mob boss Sam Giancana. The rogue cops and soldiers of fortune suppress threats to political and social order at the same time as they derive profit from the suppression: anti-communism is 'good for business,' quips Pete Bondurant (Ellroy 1995: 109).

Things change in *Blood's a Rover*. The trilogy's final novel contains the lengthiest document inserts, including the journal of an African-American closeted homosexual LAPD officer, Marshall Bowen, the journal of Karen Sifakis, a Quaker, leftist history professor and pregnant mother, and letters written by the 'Red Goddess', Joan Rosen Klein. The two women survive the turmoil of the trilogy, unlike all but one of the central male characters. Karen abandons her pacifism to execute the killer of her lover, Dwight Holly, before going on the lam with her two daughters. Joan is the revolutionary centre of the novel, the woman who changes the course of the trilogy's history. She receives the long, explanatory chapter 119 in which nine pages of text are relayed from her third-person omniscient perspective (the only time a woman is granted this position across the entire trilogy) which details her radicalization and its intersection with the novel's jewel heist plot. Her grandfather, a German-Jewish émigré, died from a heart attack when she was ten years old, in 1937, after a Hoover-directed FBI raid stole his stash of emeralds that had financed anti-Hoover tracts and leftist political organization. Tom Leahy, the agent who led the raid, was horrified, 'turned Red', and 'was grooming Jack [his son] to become a cop revolutionary' (Ellroy 2009: 584). Hoover paid off New York state troopers with some of the stolen emeralds to raid a leftist camp in the Catskills. Joan's parents resisted, were beaten by the police and died of their injuries in

Poughkeepsie. Joan's rage against Hoover paired up with Jack's, whose father was tried for sedition and died in Sing Sing prison, and they have been waging leftist foment for decades.

By this amplification of point of view and character the apparatus of the state in the post-war covert sphere develops across the trilogy into epistolary and diaristic form that coincides with the racial, sexual and gender expansion of character primacy in *Blood's a Rover*. It is as if the paperwork of the state had previously interpellated a limited range of masculine focalizers: some are acceptable (white, working, straight men); some are expendable (gay, black, foreign); some enforce these conditions (white, violent, compromised). All are male. Where the first two novels largely reinforce these boundary conditions, the institutional paperweight of the covert sphere is exploded in *Blood's a Rover*. For example, Dwight Holly, Hoover's enforcer and confidante, falls for Joan (as well as Karen), and plans an assassination of the ageing Hoover. This plan turns on creating a paper trail which mirrors that compiled by Joan's grandfather and Tom Leahy ('They talked, they plotted, they built a giant paper maze' (Ellroy 2009: 522)), Hoover's has files on everyone from Hollywood actors to American presidents, and, the fate of these documents, form part of Ellroy's overarching narrative but also his writing process in how they affect the composition and structure of the text.

The only *male* survivor, and ultimately the narrator of the trilogy, is Don Crutchfield. He is based on a real Hollywood private eye who, like the character, began as a 'wheelman' who kicked in doors to catch cheating spouses before no-fault divorce was legislated in California. But his voyeurism, his epithet of 'Dipshit', and even the colour of his eyes, are all Ellroy.

In the final section of *Blood's a Rover*, titled 'NOW', the talk, plotting and paper maze are revealed to be the work of the private eye cum novelist:

Documents have arrived at irregular intervals. They are always anonymously sent. I have compiled diary excerpts, oral-history transcripts and police-file overflow. Elderly leftists and black militants have told me their stories and provided verification. Freedom of Information Act subpoenas have served me well. (Ellroy 2009: 639)

The above describes not only Dwight's aborted plan but also Ellroy's practice and execution of novel writing. It clarifies the initial confusion over who, now, can be reread as the narrator of the prologue, who is 'going to tell you everything':

I window-peeped four years of our History. ... I followed people. I bugged and tapped and caught big events in ellipses ... . My reportage is buttressed by

credible hearsay and insider tattle. Massive paper trails provide verification ... . Scripture-pure veracity and scandal-rag content ... . I am going to tell you everything. (Ellroy 2009: 9)

This expansion is dynamic, at once narrowing and widening, compared to the prologue of *American Tabloid*. The window peeping and following is a storied feature of Ellroy's youth. Bugging and tapping are Ellroy's cheat sheets, accounts of history gleaned from primary and secondary sources. The credible hearsay is a constant in Ellroy's life, deployed thrillingly in private conversation and tantalizingly in public talks. Delivered by Crutch, the prologue at once double-downs on reality (Ellroy and Crutchfield are both actual – and living – people) at the same time that it blurs the distinction between private eye, law enforcer, revolutionary, scholar and novelist.

## Violent orders

Violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law. The same may be more drastically suggested if one reflects how often the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public. (Benjamin 1921: 235)

Ellroy's complex representation of a recognizable and historically viable world (Sam Giancana *was* a real-life mobster mixed up in the Kennedy 1960 election campaign; Hoover *did* instigate COINTELPRO operations) comes after, however, the immediacy of plot and sentence. This means that what Žižek defines as the first order of violence, the subjective, is what is initially felt or recognized by the reader. Subjective violence is that 'most visible' mode of violence, 'performed by a clearly definable agent' (Žižek 2008: 1). Because the perpetrators in the Underworld USA Trilogy are 'rogue authoritarians', the subjective violence often maps onto the machinations of the state and obscures the 'objective violence' also at work (Taveira 2015: 187).

The first order of objective violence, according to Žižek, is 'symbolic violence', which is 'embodied in language and all its forms', not just incitement and 'the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms' but also 'a more fundamental form of violence ... that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning' (Žižek 2008:1). Language excludes, frames and connotes, squeezing its referents into comprehensibility. The racist and homophobic language of Ellroy's novels – the 'faggot lounge entertainers' of



the prologue to *American Tabloid*; the ‘nigger pimp’ of the opening sentence of *The Cold Six Thousand* – are pointed manifestations of language’s chokehold on the world (Ellroy 2001: 3). Ellroy often receives criticism for ‘his’ racism, most flagrantly from Mike Davis:

That neo-Nazi in American writing who is James Ellroy ... takes the disquieting aspects of Chandler and his hero Marlowe – systematic homophobia, anti-Semitism – and always enlarges them. Each of his books is practically a *Mein Kampf*, it’s anti-communistic, it’s anti-Mexican, and it’s racist. (Frommer 1993: 39)

When Ellroy is pressed on these judgements during Q&A sessions, he dismisses not only an intentional fallacy but also what he sees as a critical failure to distinguish and locate racism as a casual attribute from an essential, defining characteristic. To erase these distinctions in a writing that seeks to represent a particular (racist, homophobic, anti-communistic, anti-Mexican) historical period is to misrepresent and sanitize that period. Further, Žižek notes that if a report of trauma is given too coldly or consistently, we suspect its veracity – it needs to be affected by the trauma (Žižek 2008: 3). Ellroy refuses to editorialize or censor, which is not the same thing as advocating or sympathizing with the racist worldview of his characters. Though fictional, the verisimilitude of the novels’ milieu and their cast of historical figures work to blur the boundaries between inhabiting a worldview and representing a worldview, thus making the ever-present violence of language all the more palpable by its specific and pointed deployment in racial invective.

Wayne Tedrow Jr. begins *The Cold Six Thousand* as ‘casually’ or ‘incidentally’ racist. This sees him as weak – he pisses his pants; he is bullied – and against the text that writes him: ‘They sent him to Dallas to kill a nigger pimp named Wendell Durfee. He wasn’t sure he could do it’ (Ellroy 2001: 3). His father, however, is *fundamentally* racist. Tedrow Sr. circulates race-hate tracts and screens films of Martin Luther King having sex with a Caucasian woman for his white supremacist buddies. His involvement with major players in government and law enforcement emphasizes his essential racism – he and it are part of the racist system of state. It is Wayne’s pain and guilt over his murder of African-Americans that ultimately drive him to love and redemption. Ironically it is an act of compassion, or at least hesitation, that initially plunges him deeper into his father’s racist world as his inability to kill Wendell Durfee, the ‘nigger pimp’ of the opening line, leads to the rape and murder of his wife Lynette who is killed by Durfee. Tellingly, it is the same process, a cold hardening, that enables him to become one of the leg-breakers of history, which makes his revolutionary turn in *Blood’s a Rover* all the more impactful.

Across the course of the trilogy, the many roles of the third-person subjective narrators – enforcer, bagman, lieutenant, informant, wiretapper, drug producer, interagency liaison, betrayer, lover – move the violence from the subjective into the two objective realms of violence that Žižek identifies, and which map onto what Benjamin calls ‘mythic violence’. In addition to the symbolic violence of language, ‘systemic violence’, the second order of objective violence according to Žižek, is ‘the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems’ (Žižek 2008: 1). The catch, says Žižek, is that subjective and objective violence cannot be seen from the same standpoint. This explains Lee Spinks’s insight that ‘Ellroy’s novel [*L.A. Confidential*] however, provides us with no position from which to read this racist rhetoric as exceptional because its omniscient third-person narrative reinscribes it in a series of narrative judgments’ (Spinks 2008: 141). Subjective violence seems to be abnormal, a break from the usual order of peaceable relations. But objective violence is ‘inherent to this “normal” state of things’ (Žižek 2008: 2). Žižek equates systemic violence to dark matter in physics, something not directly perceived yet necessary and understood to exist in order for the social, economic and political to function.

Žižek’s nearly metaphysical analogy, while an apposite image of the covert sphere, is likely inspired by Walter Benjamin’s exposition of mythic violence as at once law-making and law-preserving; we recognize here of course the work of Ellroy’s bad men. The example that drives this home is the ‘lack of proportion’ in early legal systems vis-à-vis capital punishment, such as executing a thief or a pimp in *The Cold Six Thousand*. The lack of proportion is beside the point – it is about establishing law itself, hence the extreme violence used by the Mafia, a kind of alternative mini-state in the Underworld USA Trilogy. Heads are squeezed in vices, and Pete Bondurant will break his rule of not killing women because the Mafia will not only kill his wife, but his wife’s entire family, if he does not do as they ask. Indeed, forcing Pete to act outside his own laws is how the Mafia, parsimoniously, like a smoothly running administrative state, makes and preserves its own laws.

The Mafia cannot be thwarted – only negated or co-opted. Its violence threatens the covert sphere of the state in a number of ways. Its breaking of the law undoes the force of the law, as evidence when Robert Kennedy, as attorney general, launches a legal assault on the Mafia, which leads to the assassination of his brother, the president. Further, the Mafia could reveal its role in the JFK assassination, or even its role in electing Kennedy in the first place (getting him over the line through its influence in the Teamsters Union in, for example, West Virginia and Illinois), which would delegitimize Kennedy’s presidency.

So powerful would be their revelations that Hoover does not direct the FBI to pursue organized crime despite finally admitting to the existence of the Mafia after the mass arrests of Mob figures at the Apalachin summit in 1957. This only cements its shadowy position in the covert sphere.

Indeed, the power of the Mafia and the criminal is so potent that it is co-opted by the state, especially Hoover. Ellroy's bad men do not exist as criminals, at least not wholly, but as slippery upholders of boundaries that they must cross if they are to succeed in upholding the boundaries. In his discerning essay, Lee Spinks, using the work of Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, explicates how power is routed between the state (here, an autocracy) and the individual through the law:

The sovereign is always located within the law because the juridical principle is coextensive with his body and the field of his domination. Yet the sovereign can always also stand outside the law in order to suspend it and declare a state of exception or emergency. (Spinks 2008: 123)

The coextension of the sovereign's position both inside and outside the law manifests across the trilogy in Hoover's arbitrary actions: Hoover allows President Kennedy to be killed despite Hoover's tentacular surveillance revealing to him the assassination plot, yet he uses an abductive logic of pre-emption to detain thousands of apparent anarchists during the Palmer Raids. Hoover is the Leviathan of the covert sphere, shrouded in a cape of liberal democracy: 'The post-World War I Red scare granted him History' (Ellroy 2009: 582). In the LA Quartet, where the functioning of a nascent covert sphere is represented at the local level of the city, the fearsome Dudley Smith personally enforces the lines of racial cum criminal segregation in Los Angeles – he is both a dark sovereign and brutal enforcer. When this insider-outsider status applies to the violent proxies of the sovereign – Kemper Boyd, Wayne Tedrow Jr., Dwight Holly – Ellroy most comprehensively portrays the covert sphere and the American security state.

## States of torture

*Hoover played a trump card: 'National security'.*

(Ellroy 2009: 584)

The co-option of extra-legal violence by the state is an enduring aspect of the American state and the covert sphere. For example, the Senate Intelligence

Committee report, released on 9 December 2014, argues that the CIA routinely misled the White House and Congress about the particular brutality of its interrogation programme and its effectiveness in obtaining information from detainees. President Barack Obama fell between critique and apology in his response to the report: 'We did a whole lot of things that were right, but we tortured some folks ... . It is important for us not to feel too sanctimonious in retrospect about the tough job that those folks had.' But this retrospective placing of the CIA's 'tough job' in a post-9/11 milieu and in an extra-legal space of black sites and a global war on terror elides the particular history of US state violence and its banner of 'national security'.

On the different theories developing within security studies, David Watson writes:

What has become clear is that the promiscuous logic of security manifests itself within multiform configurations and diverse histories. For that reason, theorists working within security studies and international relations have usefully distinguished between two overlapping conceptions of security: a state-centric form of security – a geopolitics of security taking the territory of the sovereign state as its referent object – and a biopolitics of security that, more diffusely, seeks to secure life and its circulation. (Watson 2016: 667)

By historicizing the development of the post-war American state, a historicization that, I argue, both powers Ellroy's fiction and makes the violent functioning of the state vividly apparent, we can parse the overlapping conceptions of security against the contiguous orders of violence that underwrite this security and, thus, the nation or 'homeland'. State violence is not exceptional; for example, while it is garish and terrible, the infamous prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib was not abnormal, undertaken by a few deviant individuals. 'Abu Ghraib', writes Joseph Pugliese,

as Orientalized space of absolute licence from Western norms, is where law and reason will be suspended under the command of a few Kurtz-like figures. There are the white mythologies that the West never tires of telling itself: of the temporary descent into the darkness ... that is always ready to be redeemed by the white light of official procedure, investigations and reports. In this manner, the investigation and punishment of every individualized act of transgression functions to validate the operation of law. (Pugliese 2013: 57)

The state's political power 'to foster life or disallow it to the point of death' is where the biopolitics and geopolitics of security intersect (Foucault 1978:

138). Foucault, in his lectures on biopolitics, states that 'liberalism turns into a mechanism continually having to arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals by reference to the notion of danger' (Foucault 1978: 66). The liberal democratic state, then, is predicated on the 'interplay of security/freedom' (Foucault 1978: 66). And so, the Underworld USA Trilogy celebrates not – or not only – bad men and the price they paid to define their time, but, in this very celebration, reveals the state and its brutalization of individuals who are merely the terminal point of the state's knife blade of mythic, objective violence.

The wresting of biopolitical power from the state threatens, following the 'promiscuous logic of security', the geopolitical order and often comes at the knowing or accepted cost of a character's life. The drive to stay alive usually provides the necessary tension between the singular individual and the state's power over life and death that predicates the liberal democratic state. Yet Lenny Sands smiles and flicks his cigarette at Kemper Boyd when Boyd comes to shoot him to protect President Kennedy from a shakedown set up by Lenny (Ellroy 1995: 507–8). Lenny (the 'faggot lounge entertainer' of *American Tabloid's* prologue) survives, as the chamber of Boyd's gun, so often the instrument of state violence, was empty. Yet, Lenny kills himself shortly afterwards. Lenny claims the field of biopolitics for himself. His suicide undoes Boyd, who realizes that his daughter has betrayed him to Robert Kennedy, that John F. Kennedy disdains him, that the 'compartmentalized' roles in 'the Life' have dissipated, and that he will soon pay the price for his sins with his ultimately inconsequential life.

Just as Kemper's compartments, the boundaries of his psyche, unravel, Lenny's shrug and smirk in the face of mythic, objective violence disrupts the smooth functioning of the state, even when the agent of the state may be acting in a private capacity. The murder of civilians is a kind of mythic violence, of law-making and law-preserving, and, here, is outsourced via a contract. This is precisely the form of Hoover's machinations and sociopolitical control of both private individuals and agents of the state throughout the Underworld USA Trilogy. Hoover does not investigate avenues other than Oswald acting alone in the JFK assassination, even though he knows it involves 'private actors' like the Mafia and Cuban exiles, nor will he push further on James Earle Ray with respect to the assassination of Martin Luther King because Hoover essentially instructed non-government/non-FBI workers to perform the hit; yet he must

use government agents and the covert sphere to cover and concoct paper trails, to lose and fabricate evidence, and to redact files.

## Violence-as-spectacle

*Wayne stalled. Wayne savoured.*

Ellroy 2001: 619

Systemic violence functions fist-in-fist with the symbolic violence of the trilogy discussed above. Continuing his analysis of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses, Pugliese writes that ‘the practices of torture perpetrated at Abu Ghraib must be seen, through their ritualized and codified repetition, as reproducing historical *regimes of visibility* predicated on white supremacist violence-as-spectacle’ (Pugliese 2013: 73, emphasis added). The use of photographic technology and the posing with the tortured at Abu Ghraib is similarly deployed in the various shakedowns perpetrated by Ellroy’s protagonists, Crutch and a French mercenary named Jean-Philippe Mesplede scalping communists in raids on Cuba, and Wayne and another French mercenary, Laurent Guery, brandishing the shrunken heads of Viet Cong.

Ellroy’s move, in his fiction, from the local to the international, follows the ritualized contours of white supremacist violence-as-spectacle. The consistency of the symbolic and systemic violence of this move allows the recognition and historicization of racist biopolitical and geopolitical relations despite the Orientalist representation of Vietnam and the Dominican Republic as lurid, tropical poverties full of jabbering and interchangeable natives – if anything, the absurdity and black humour of the scenes make the relations all the more apparent. In the LA Quartet, Dudley Smith practices what he calls ‘containment’, which involves peddling pornography and drugs to the African-American areas of Los Angeles, and only to those areas. He uses torture, intimidation and murder to enforce this physical line of white supremacy. In the Underworld USA Trilogy, when Ellroy’s purview expands to a national then international level, the racism of white supremacy continues. Vietnamese ‘slaves’ are used by CIA agents and CIA ‘contractors’ to grow and harvest poppies in a joint CIA-Mafia plan to sell heroin to the African-American areas of west Las Vegas. This also has ‘containment’ as its aim. The Mafia wants to keep the town ‘clean’ for tourists and for Howard Hughes, who appears in the

novel as a mysophobic racist, whom the Mafia will fleece when he buys casinos from them. The Vietnamese 'slaves' are murdered, whipped, electrocuted or deprived of sleep through the administration of amphetamines, as the white overseers deem fit. In *Blood's a Rover*, the Mafia strikes a deal with President Balaguer to build casinos in the Dominican Republic that will also exploit brown slave labour.

The exploitation and degradation of bodies of colour, in particular, coincides with the genealogy of the violent and technological regime of visibility that we encounter most starkly in the circulation of photographs of lynching. Pugliese offers the account of the lynching in Paris, Texas, in 1893, of Henry Smith, described by Philip Day in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (2003). The townspeople produced a macabre theatre of torture and cruelty by using props, platforms and floats. Smith was jabbed with hot irons until his bones were visible through his melted flesh. He was set alight in the climax, after being soaked in oil. For the denouement, 'almost immediately afterward the scouring of the area for buttons, teeth, and other mementoes began, and continued through the night' (Day 2003: 78). Ellroy himself has expressed fascination with the lynching of Frank Little, a union activist who ran afoul of the Anaconda Mining Company. Ellroy's interest in the case stems from the fact that Dashiell Hammett, in his then role as a Pinkerton detective, was allegedly offered a murder contract on Smith. While the Hammett story cannot be confirmed it does at least confirm Ellroy's interest in how the crime writer is implicated in a true-crime narrative, which he later developed with the character of Don Crutchfield in *Blood's a Rover*.

This fetishistic and racist visibility is enacted by *The Cold Six Thousand* in the grisly scene when Wayne kills Wendell Durfee, the 'nigger pimp' of the novel's opening sentence. Wayne has traced Wendell to Skid Row, Los Angeles. 'Skid Row was crammed up. Winos/amputees on skateboards/he-shes roughed up' (Ellroy 2001: 619). Surveying Wendell's room, 'Wayne saw empty short-dogs. Wayne smelled wine upchucked' (Ellroy 2001: 620). Wayne shoots off Wendell's fingers after injecting him with heroin. As Wendell vomits, 'bile blew out his nostrils. Wendell shit in his pants' (Ellroy 2001: 621). Finally, 'Wayne aimed tight. Wayne shot his legs off at his knees. Blood spritzed. Bone chips flew ... Wayne grabbed a chair. Wayne watched him bleed to death' (Ellroy 2001: 621).

Later, this regime of visibility somewhat loses its supremacist sheen as the hate-mail monger and impenitent essential racist, Wayne Tedrow Sr., is beaten to death with a golf club by his ex-wife, Janice. Wayne's racist views are already

beginning to slip by the time he kills Wendell, but he fulfils this murder contract because a matter of revenge has been left outstanding. Wendell raped and murdered Wayne's wife Lynette. Janice is also motivated by revenge and the club is a fetishized object, a symbol of Janice's golfing prowess and the defiance that she displayed upon the divorce from Senior that was precipitated by sleeping with Senior's son: two million dollars and a beating, or one million dollars and no beating. She took the beating. Wayne watches the murder through a window after handcuffing his father to a bar rail, a voyeur's view of his patricide by proxy: 'Blood sprayed the panes' (Ellroy 2001: 672).

### The love revolution

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;  
 Breath's a ware that will not keep.  
 Up, lad: when the journey's over  
 There'll be time enough to sleep.

A. E. Houseman, 'Reveille', epigraph to *Blood's a Rover* (Ellroy 2009: 1)

Ellroy concedes that *The Cold Six Thousand* is 'too complex and somewhat too long and that the style is too rigorous and too challenging in its presentation of a very complex text', an appraisal shared by many reviewers (Powell 2008a: 159). While longer than *The Cold Six Thousand*, *Blood's a Rover* signals a return to the successful earlier forms of the LA Quartet. The prose remains terse with little ornamentation, but it is more discursive and expositive; at the very least, the sentences contain more words and the paragraphs contain more sentences than *The Cold Six Thousand*. Further, *Blood's a Rover* includes a crime procedural plot that runs alongside and continually intersects with the 'private nightmare of public policy' plots that began in *American Tabloid* and subsumed *The Cold Six Thousand* (Duncan 1996: 72). This is evident from the novel's two beginnings. It opens with a cinematic armoured car robbery, written in a dialogue-free, intensely action-focused style, which results in six dead bodies, that occurs four years before *The Cold Six Thousand* ends. This is followed by the continuation of the trilogy's diegetic history with Wayne in a hotel room cooking up heroin. Significantly, both beginnings are preceded by title pages that read 'THEN' and are interspersed with the italicized prologue, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, that is revealed to be narrated by the trilogy's only verified male survivor, Crutch.



*The Cold Six Thousand* is a loveless novel. Only Barb has a somewhat significant role, which is mainly to temper the actions of Pete Bondurant. And the sense of proportion and justice that Janice's brutalization calls forth helps diminish at least the racist elements of the violence-as-spectacle of Wayne Senior's murder. Nonetheless, women are ancillary characters. Previously, women loomed large in Ellroy's novels, representing the outsized role they have played in his life, from the murder of his mother to his obsession with the Black Dahlia to the intimate and sometimes desperate relationships with women detailed in his second memoir, *The Hilliker Curse*, to his marriage to Helen Knode ('the chief spiritual architect of my life') to the two women who inspired the characters of Karen Sifakis and Joan Rosen Klein in *Blood's a Rover*. It is no accident that *The Hilliker Curse* is subtitled *My Pursuit of Women*.

Janey Place suggests that the 'ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it' (Place 1978: 45). Ellroy's sensitivity to male violence against women means that this archetypal noir dynamic is played out ambivalently in his own work, and it is shown to be less ideologically driven than psychosexual. For example, in *The Big Nowhere*, Claire DeHaven is the 'Red Queen' of Hollywood, the central figure in the communist activities of the culture industries. The hollowness of the grand jury investigation into communist subversion in Hollywood is reflected in DeHaven's political organizing being aimed at upsetting her father rather than at glorious revolution; she reveals Danny Upshaw's closeted homosexuality rather than the patriarchal – capitalistic social and economic relations of the West.

However, hints of the ideologically disrupting force of women are found in the character of Laura Hughes in *American Tabloid*. She is the (fictional) illegitimate daughter of Joe Kennedy and Gloria Swanson. The Kennedy family does not acknowledge her publically. Kemper falls in love with Laura but decides not to marry her as this would sever his ties with the Kennedy family and, thus, the power of the American state. From what Jim Mancall notes is perhaps the 'moral centre' of the novel, the orphaned Laura creates her own family with Lenny Sands and Kemper's daughter, Claire (Mancall 2014: 121). And it is from within this family structure, as odd a grouping in Ellroy's fiction as any other, that the homosexual Lenny, flanked by figures of daughter, mother, and beloved, shrugs in the face of Kemper's threat to kill him, and triggers Kemper's unravelling.

The ideological and psychological are not to be arbitrarily separated, of course, and their admixture in *Blood's a Rover* is foregrounded, central to characterization and narrative; moreover, it is revolutionary. Karen and Joan figure and the ground ruptures in the constitution of the state and its juridico-political orders. Women, and the love of men for them (and the love between the women), enter the scene at the same time that Ellroy's fiction deploys what Benjamin would call 'divine violence'.

If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroy them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (Benjamin 1921: 297)

Wayne, who was involved in the assassination of Martin Luther King and has killed unarmed black men as executor and executioner for the state's mythic, objective violence, begins a romance with Mary Beth Hazzard, the widow of an African-American minister who is indirectly killed by Wayne. Her love cracks his violence-hardened coldness, and exposure to Joan transforms his political consciousness. Indeed, the chapter that ends with Wayne thinking *'I've Gone Red'* simply begins *'Joan'* (Ellroy 2009: 381, 376). His nightmares of murdering African-Americans are replaced with 'peaceful' dreams of 'Dr. King, sermonizing and laughing' (Ellroy 2009: 409). Further, his revolutionary about-face comes after he took part in Hoover's infiltration of civil rights organizations, the state's failed attempt to uphold the racist law of the land. The COINTELPRO operation was financed, in part, by the aforementioned CIA-overseen slave labour heroin production in Laos and Vietnam. Wayne, the head chemist of the heroin production, recognizes the similar slave labour being used in the Dominican Republic to build the Mafia's casinos. He halts construction on the casinos by detonating explosives on the site after setting the forced labourers free. Wayne is killed shortly afterwards in a drug-induced dream state, his final words are 'Peace', and a cult of resistance is born in his image (Ellroy 2009: 421).

Wayne smashes the biopolitical and geopolitical structure of state violence, even if only temporarily, like the explosion that extinguishes a fire when oil is struck. Wayne's actions, his strike without threatening, his destruction of boundaries, are also oddly bloodless, at least in their account. This literal coincidence with Benjamin's curious description of divine violence being 'lethal without spilling blood' (Benjamin discusses the Earth, in the Bible, opening

up and swallowing people) becomes significant when similar moments are compared:

[Divine violence] does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life. The dissolution of legal violence stems ... from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that 'expiates' the guilt of mere life – and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law. (Benjamin 1921: 297)

As mentioned earlier, blood flows floridly when Wayne kills Durfee, when Wayne watches Janice kill his father, and when Crutch and Mesplede scalp communists in Cuba – white supremacist violence-as-spectacle. In their climactic shootout Dwight Holly is killed by Scotty: 'The bullet caromed and tore out his neck ... . He gouted blood and shot wide ... . Dwight spat blood in his face. Scotty pulled up his vest and gut-shot him' (Ellroy 2009: 574). All these scenes involve men who enforce and uphold the law, a law that is craven and corrupt and racist and demarcates the boundaries of the covert sphere.

On the other hand, 'divine violence serves no means', writes Žižek when attempting to exposit Benjamin's dense thought, 'not even that of punishing the culprits and thus re-establishing the equilibrium of justice. It is just the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically "out of joint"' (Žižek 2008: 169). Karen abandons her pacifist principles and kills Scotty Bennett. 'She raised a little snubnosed revolver. She shot him six times in the face' (Ellroy 2009: 576). Hoover dies off-screen of a heart attack after Crutch flashes at him one of Joan's grandfather's emeralds. There is even an earlier moment: Kemper shoots Dougie Frank Lockhart after he confesses to the Birmingham church bombing: 'Kemper shot him in the mouth. A full clip took his head off' (Ellroy 1995: 569). This has no bearing on Kemper's fate. How can it have meaning, given everything that Boyd has done? Annihilation, effacement, death, but no blood, just signs of injustice.

Crutch, entwined with Joan, asks her '*How will I know when I've done the wrong thing?*' (Ellroy 2009: 627). He is thinking of killing Hoover. As the Red Goddess (as opposed to Claire DeHaven, merely the Red Queen), Joan is given divine dispensation to judge. The violent, bloodless deaths do not signal anything other than ruptures in the smooth functioning of the state. They do not mean anything beyond nothing, which is impossible for language or the

state to countenance – *something* must be signified; *someone* must be governed. Divine violence ‘overlaps with the biopolitical disposal of *Homini sacer*’, writes Žižek. ‘Of what are they guilty? Of leading a mere (natural) life. Divine violence purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law, because law is limited to the living: it cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life, what is more than mere life’ (Žižek 2008: 168). This is why Hoover is killed by the sight of an emerald; it is embellished with history itself, with the voodoo of emerald lore, and with Crutch’s (and Dwight’s and Wayne’s and Karen’s and Jack’s *and Ellroy’s*) love of Joan.

Where there might be a homosociality of the state’s objective violence that binds the detectives and rogue authoritarians in Ellroy’s earlier novels, we can trace a binding love in a set of alternative troikas of resistance and revolution as Žižek argues ‘Divine violence is the *subject’s work of love*’ (Žižek 2008: 172). Where Ward Littell, Kemper Boyd and Pete Bondurant in *American Tabloid*, and Wayne Tedrow Jr., Ward Littell and Pete Bondurant in *The Cold Six Thousand* enact and exposit state violence, resistance to these men and their roles in the execution of state violence is brought about, for example, by and in the family structure of Lenny Sands, Laura Hughes and Claire Boyd. This does not mean that people survive: ‘Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it’ (Benjamin 1921: 297).

*Blood’s a Rover* sees these alternative troikas proliferate: Joan, Karen and Dwight; Wayne, Mary Beth and Reginald Hazzard; Dwight, Karen and their children; Joan, Crutch and their child; the real Joan, the real Karen and Ellroy. Where family has previously signalled betrayal, psychopathology and subjective violence in Ellroy’s earlier works, these alternative family arrangements signal hope and resistance against the objective violence of the state. Where ‘HATE’ was the refrain of the loveless *The Cold Six Thousand*, Dwight repeatedly asks Karen, ‘Do you love me?’ in *Blood’s a Rover*. When pressing forward with their plans to assassinate Hoover or when recounting the years of leftist foment, Joan and Dwight repeat, ‘Belief works that way’ (Ellroy 2009: 461):

The notion of love should be given here all its Paulinian weight: *the domain of pure violence*, the domain outside law (legal power), the domain of the violence which is neither law-founding nor law-sustaining, *is the domain of love*. (Žižek 2008: 173)

This contradictory domain is what allows Žižek to pair the Marxist Che Guevara and the Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, in support of this claim – and this pairing is of a piece with Ellroy's culminating masterpiece, and the relationships of love that Ellroy, self-described Tory Mystic, shared with two leftist academics: 'There's more sex in this novel than in any other because it's largely based on the last two women who broke my heart and kicked my ass' (Powell 2008a: 164).

Wayne succeeds as he journeys through novels of hate and love. Dwight and Karen err on the side of love when they abort their plan to assassinate Hoover because they share a credo: 'Nobody dies' (Ellroy 2009: 561). Joan's hate will see her fail to bring about revolution because her actions are akin to what Benjamin describes as the difference between the general strike, which simply wants to wrest state power for itself, and the general *proletarian* strike, which wants to topple the order of things.

Wayne is killed because of revolutionary action, an accepted, but not demanded, sacrifice. Dwight is killed by Scotty Bennett after he abandons his plan to kill Hoover. Scotty takes his place as a third-person narrator, only to be killed by Karen. Joan replaces Scotty as a third-person subjective narrator. Crutch survives after indirectly killing Hoover, and takes *his* place as the trilogy's master narrator, compiler, explicator and ultimately failed detective – he never finds Joan, who takes his virginity and has his child.

The unassimilable and revolutionary power of women and love is reinforced in the shattering, divine violence of when Karen shoots Scotty Bennett in the face in *Blood's a Rover*. Dwight and Wayne are incapable of controlling Joan Crutchfield – her power over men is apparent but instead of being destroyed, as the generic dictates of noir demand, the parallel contour of the revolutionary romance of *Blood's a Rover* sees her disappear, yet continue to agitate around the world. Crutch tracks her activities: '*I have toured the world's revolutionary hot spots. I have been to Nicaragua, Grenada, Bosnia, Rwanda, Russia, Iran and Iraq*' (Ellroy 2009: 640). The incoherent politics of this list indicate that divine revolution and a resistance to the mythic, objective violence of the state is the throughline, rather than the establishment of socialism. Crutch is the last man standing, the survivor, the loser hero. He is exploited by Joan – she sleeps with him to become pregnant – and he cannot find her, despite the novelist's art he would seem to practice at the end of the trilogy. Yet, it is all a gift. '*To J.M.*' reads the book's dedication, '*Comrade: For Everything You Gave Me*'. *Blood's a Rover* closes by blurring the distinction between the already

overlapping position of Ellroy and Crutch as the trilogy's arch-narrator: '*I give you this book and anoint you my comrade. Here is my gift in lieu of a reunion – my lost mother, my lost child and the Red Goddess Joan*' (Ellroy 2009: 640). This final triumvirate – mother, child, beloved – signals love and its loss. 'Divine violence,' concludes Benjamin, 'which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution, may be called sovereign violence' (Benjamin 1921: 300). After his lifelong pursuit of women and their love, of pulling apart and reconstructing noir and crime fiction, of confronting the violence of the law and the state, and of selling his life and self for his books, Ellroy lays ultimate claim on himself, his personal history and spiritual redemption through revolutionary art.

## From Paranoia to the Contrary: Plotting the Noir World of James Ellroy

Woody Haut

James Ellroy's journey as a writer has evolved from his early efforts in portraying and critiquing the more deranged elements of American culture to something approaching a kind of iconoclasm. Ellroy is a writer who, as I will argue in this chapter, has made it his mission to cover the more paranoid extremes of the political and cultural terrain. However, as he is now writing in a different political era from that of his debut novel which was published in 1981, Ellroy has formulated a different mode of attack and enquiry, and subsequent readings of his later historical novels must embrace an equally radical mode in making any political interpretation of these works. Ellroy's inherent contrariness, his grandiose claims and hilarious, 'self-promoting Demon Dog' persona has made it difficult to label him with critical terms as his opinions and writing style are deliberately abrasive by nature (Rich 2008: 187). Nevertheless, Ellroy, moving between the personal and the political, is, even at his least effective, more than capable of shedding light on national and local American culture. Whether charting the noir history of Los Angeles, with its corruption and sleaze, or uncovering the stories behind the stories of significant national events, from JFK's assassination to the post-war birth of modern Las Vegas, Ellroy's hidden history or noir mythology must be read as a comprehensive body of work, and not confined to a single novel despite the contradictions that are apparent throughout the text. Ellroy portrays historical events as competing conspiracies fighting for dominance. But to get a full understanding of the evolution of Ellroy's work, one has to venture beyond the hype and the contrarian attitude, to tease out the helter-skelter plotting of his novels.

So much critical attention has focused on the LA Quartet novels that it is difficult to comprehend the significant impact of Ellroy's work when it first

appeared in print. Ellroy's tactic at the time was to combine fact and fiction: he did this with an ear for dialogue attentive to the way in which power functioned, whether in the streets or in the suites, in corridors of power or in the criminal underworld. It was a time in the 1980s when culturally engaged crime writers were fairly thin on the ground with the exception of a handful of novelists such as Joseph Hansen, Charles Willeford and James Crumley. Suddenly there was James Ellroy, who with his novels – *Brown's Requiem* (1981), *Clandestine* (1982), the Lloyd Hopkins series and the LA Quartet – would make the most significant revision of the genre since Chandler. Ellroy's work stands in sharp contrast to all that came before: the whodunnit, the police procedural, the social investigations of Ross Macdonald and the hard-boiled private-eye narratives written by various descendants of the Black Mask school. To read Ellroy's somewhat overlooked early novels was to encounter a writer far more political, and partial to social commentary, than he was given credit for. Ellroy fiercely touts his right-wing credentials, walking a thin line between madman and prophet but also deflecting critics eager to give a political interpretation of his works but deterred by his apparent inflexible conservatism. From the beginning of his writing career Ellroy was already on the road to becoming a politically incorrect contrarian. His writing was political in an indirect sense, because those early novels spoke directly to male anxieties, particularly when it comes to women, and the degree to which America was becoming an increasingly violent and paranoid place, with women more often than not the object of that violence and paranoia.

When Ellroy's debut novel was published in 1981, Ronald Reagan was in the White House, and supply-side economics was set to become part of the vocabulary of mainstream politics. By the time of *White Jazz*'s publication in 1992 Bill Clinton was set to assume power, accompanied by proclamations of tough love, essentially a matter of Reaganomic policies embedded in a strategy of 'third-way triangulation'. You can sense something of that transition in the increasing paranoia of Ellroy's subject matter and his writing as it moved from the strictly linear, the private-eye mystery narrative of his first novel, to its more fragmented counterpart in the experimental and gleefully anarchic *White Jazz*. And although the Quartet's setting was the 1940s and 1950s, he was also, regardless of how he claimed to live out of time, writing about the present: two eras separated by a common pursuit of corruption, sleaze and the psychotic desire for power. It is also important to note that the period of writing *Brown's Requiem* to *White Jazz* was a time when feminism appeared to be making inroads into the wider culture. The resurgence of hard-boiled crime fiction in the 1980s grew, on



the one hand, out of the legacy of the Vietnam War, and writers associated with it. It was also a reaction to a wave of feminist writers, not in a negative sense, but as a way for certain male writers to create a space in which they could address the wider culture, including issues of masculinity. And even though his work takes place in a predominantly male environment, Ellroy revels in pushing his male characters – Lloyd Hopkins, Buzz Meeks or Dudley Smith – all of whom suffer from a severe sense of entitlement, to extremes, to expose their foibles, weaknesses and perverse fantasies.

In *Blood on the Moon*, Kathleen McCarthy, the feminist poet lover of Detective Lloyd Hopkins tells him, 'I want to tell you a story. It's a true romantic story':

There was once a quiet, bookish girl who wrote poetry. She didn't believe in God or her parents or the other girls who followed her. She tried very hard to believe in herself. It was easy, for a while. Then her followers left her. She was alone. But someone loved her. Some tender man sent her flowers. The first time there was an anonymous poem. A sad poem. The second time just the flowers. The dream lover continued to send the flowers, anonymously, for many years. Over eighteen years. Always when the lonely woman needed them most. The woman grew as a poet and diarist and kept the flowers dated and pressed in glass. She speculated on this man, but never tried to discover his identity. She took that anonymous tribute to her heart and decided that she would reciprocate his anonymity by keeping her diaries private until after her death. And so she lived and wrote and listened to music – a quiet mover. It almost makes you want to believe in God, doesn't it, Lloyd?

Lloyd took his head from its soft tweed resting place, shaking it to bring the sad story into sharper focus. Then he stood up and helped Kathleen to her feet. 'I think your dream lover is a very strange fighter', he said, 'and I think he wants to own you, not inspire you.' (Ellroy 1984: 185)

This mock fairy-tale retelling of Kathleen's life is full of sinister undertones which Hopkins recognizes, but it brings out the jealous, chauvinistic side of him more than the detective. Hopkins has been investigating a series of women murders. It transpires that the killer, Theodore Verplanck, is also Kathleen's anonymous 'dream lover'. Hopkins sees in Verplanck, who he does not know by name at this stage, a rival for Kathleen's affections. This is not the only parallel between the two men. Both men were the victims of rape in their youth, but Hopkins recovered more swiftly from the trauma building a successful career and starting a family, even though he is chronically prone to adultery. Verplanck's rape as a teenager only served to cloud his homosexuality, and he

has manufactured romantic feelings for Kathleen as she was pleasant to him at school, and his bizarre displays of affection, aside from the anonymous gifts, include brutally murdering members of her poetry group, 'Kathy's Kourt', who drifted away from her over the years. This violently warped sexuality is offset by the twee tone of Kathleen's musings. While members of her group dabbled in sexual experimentation, which Ellroy stereotypically associated with the counter-culture movement, Kathleen almost comes across as the all-American 1950s housewife in her idealized concept of male admirers and romantic gifts. Hopkins, who has been resting his head in her lap like a child, needs to shake it to 'bring the sad story into sharper focus', as though breaking free from the spell she casts in narrative. After all, her feminist views hardly chime with his right-wing opinions and he is baffled and attracted to her paradoxical character. When he warns Kathleen that the anonymous suitor wants to possess her, this is through a realization that he also desires this firm control which he almost regards as a masculine right given his role as the protector detective. In their rivalry for Kathleen, both Hopkins and Verplanck, detective and serial killer, are complicit in the murderous violence that ensues, but then so is the feminist poet herself, as Kathleen clearly enjoys being the object of both their desires and makes excuses for Verplanck even after he is killed. She sends a break-up letter to Hopkins with a red rose which is 'for Teddy (Verplanck). If we remember him, then he'll never be able to hurt us' (Ellroy 1984: 276).

Ellroy has maintained a consistent level of analysis as he transitioned from representing the paranoid male reaction to feminism in *Blood on the Moon* to what appeared to be a more contrarian position in his short story, non-fiction and historical crime fiction, the two weakest and wildest of which, *Blood's a Rover* and *The Cold Six Thousand*, were, coincidentally or not, written and published during the presidency of George W. Bush when post-9/11 American politics had given birth to neo-conservatism. The evolution of Ellroy's writing mirrors the political changes of a country which, even though conservatism is deeply embedded in the culture, seems in a constant state of flux. While Ellroy is more than just a cipher for the times, his writing's stylistic evolution, and how it mirrors the political narrative, can be traced over the course of the LA Quartet, which begins in a fairly conventional manner with *The Black Dahlia*, but ends with a cryptic noir vision that encompasses the ultra-violent *White Jazz*:

I pulled the trigger – *click/click/roar* – muzzle flash set his hair on fire.

This scream.

This huge hand snuffing flames out – stretching huge to quash that scream.

A whisper.

‘We’ll stash him at one of your buildings. You do what you have to do, and I’ll watchdog him.

We’ll work an angle on his money, and sooner or later he’ll spill.’

Smoke. Mattress debris settling.

EVERYTHING SPINNING. (Ellroy 1992: 274)

In this scene, corrupt LAPD detective Dave Klein tortures Mob underling Chick Vecchio for information. Klein’s fractured narration gives the violence a chaotic air which is at odds with the rationale behind his brutality, the need to put the pieces together. The gunfire, flames, smoke and debris push this beyond-a-regular beating until even the perpetrator of the violence finds his vision disintegrating ‘EVERYTHING SPINNING’. With *White Jazz*, Ellroy was willing to throw everything into the mix, to create something new and confrontational. It is a dystopian, if not apocalyptic vision of social order as what passes for normality in *White Jazz* is brutally restored by the coda as the crimewave subsides and ‘the public has been partially or totally unaware of the gravity of the situation’ (Powell 2015: 160). At the same time, after the publication of *Brown’s Requiem*, Ellroy did not display any interest in, or regard for, Chandler’s slick observations, easy moral imperative, and petit-bourgeois perspective, intertwined with statements regarding the city’s mean streets where ‘a man must go who is not himself mean ... neither tarnished nor afraid’ (Chandler 1944: 987).

Ellroy’s LA might be romanticized but it bears little relationship to Chandler’s, admittedly influential, take on the city, much of which transpires during the same period the *Quartet* is set. Chandler’s pithy comments might cut to the bone, but Ellroy’s verbal onslaughts seek to destroy everything in their path, in order to create a more-than-tarnished space representing the writer’s personal Los Angeles, which, having succumbed to greed and redevelopment, barely exists now except as ghosts and remnants of the past. Ironically, given Ellroy’s self-confessed politics, it could even be argued that his is a leftist, possibly postmodern, interpretation of the city’s history. For Ellroy, redevelopment arrived in tandem with the rise of the cultural spectacle, be it Hollywood films and the gossip industry surrounding it, the opening of modern theme parks like Disneyland, the construction of Dodger Stadium in the Chavez Ravine area or the creation of the freeway system. If the latter was the death knell of public transport in LA, particularly for the Red Cars which ran from areas such as

Santa Monica, through Pasadena to the Sierra Madre hills, then the building of Dodger Stadium was arguably the last gasp for public housing in the area. It was an event that resulted in the displacement from their homes of up to a thousand families, mainly Latinos, to make way for the now-famous ballpark. *White Jazz* addresses this particularly dark period of LA's history, as Lieutenant Dudley Smith does his best to exploit those same dispossessed families, squeezing money out of the evicted by housing them in Lynwood where he is setting up a pornography ring. Yet, if compared to the era's actual personages, Smith seems little more than a minor functionary. After all, this was a time when the likes of Fritz Burns and his Committee against Socialist Housing were spreading their propaganda and marshalling their forces to make sure advocates of public housing, in particular, the Housing Authority's director of public information and veteran campaigner for public housing in Chavez Ravine, Frank Wilkinson, were being red-baited out of the debate to enable Burns and his committee to push their political agenda. The result was that Wilkinson would be quickly fired from his position with the Housing Authority. He would eventually be held in contempt of Congress by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and, in 1961, sentenced to federal prison (Goldberg 2010). Thus, Chavez Ravine residents lost one of their principal advocates. Meanwhile, the removal of those families, portrayed in a novel like *White Jazz*, became, as Hector Beccera points out, a rallying cry 'of Latino L.A. history and activism' in the area for years to come (Beccera 2012).

Though Ellroy accurately depicts the broad outline of events surrounding the eviction of Chavez Ravine families, he does not seem overly concerned about getting the details exactly right. For instance, in *White Jazz*, voters are supposedly deciding whether – in the words of the scandal-sheet *Hush-Hush* magazine – to 'boot an egregiously entrenched enclave of impecunious, impoverished, impetuously machismo mangled Mexican-Americans from their sharecropper shingle shacks in that shady, smog-shrouded Shangri-La Chavez Ravine' (Ellroy 1992: 82). However, 90 per cent of the land in Chavez Ravine had been acquired as early as 1952. In fact, it was in June 1958, when the Dodgers were playing their first season at the Coliseum, that voters actually approved Proposition B, a referendum on the city's contract with the ball club, but one that said nothing about evictions. Nevertheless, in Ellroy's fictional Los Angeles, the inherent racism of the city is brought to the foreground: '[Morton] Diskant's been riling the spooks up with Chavez Ravine, something like "Vote for me so your Mexican brothers won't get evicted from their shantytown Shangri-La shacks to make

room for a ruling class ballpark.” All because “the Dodgers are good for business” (Ellroy 1992: 19). Ellroy knew that what was good for business in the late 1950s still held true around the time *White Jazz* was published as the United States transitioned from the Bush administration to Clinton. The latter’s commitment to the Community Reinvestment Act was described by Wayne Barrett as ‘a boon to black families and Hispanics’ trying to get on the housing ladder, and has been attributed by Barrett and other conservative commentators as a major factor in the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008. If the injustice of Chavez Ravine hangs over the history of LA, then attempts to make reparations have influenced its present and future, albeit not always for the public good (Barrett 2008).

Although skimping on the details, Ellroy’s take on post-war LA – described by Peter Messent as a ‘fictional world of collapsing boundaries, uncanny doublings and identity slippage, where political, economic and media interest powerfully combine in the suppression of any version of the “truth,” and where the law (and the investigative actions of his cop protagonists) are always subordinate to such interests’ – is not all that far removed from the historical record (Messant 2010: 185). Also, politically speaking, Ellroy’s version of LA history is not substantially different from the anti-corporatist and spectacle-denouncing critique of a post-war city in which political and real estate interests intersect, put forward by urbanologist and one-time Ellroy-nemesis Mike Davis, in books such as *City of Quartz* (1990) and *Ecology of Fear* (1998). This is corroborated in a 1987 *Libération* article by the late French crime writer and *gauchiste* militant Jean-Patrick Manchette, who would go so far as to call Ellroy ‘*un peu Marxiste*’ (Manchette 1987). While it should be noted that Manchette was writing about Ellroy relatively early in his career, and it is doubtful any critic would repeat the Marxist claim as overtly as Manchette, given Ellroy’s public statements in the years since, it still holds that Ellroy has become an expert at dissecting authoritarian power through narrative even if he is inclined to defend it in public statements.

*The Big Nowhere*, published in the final full year of Reagan’s presidency, is set, appropriately enough, against the Hollywood Red Scare of the early 1950s. During his Hollywood career, Reagan had morphed from a New Deal liberal into an anti-communist HUAC informant. Here, Ellroy relies on Joseph Conrad to articulate the novel’s sub-current, and, it might be said, Ellroy’s *modus operandi*: ‘It was written that I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice’ (Ellroy 1988: i). His characters live in their dreams and nightmares. Danny Upshaw is haunted in his sleep by reliving a murder he witnessed and failed to stop. In

his unconscious state, Upshaw is terrified of the impending vision he can never escape, that of a young woman being hacked to death by two men with axes as Upshaw drove by. While he slowed the car to get a better view, he did not attempt to stop the violence. His efforts to find out what happened afterwards bring up clues, but nothing that will let him know for sure. The murder is the catalyst for his career in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department:

Part of him knew it was just a dream – that it was 1950, not 1941, that the story would run its course, while part of him grasped for new details and part tried to be dead still so as to not disrupt the unravelling. (Ellroy 1988: 37)

Upshaw's anxiety about the date evokes a childlike fear of reliving the trauma of past generations, but also shows how much American society has changed over the relatively short period of nine years. He witnessed the murder around the time of the Pearl Harbor attacks, an event Ellroy would come back to in *Perfidia*, and for Upshaw the murder resonates more strongly than any of the horrors of the war partly because health issues prevent him from serving in the military. The murder he witnesses is a declaration of war for him, and the time is so troubling to revisit not just because of the physical horror of the scene but also due to the impotence and inexperience he associates with his younger self. Now a sheriff's deputy, Upshaw should be more comfortable with his identity in 1950 but the narrative is interrupted to come back to this point in backstory as the nightmares never end. He keeps returning to this scene as he can never truly understand that degree of evil, even in the cases where the murderer is caught, and most painfully he needs to slow the dream down 'so as not to disrupt the unravelling' and to brutally justify the role in law enforcement he took while his country was going to war.

Like Ellroy in his pre-literary life – a trifecta of breaking and entering, drug consumption and a pulp fiction addiction which would lead to an identity submerged in noir fiction – his characters exist in their own purgatory, trapped between their dreams and the knowledge that they would be better off leaving those dreams alone as there is no escape from the political reality of the corrupt institutions they serve. Moving further into the abyss, *L.A. Confidential* begins with a quote from Los Angeles novelist Steve Erickson: 'A glory that costs everything and means nothing' (Ellroy 1990: i). Ellroy returns to the theme of glory in the text with obsessive devotion, combining in the plot a series of grisly murders, the construction of the Dream-a-Dreamland Disneyland-like theme park, and the warped perspective of various cops

and politicians. Ellroy's narratives can be labyrinthine, mirroring the bureaucratic nature of the institutions he is portraying which remain largely unchanged even as the Quartet covers the twilight days of the Harry Truman administration to the dawn of the Kennedy presidency. In *L.A. Confidential*, Ed Exley, rises through the ranks of the LAPD because, in his 114-page report, he is the only person able to articulate the narrative, one that he, of course, has altered to his advantage. The *L.A. Daily News* accuses Exley of using the 'Nite Owl case as a springboard for his ruthless personal ambition' when it transpires that the three suspects Exley killed were innocent, but he is able to shrug off the scandal and reclaim the narrative stronger than he was before when he reinvestigates and helps solve the case (Ellroy 1990: 380). Moreover, unravelling a narrative is what investigations, whether criminal or literary, are about, even if that means manipulating it to suit one's own agenda. So, the corrupt Exley is not only credited with solving the 'Night Owl' murder, but he has succeeded in burning the evidence, keeping the case files and money, saving the careers of his erstwhile colleagues, and assisting his father in his bid to gain the Republican gubernatorial nomination. But this career advancement comes at great moral and personal cost, as the reformed prostitute Lynn Bracken tells Exley, 'Some men get the world. Some men get ex-hookers and a trip to Arizona. You're in with the former, but my God I don't envy you with the blood on your conscience' (Ellroy 1990: 480). Bracken's words cut deep, as he knows how much she has suffered alongside her partner Bud White who is forced to leave the LAPD due to his injuries, and yet, they are the relatively lucky ones to have survived LA's corrupting narrative before it destroyed their soul as it has done to Exley.

*White Jazz*, with its rapid-fire, stream-of-consciousness narrative goes even further in combining police reportage, personal confession and smut magazine sensationalism in its portrayal of a political system stretched to breaking point by its own corruption; the origins of the prose style being the result of Ellroy having to cut his novels down to a readable size, though it could just as well have been an early attempt at a kind of urban poetry. In fact, Ellroy becomes a different, and perhaps an even more radical, writer if one thinks of him as a poet, frustrated or not, rather than as simply a hyperactive and obsessive crime writer. But this time Ellroy begins the book with a quote from crime writer Ross Macdonald, who was practically as father obsessed as Ellroy has been mother obsessed since the murder of Geneva Hilliker Ellroy: 'In the end I possess my birthplace and am possessed by its language' (Ellroy 1992: i). Birthplace, language and, in the

end, death are the ponderables that are driving his narratives. The prologue that follows marks out the parameters of Dave 'the Enforcer' Klein's guilt:

*All I have is the will to remember. Time revoked/fever dreams – I wake up reaching,  
afraid I'll forget. Pictures keep the woman young.*

*L.A. fall 1958.*

*Newsprint link the dots. Names, events – so brutal they beg to be connected. Years  
down – the story stays dispersed. The names are dead or too guilty to tell.*

*I'm old, afraid I'll forget:*

*I killed innocent men.*

*I betrayed secret oaths.*

*I reaped profit from horror. (Ellroy 1992: 1)*

As this is a memory narrative the unreliable process of recollection frames the deliriously violent later scenes such as the interrogation of Chick Vecchio. Both memory and the equally unreliable tabloid journalism of *Hush-Hush* bind this story together, 'Newsprint link the dots'. But with Ellroy the salacious prose of the scandal sheets is no less poetic than the inner rhythm of Klein's thoughts. After *White Jazz*, Ellroy decided to venture beyond the confines of crime fiction, just as he had progressed beyond novels about serial killers, private eyes and vengeance-seeking cops, to court literary legitimacy through a series of long, dark political novels. But, in a way, those beginnings are all one needs to know: that his work is sanctioned by the will to remember and dream. That the crimes described can be reduced to a single event, and ensuing guilt. In that context, Ellroy will deploy whatever he might have at his disposal: memory, fact, fiction, autobiography and a language part poetry and part obscenity. All to reconcile himself to the fact that he has '*reaped profit from horror*' and '*betrayed secret oaths*'. With the past having infected, if not cursed, the present, it reduces nostalgia, so often the province of crime fiction, to little more than a sick joke. For Ellroy, as with Klein ruminating on a lifetime of misdeeds, the past is neither dead nor truly past (Canavese 2006: 156). And that will be the case so long as corruption, sexual obsession and violence continue to infect and motivate the historical record.

Ellroy's critique of post-war American society does not make him the leftist that some critics would like him to be. Mike Davis, while sharing some of Ellroy's critique of Los Angeles, still regards the author as nothing less than a proto-fascist whose sensibility undercuts the very genre he is writing in. As



Davis writes, 'Ellroy risks extinguishing the genre's tensions, and, inevitably, its power. In his pitch blackness there is no light left to cast shadows and evil becomes a forensic banality. The result feels like the actual moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era: the superannuation of corruption that fails any longer to outrage or interest' (Davis 1990: 45). While Davis is not altogether wrong, he tends to misunderstand Ellroy and the extent of his cultural revisionism. After all, could it not be that the Quartet feels like the moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era because it is derived from the moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era? Ellroy accepts the 'super-annuation of corruption' as it has always been there, his characters cannot escape it and he is more interested in redeeming his protagonists through their love of strong women than he is with futile attempts at reform, 'my books are all about one thing and one thing only, a man needs a woman' (Powell 2009: 194). In *Blood on the Moon*, Kathleen McCarthy might drive both Hopkins and Verplanck to the brink of madness, but Ellroy never questions the logic of that madness when a beautiful woman is involved. Thus, to criticize the 'all-encompassing noir mythology' which Davis identifies in Ellroy's work as destroying the genre's tensions is to misread how the genre, or at least the genre according to Ellroy, has altered since the days of Chandler and Hammett (Davis 1990: 45). Accordingly, any serious reader of the Quartet will be aware that the origins of political corruption in these novels are perversely personal, and that Ellroy has never been one to separate the historical and political from the perversely personal. Not only are Ellroy's ahistorical touches no more indulgent than any other writers, but, by focusing on warped obsessions as a prime motivating force, he is probably closer than most to explaining how history and the social dynamics of power truly work.

Lee Horsley in *The Noir Thriller* (2009) has a different, thankfully more nuanced, take on Ellroy. For Horsley, the LA Quartet is primarily an exploration of 'Hollywood's image-making', as it relates to the commercial development of American society. In doing so, she states that Ellroy explores the bond between 'the money-makers and the myth-makers', pointing out that Ellroy repeatedly writes about 'lives that have been warped by voyeuristic participation in films produced by those in pursuit of wealth and power'. She adds, 'The dominance of Hollywood storytelling combined with the addiction to spectacle spurs the disaffected to narrative acts of their own, although it also means that characters can only conceive of themselves in terms of the conventional rules of the cinema' (Horsley 2001: 214-15). Though Horsley cites *L.A. Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia* as prime examples, equally one might add to that other Ellroy novels,

up to and including *Perfidia*, in how Hollywood has a crucial role in Ellroy's portrayal of political structures. Dudley Smith's affair with film star Bette Davis in *Perfidia* and the revelation that aspiring starlet Elizabeth Short is his illegitimate daughter is symbolic of the status the LAPD holds in Hollywood and its corrupt grip on the media. Smith accompanies Davis and Short to a screening of *Citizen Kane*, and his instant dislike of the film, '[a] moronic motion picture', reveals that he perceives himself within what Horsley describes as 'the conventional rules of the cinema', and he thinks Welles has stepped outside this moral contract; 'Young Welles scrounged coon maids off Beverly Hills bus stops. He bamboozled them with maryjane and magic tricks. He plied them with his cricket dick and drove them home to coontown' (Ellroy 2014: 582). Horsley is also accurate in outlining the contours of Ellroy's career-long obsession with image and myth-making. Ellroy also appears to be fanning the same flames when it comes to American culture's ability to create and sustain images and myths that invite the voyeurism of viewers and readers who consume the product in front of them, not as blank slates but with all the cultural baggage which accompanies those spectacles they so willingly buy into. *Hush-Hush* acts as a great leveller in his novels, the lurid scandals within its pages brings the Horsley's 'money-makers and the myth-makers' down to the level of the everyday society upon whom they depend.

Existing somewhere between Horsley and Davis is Josh Cohen's subtle critique of Ellroy's work. Writing specifically about the LA Quartet, Cohen argues:

Ellroy's novels, whilst ferociously demystifying the spectacular life-world of Los Angeles, do not appear to make that world any more available to the agency of the individual or collective urban eye; on the contrary, the material terrors of history and geography are, if anything, more destructive of the imperatives of ethics and politics (other than the corrupt variety) than the dazzling signs that conceal them. (Cohen 1996: 5)

These 'dazzling signs' are circuitous by nature in order to cover up the hidden history of Los Angeles. They may be found in the spectacle of Hollywood or Dodger Stadium or in the person of a character like Ed Exley who Klein describes in the closing lines of *White Jazz* as 'Chief of Detectives, Chief of Police. Congressman, Lieutenant Governor, current gubernatorial candidate' (Ellroy 1992). Exley nurtures the same political ambitions of his father, but the laurels hide his individual corruption which Klein threatens to expose, thereby offering a sense of narrative continuation beyond the last page of the

Quartet. If Exley's climb to power might seem unlikely, given the scandals and corruption he becomes embroiled in, then surely the various aforementioned critics would agree that Ellroy's characters are often so overblown that they are able to move history as much as they are moved by history, this in a genre that seeks to manipulate the reader as much as the author manipulates his or her protagonist by presenting the characters in a hidden history which is entirely Ellroy's own. With their own manufactured trajectories, Ellroy's characters are never less than expendable, burning themselves out for the sake of the narrative, after which the author disposes of them without a twinge of conscience like the twisted and tormented hero of his earlier novels, Lloyd Hopkins, a character he decided to abandon 'on some sort of ambiguous note' (Silet 1995: 45). Too much a typical protagonist, Hopkins's sudden exit signalled the end, so far as Ellroy was concerned, of a particular kind of warped decency, and he has never felt the need to revisit the character and rewrite him politically for the convenience of any critic. Ellroy was happy for Hopkins to be the likeable but troubled 'f\*ckhead' (Ellroy 1984: 1).

For Ellroy, avenging angels, no matter how right-wing or psychotic, are easier to eliminate than their devilish counterparts. That's the case with the Machiavellian Dudley Smith, whom the reader encounters for the first time some hundred pages into *Clandestine*. Dudley remains a constant throughout the Quartet. Smith, an Ellroy favourite, builds a formidable power base through fear and manipulation, willing to kill, whether in or out of the line of duty. Personifying everything loathsome about law enforcement, he is, as Buzz Meeks, in *L.A. Confidential*, says, 'smarter than everyone else', which given Ellroy's fondness for revisiting the character is a testament to the power he yields (Ellroy 1990: 152). An old school cop and racist, who emigrated from Ireland, Smith possesses a personality to fit every occasion; on the one hand, his character is pure Irish blarney, telling folksy stories about his family or offering fatherly advice to young officers, while, on the other hand, he is a hit-man for LA crime boss Mickey Cohen. A minor character at the beginning of the Quartet, he ends up as a major player and the personification of LA's noir narrative, ruthless but morally consistent.

It is not only Dudley Smith who is given a pre-Quartet life in *Perfidia*, but the likes of Lee Blanchard and Bucky Bleichart, Claire De Haven and, most significantly, Kay Lake, the 'red princess' from *The Black Dahlia*. Arguably the moral centre of the novel, Kay understands that the era's paranoia is based, as she reports in her journal, on 'the lie that race defines human beings. The lie

that dissent defines sedition ... . The definitive lie of fearful hatred' (Ellroy 2014: 427). Taking place just prior to, during and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, *Perfidia*, despite lacking the impact of Ellroy's earlier work, manages, if nothing else, to add substance and meaning to the original LA Quartet, still a few years in the future as the movement of power returns to those who control the narrative. Kay, although not in a societal position of prominence, provides commentary on wartime events through her journal which shines a light on the profiteering and institutionalized corruption of the LAPD.

Moreover, *Perfidia* succeeds in walking a tightrope between the paranoia of Ellroy's earlier writing and the contrariness of his non-fiction and early novels. What it lacks in intensity it more than makes up for in political insight and sense of history through that paranoia, 'The city would build up and out after the war. The war gave him L.A. ablaze with crazy purpose' (Ellroy 2014: 574). For Ellroy paranoia is a form of power as he places the narrative focus on the internment of Japanese-Americans post-Pearl Harbor, with its obvious comparisons to 9/11 and its aftermath, giving the Quartet new avenues for political commentary. Though it should also be noted that, according to Japanese-American crime writer Naomi Hirahami, no Japanese-American, however brilliant, would be hired by the LAPD as Ellroy's central character Hideo Ashida is in *Perfidia*, at least not until the late 1940s (Hirahami 2015). Though, given his scrupulous sense of history, it would be fair to give Ellroy a degree of poetic licence on this matter, regardless of how it might otherwise impinge on the accuracy of his narrative. As a typically hyper-driven memory theatre, overflowing with forensic detail, fevered declarations and obsessive musings, *Perfidia*, and the three books that will follow, might well be Ellroy's final elegy to the city. Without the narrative drive, urgency and paranoia of earlier novels, *Perfidia*, nevertheless, further substantiates Ellroy's revision of the genre and his sense of the city. At the same time, its publication comes in a decidedly different era, one in which Ellroy's portrayal of male anxiety no longer holds the same impact, while the psychogeography of his native city (with an emphasis on psycho) has now been gone over countless times. This makes any paranoia regarding the failure of trickle-down economics, corruption, hegemonic decline, political correctness and gender politics, a given rather than a substantial and innovative critique. Even though Ellroy's stock might have fallen from the bull market of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is still the case that he knows his city's history as well as anyone, and remains as intent as ever to squeeze everything he can from it, as it is said of future LAPD chief William H. Parker in *Perfidia*, 'The war let him love

L.A. one last time as it was' (Ellroy 2014: 574). At the same time, wingnut cop Carl Hull, issues a caveat, warning Dudley Smith, and perhaps the reader, that there is more nastiness to come, because 'the real war starts when this one ends' (Ellroy 2014: 392). Hull's warning is ironically prophetic, the irony stemming from Ellroy's new determination not to let an overly powerful and overbearing character, such as J. Edgar Hoover in the Underworld USA novels, have so much power over narrative in this world. Ellroy ended the Underworld series with Hoover dying after a long period of mental decline. *Perfidia*, with its multiplicity of viewpoints, shows how paranoia can create power but never hold it for Ellroy's protagonists as the concept is naturally malleable, and the reader knows, as Ellroy is now writing prequels, that the persecution of Japanese-Americans in the early 1940s will evolve into the post-war Red Scare and finally displacement of Hispanic families at Chavez Ravine.

Ellroy's interpretations are as personal as they are plausible. Basing his plots and counterplots on how obsessive behaviour creates history, Ellroy has spent four decades expurgating the past in order that he might, whether he realizes it or not, critique the present. Despite his fictional characters, their failings and their ultimately doomed, even for a figure as powerful as Hoover, attempt to control the narrative, Ellroy is not so much interested in shaping events as in reconciling himself to the paranoia of public facts and private obsessions. With a gargantuan ego and formidable writing skills, Ellroy, ever the contrarian, might yet, and against form, be delivering much more than he claims.



## Part Four

# Ellroy and After: The Ellrovia Influence on Authors and Genre





## ‘A Pointed Demythologization’: The Influence of James Ellroy’s Novels on Megan Abbott’s Revisionism of the Femme Fatale

Diana Powell

In her monograph *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction* (2002), crime author Megan Abbott contrasts James Ellroy’s work with other interpreters of the hard-boiled genre, namely Robert Altman’s reinvention of Chandler’s Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye* (1973):

A pointed demythologization, for instance, might have been made [of Altman’s Marlowe] by targeting the misogyny, or racism or homophobia at the heart of the tough guy figure (a project that has, in a large part, been taken up by the James Ellroy novels). (Abbott 2002: 194)

Ellroy’s noir portrayal of 1940s and 1950s Los Angeles is more compromised, more contaminated than the pockets of corruption Chandler exposed. By demystifying the detective and exposing the ugliness of the noir era, Ellroy leaves no place for the Chandler-style private eye, the modern white knight ‘who is not himself mean’, because Ellroy’s detectives fatalistically belong to and reflect the wide-reaching and deeply tainted institutions of the time (Chandler 1944: 987). Yet Ellroy’s interpretation of noir is not purely destructive, it repeatedly returns to and reinvents noir, providing revised versions of historical and genre-familiar characters, plots and language patterns created by Chandler, Hammett and Wambaugh to name a few. Demythologization and reinvention, however, can create their own restrictive noir mythology. Despite the fact that Ellroy has striven to avoid creating a definitive version of his work – his self-confessed aim is to continually ‘puncture’ his own

‘myths’ so that there is no one standard Ellroy interpretation – he has, in fact, created such a compelling version of noir that he has dominated the popular understanding of that era (Hogan 1995: 60). Indeed, Ellroy has risen to such dominance as a neo-noir writer that critics have extended beyond Ellroy’s natural field of post-Second World War to pre-Watergate to find links to other historical crime fiction, no matter how tangential. One such link is provided by film critic Tim Robey on the Prohibition-era Ben Affleck vehicle *Live by Night* (2017): Robey denounces the film as ‘watered down James Ellroy’ rather than comparing it to its more well-regarded and natural predecessor, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–14) or its proto-noir forerunners *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932), or even the novel on which it was adapted from by Dennis Lehane (Robey 2017). Ellroy’s place in the popular consciousness is such that, in setting her early crime fiction in the 1930s to the 1950s, Megan Abbott must demythologize not only noir, but Ellroy’s version of noir. I would argue that Abbott achieves this, and yet at the same time pays affectionate tribute to the author, which in turn reaches beyond her consciously noir novels and into her contemporary fiction. Even when Abbott leaves noir behind, she does not fully leave Ellroy.

As a crime writer, Abbott has admitted her debt to Ellroy, calling her first two novels, *Die a Little* (2005) and *The Song Is You* (2008), ‘lovesongs to him’ (Godfrey 2009). Ellroy has also contributed warm words on Abbott’s works. In a blurb which has featured on several of Abbott’s novels, Ellroy comments, ‘Megan Abbott: superb storyteller, film noir scholar, deconstructionist suffused with a true artist’s passion. Poised to ascend to the top rung of crime writing and quite possibly something beyond’ (Ellroy 2005b). Both *The Song Is You* and Abbott’s first novel *Die a Little* share Ellroy’s noir vision of Los Angeles of the 1940s and 1950s, and both consider the transient glamour of characters chasing the Hollywood dream, from starlets and hangers-on who end up demeaned or dead in their pursuit, to those who pay the emotional price for being unable to rescue them. Of Abbott’s Ellrovia ‘lovesongs,’ *The Song Is You*, in plot, characters, language and style a closer reflection of Ellroy. But *Die a Little* is more radical in its unveiling of American institutions than *The Song Is You*, which maintains a narrower focus on the Hollywood dream. In *Die a Little*, middle-class wives and spinster teachers reveal a corruption masked by the gloss of the consumerist post-war boom economy in a way that on one hand evokes Ellroy through its uncovering and on the other, moves away from him by setting the action largely outside the male purview.

## Hard-boiled women: *Die a Little*

*Die a Little* portrays the sexual awakening of a young teacher and her cop brother to the sexually deviant underworld of 1950s LA, wherein the Hollywood veneer is mirrored by an equally duplicitous domestic realm of fruit-cocktail gelatin rings, Singer sewing machines, hat boxes and Mai Tais. Brother and sister, Bill and Lora King, dote on each other like an elderly married couple. When Bill is wounded in a car accident that introduces him to his future wife Alice, Lora is asked by hospital staff and by Alice herself if she is his wife (Abbott 2005: 3, 6). Throughout, there are protective, if not incestuous, undertones. As orphans, the two make a home together, and Bill provides the same protective spirit to his few romantic relationships as he does to Lora. Towards the end of the novel when the formerly incorruptible Bill, now strangely weak and desperate, uses his position in the police to frame the pimp Joe Avalon and protect his wife Alice, rationalizing that Avalon's 'done enough bad things that he never got caught for', Lora overhears their conversation and it reminds her of a pivotal childhood incident:

*I want to protect you from all that, my brother Bill once said to me. I had returned home crying. Some boy who had cornered me in his car, pressed himself so close, so roughly his watch had caught on my sweater and snagged it from collarbone to waist. The sweater was a favourite, was the perfect aquamarine. It was the softest thing I'd ever owned. It felt like pussy willows against my skin. It was the ruined sweater that brought me home with tears stinging. But my brother assumed it was the boy.*

*–Did he hurt you? Did he force himself on you?*

*–He tried to. He kept ... trying.*

*It was true, after all.*

*It took nearly an hour to persuade him not to go this boy's house. I knew he wouldn't hurt the boy, just frighten him, scold him. But I was too embarrassed. And part of me would rather listen to him. Listen to him say things like*

*–I want to protect you from all that. I don't want you to have to know these things. About men. I want you to be safe forever. I will make you safe forever.*

*I want to protect you. (Abbott 2005: 203–4)*

Lora recalls a moment when Bill's protection is untainted, and it is significant that his focus is on her: Lora thinks 'he's talking to me', because she too craves that protective touch he gave her, significantly and ironically, after an unwanted

sexual advance from another boy. That Lora desires to return to her version of her brother, 'my Bill, the Bill who never surprises me except with the extent of, his flinty decency, his goodness, his deathless integrity', and to the comparative domestic bliss they shared before Alice's drugs, prostitution and Hollywood-types entered the scene evokes the tragedy of noir in his mistake of loving the femme fatale Alice, even though institutionally, Alice, his wife should be the object of his protection (Abbott 2005: 206). Yet the corrupt Alice cannot be protected conventionally, and it is Lora, who, throughout the novel, is compared to Bill, who will rescue her brother from this potential version of himself by becoming darker than he ever was. Bill's false attempts at duplicity are contrasted with Alice's long-standing duality, which begins to simplify into one of transparent fakery: Alice's last event as hostess is a Japanese-themed cocktail party, which is ironically a police charity event, wherein Lora describes the lanterns as 'artfully positioned' and the party as 'pitch perfect. It is almost obscene' (Abbott 2005: 206-7). Alice herself has 'her dark hair pulled back tight and her eye makeup straight out of a Charlie Chan movie', yet her perspiration keeps damaging the white paint and at one point 'her face is sliding off' (Abbott 2005: 207, 214). With Lora uncovering the truth, Bill brought into an awareness of his wife's past, and the cops outside the party coming to investigate, artifice is no longer a mask for Alice, and her underworld dealings are apparent alongside the fiction she created around herself and Bill. Yet as power seeps from Alice, who is losing control of the story, it is gained by Lora, who puts on an act to protect her brother and replace Alice. Protection is reinterpreted from its traditionally male chivalric quality to a female one more attune to using the weapons of the criminal and socially manipulative society around her to falsely maintain Bill's heroic ideal.

*Die a Little* presents a blurred brother-sister relationship akin to the Kay Lake-Lee Blanchard protective, celibate co-habitation in *The Black Dahlia*. But whereas Kay and Blanchard's unnatural sibling relationship – Kay has replaced for Blanchard the sister who he could not protect, and he is the protector from her previous physically destructive boyfriends – is replaced with a sexually consummated, and thus more natural, Bucky Bleichert/Kay pairing, Abbott takes her characters back from sexuality to celibacy, by restoring the brother-sister marriage. This also reveals Abbott's strongest deviation from Ellroy, for whom sex can be as restorative as it is destructive, as Bucky's first-person narration candidly reveals when he describes sleeping with Kay:

That first night she was as much my grief catcher as my lover. I was afraid of noise and abrupt movement, so she undressed me and made me be still,

murmuring, 'and all that', everytime I tried to talk about Fritzzy or the Dahlia. She touched me so softly that it was hardly touching at all; I touched every whole and healthy part of her until I felt my own body cease to be fists and cop muscle. Then we roused each other slowly and made love, with Betty Short far away. (Ellroy 1987: 214)

Sex is psychologically healing for Bleichert, as their lovemaking shuts out first the case 'Dahlia', and then his role 'cop muscle'. Yet the 'whole and healthy' transference from Lake to Bleichert is continued to Bucky's more unhealthy obsession with Elizabeth Short, whose personhood is restored by the end of the line as he affectionately refers to her as 'Betty'.

In contrast, Bill had been able to shut out the lurid side of his job and does not look to women for restoration. Despite working as a detective, until he met Alice, Bill seemed untouched by the city of LA, perhaps because in Lora's mind he should be chaste anyway or perhaps it is because for Abbott, corruption begins on the personal level. It is fitting that a car crash brings the sultry, mysterious Alice, a Hollywood seamstress, and Bill together, as his compulsive attraction to Alice brings him closer to self-destruction. Alice awakens Bill sexually, fulfils his fantasy of rescuing her and perpetuates the 1950s idyllic stereotype of a loving wife and impeccable hostess. Yet, in a deviation from the femme fatale storyline, Alice's electric sexuality also stirs Bill's sister Lora, who, although she distrusts and judges Alice, describes her sister-in-law's 'sweetly spreading pale thighs,' 'her alabaster skin ... spread across the frame, pillowing out of the silk and curving sharply into her dark hair' (Abbott 2005: 3). Lora's attraction/repulsion to Alice and to the darker side of LA is channelled into her relationship with Mike Standish, a Hollywood fixer whom Alice introduces to Lora. Mike rescues studio actors from bad headlines while also discreetly catering to their fetishes and should be perceived as more dangerous than the fumbling dates Lora's brother sought to protect her from. But Alice's darkness, masked in sisterly concern, pushes Lora to date Mike, even gaining Bill's naive approval at the match. Alice's protection is intended as exposure and destruction. Yet, surprisingly, rather than being the cruel victim of her sister-in-law's plans for corrupting her, Lora who is already a keen observer of her brother's relationship, stays detached even in sexual encounters with Mike. When she finds another woman's lipstick on Mike's bed, Lora asks him, after he clears the bed covers:

'Is that the usual routine?' I say walking toward the center of the room, then turning and facing him again.

‘Not always, but with you. ...’ He smiles suddenly and, head still tilted against the wall, he twists around to catch my gaze. ‘Aren’t I a bastard? Or maybe I’m a powder puff, You see, Lora King, turns out I’m surprising myself this time. Turns out I’m disappointed how little you care.’

I find myself offering a sharp giggle of shock.

‘Hard boiled.’ He winces.

Covering my mouth, I concede, ‘You’re rotten,’ before letting the smile spread, blowing smoke. I run the tip of my thumb along my lower lip, brushing away a stray wisp of tobacco.

‘Well, then.’ He folds his arms and matches my stare, grinning like a snake. ‘Put out that cigarette, beautiful, and take off the f\*\*king dress.’ (Abbott 2005: 99)

Lora’s curiosity leads to her own self-discovery: her ‘giggle of shock’ brings an awareness of her own dark pleasure and power. Unlike her brother, who at the mercy of his wife believes Alice’s fantasy creation, Lora confronts the truth of the situation, removing the opportunity for Mike the expert fixer to invent, explain and assuage. Confronted by this cold detachment, Mike is uncharacteristically shaken: he cannot protect her from hurtful truths, so instead he reveals more and Lora is turned on sexually. Lora’s emotional detachment from both sex and sexual betrayal accompanies her birth into this dark underworld through which she can save her brother by understanding the darkness and using it to her advantage. Yet her morally dubious actions – framing Mike Standish and tipping off underworld characters to Alice’s whereabouts which leads to her death – are accomplished in an attempt to shield her brother from emotional pain and return him to their celibate sibling marriage. Ironically, she is more like Standish than she believes, as when her framing of him leads to a severe beating, Standish sacrifices himself silently, even nobly, asking her later, ‘Didn’t you think that maybe I was just trying to protect you?’ (Abbott 2005: 236). Standish, ever the fixer, anticipates Lora’s murderous solution of her brother’s problem and allows himself to form part of the alibi, significantly by not using his talent for saying the right thing, but by remaining silent. That she responds to his question ‘From what?’ reveals the extent to which she has become ‘hardboiled’ (Abbott 2005: 236). She does not admit Mike as her confessor, nor thank him for his temporary role as her protector.

Although Lora King gains strength through her cold affair with Mike Standish, the other female characters in *Die a Little* are destroyed in a way that evokes the Dahlia: when Mike Standish describes his first sexual encounter with

Alice to Lora, Alice's 'mouth was like one gorgeous scar across her face' with 'eyes like bullet holes' (Abbott 2005: 135). Likewise when Alice's friend Lois, a B-movie actress and aspiring starlet, is murdered, Alice describes her floating in a pool 'like a big black rose' (Abbott 2005: 222). Lois's body is mutilated, and Alice becomes an unrecognizable corpse. When Lora considers the two women's deaths, she reflects, 'I can see them both down there, one face wiped clean, made new and one split apart, turned inside out. If I could, I'd give them back their faces, like the solemn, lurid photograph' (Abbott 2005: 239). Lora's description returns them to the sexually deviant underworld – their pornographic past she uncovered through Mike Standish – rather than to their virginal pre-Hollywood existence. Alice and Lois cannot be restored, as Bucky Bleichert attempts to do to the Dahlia through his relationship with Kay Lake. There is no untainted version of Alice, like there is in Bleichert's mind of the late Elizabeth Short, and no part that could have been rescued. Abbott, instead, has her heroine restore her brother, through uncovering the darkness both in others and ultimately in herself, but this is likewise an unsettling, false and fragile compromise.

### No body to remember: *The Song Is You*

Abbott described Ellroy's books as 'portraying the world I loved in movies – L.A. in the '40s and '50s – but he also lifted the veil and showed all the darkness underneath. That contrast fascinated me, as did his male characters, and I've read everything he's written' (Godfrey 2009). Jean Spangler's disappearance was dubbed 'The Daughter of the Black Dahlia' case, and using it as a starting point for the plot of *The Song Is You* suggests that Abbott was striving for a conscious tie, not directly to noir, but to the Black Dahlia's chronicler James Ellroy. Indeed Abbott's publisher Simon & Schuster's website promoted the novel as 'a thrilling conclusion to (the) as yet unsolved "Daughter of Black Dahlia" murder case' (Abbott 2007b). This striking claim could also be made of Ellroy's fictional solution to the Elizabeth Short murder in *The Black Dahlia*. Yet despite this clear association, in some ways, the treatment of women in *Die a Little* is more Dahlia-like than *The Song Is You*. In *Die a Little*, women are described as flowers, their mouths, as gaping holes, and a murdered victim's dress 'blooms' when she floats in the pool. In other words, the marking and displaying of the female form is closer to *The Black Dahlia*'s grotesque presentation than the so-called Daughter of the Dahlia novel, where women are forgotten, burned up or buried.

*The Song Is You* may have the police hunt and the public interest of the Dahlia case, but the female form is not salaciously subjugated. The only one of Abbott's noir novels to have a leading male protagonist, *The Song Is You* follows the compromised reporter and Hollywood fixer Gil Hopkins (Hop) and his involvement in the disappearance of Jean Spangler. Two years after the aspiring actress's disappearance, Hop is approached by a black actress named Iolene, who claims that Hop buried evidence important to the Spangler case. It is significant that it is not Hop who is haunted, nor is there an audience still interested, when he begins his investigation. Iolene explains that Hop had left Spangler and Iolene alone with two movie stars on the night Spangler went missing. Later, after Spangler disappeared, he went to work protecting the clients, withholding information from the press and gave the police false leads on Spangler (who had dated a mobster). Now that the Spangler case has fizzled out, along with his own career, Hop begins a private investigation.

One of Ellroy's long-standing tropes is that his men are emotionally, and sometimes physically, destroyed by their desire for unattainable women. In *The Black Dahlia*, Bucky Bleichert becomes obsessed by desire to avenge and possess the Dahlia Elizabeth Short. The memory of Short is the 'other woman' in his marriage to Kay Lake, and eventually she has her own living stand-in through Bleichert's affair with Dahlia look-alike Madeleine Sprague. In contrast, Abbott's male investigator is more self-serving, and his treatment of the victim remains unemotional. Hop is motivated partly out of guilt for what he could have done for Iolene (Ellroy's heroes are rarely ever present to save the girl as with Bleichert and Elizabeth Short, whereas Hop's business depends on him coming to the rescue of compromised celebrities) and partly because he let slip his suspicions of Spangler's murder to a journalist and needs to bottle the story to protect what is left of his own career. Hop is himself a former journalist for the movie-magazine *Cinestar*, and for a reporter, his friend Jerry explains, the relationship with the victim is different:

You run down these stories and a lot of 'em stick in your head, knock around there a little, sneak up and say boo when you least expect it. Happens even more with cops, but with cops it's about saving them. I think it's different with reporters, but I'm not sure how. Wanting to know, needing to know everything. (Abbott 2007: 93)

Hop, like his friend in the pressroom, trades in information. Spangler herself is just part of the currency, and unlike Elizabeth Short, she has been devalued as 'those stories come once in a newsman's life, right? That's what the managing



editor told me. We were sure they'd find her body, hopefully split in two. Or maybe split in four, raises the stakes a little' (Abbott 2007: 40). The stakes were raised briefly in that Spangler left a note cryptically referring to 'Kirk', and she had recently played a small role in *Young Man with a Horn* starring Kirk Douglas. For a while at least, her disappearance is a mystery that could go straight to the heart of Hollywood.

Yet even darker than the trade in human secrets is the pleasure of men, including Hop, and society as a masculine audience, in destroying women. This is seen in the media's handling of the Spangler case; they lose interest in her once she is labelled as a mistress to one of Mickey Cohen's hoodlums, and the Hollywood angle fizzles out as Douglas is cleared of any involvement. As Hop puts it, 'So she's no longer a possible victim of some snazzy sex criminal. Instead she becomes, well, you see it, a two-bit mob whore' (Abbott 2007: 46). The newspaper's stance is incriminating not only of itself but also of their audience – with no body, and thus no signs of torture to titillate, readers get bored. Hop's relationship with his wife Midge also reflects this kind of hate – desire. Even before their marriage falls apart when she leaves him for his good-natured friend, their sex life indicts his masculine urge to destroy the feminine:

Each night he clamped his hand on one of her white dimpled knees and pushed it down flat on the rough hotel sheets and tried to f\*\*k all their shared ugliness away. And all her beauty, too. (Abbott 2007: 179)

Hop is a different type of destroyer. And although emotional abuse and neglect drive his wife away, Hop feels only disgust for the two sexually sadistic movie stars he left Spangler alone with, and thus unwittingly had a role in her disappearance. The two Hollywood stars have a sickeningly sweet veneer having earned their fame in upbeat Hollywood musicals playing a Donald O'Connor and Gene Kelly-type duo. For Hop, whose job it is to make and destroy stars, the distinction between love and hate is blurred and often undefinable.

The presence of a corpse, and the mourning for the dead, is removed in *The Song Is You* by Spangler's reappearance, which does not evoke the emotional renewal of the noir classic *Laura* (1944), where the obsessed cop who falls in love with the murder victim has his reward in a real relationship once the titular victim turns out to be alive. Spangler, who has been physically scarred during her ordeal, views her own flight and return as a Phoenix-like cleansing: 'Sometimes you have to do bad things to get pure again', she said. 'Like burning something to make it clean' (Abbott 2007: 228). There is an almost religious tone struck by the victim as she assumes a penitent but active role in her own torture,

thus freeing herself from victimhood and the need to be avenged. But while her gruesome experience has had the upshot of separating her forever from the destructive Hollywood crowd, her friend Iolene's sincere desire to find out more about Spangler's death, the role usually taken by lovelorn men in Ellroy's novels, leads to her own demise. Iolene will also go forgotten and unmourned by the world, although Hop thinks of her briefly. He chooses to hide Iolene's death from Spangler, denying the memory of Iolene to the one person who would grieve it, and who was partially responsible for her death.

The epigraph to *The Song Is You*, 'The end of a story should be what the beginning is about,' is taken from a quote by Hollywood producer Irving Thalberg and precedes Jean Spangler, getting ready for the fateful night of her disappearance, and actress Barbara Payton, enjoying her two celebrity love interests and her studio power before her public tragedy plays out (Abbott 2007: i). In the end, Hop and the Hollywood machine make both women disappear. The story begins and ends with a woman's destruction. When a disgraced Payton comes to Hop at the end of the novel to ask him for help, he once again, as he did with Spangler, does nothing:

'I would do it anyway, Barbara, if I could,' he said, with a full grin. 'But I've got no pull with casting or production. I'm just publicity.'

Raising her eyebrows, she leaned back in her chair. 'Yeah,' she said, nodding her head and watching him closely. 'You know I didn't just roll in from the pasture. I know what it is you do here and what you undo. And there's no more precious tackle on the lot. You know where all the bodies are buried,' she said looking him straight in the eye. 'You bury them.' (Abbott 2007: 238)

Unlike Ellroy, Abbott's story is concerned with the living dead. Abbott unromanticizes the relationship between male protagonist and victim by replacing Ellroy's flawed protectors with a largely passive, voyeuristic and parasitic protagonist. Abbott further punctures Ellroy's myths by removing a chance for mourning and thus for the loss and obsession that feed Ellroy's lost souls, who *cherchez la femme* as if it is a sacred obligation.

### *Bury Me Deep and the homme fatale*

Ellroy's influential presence in Abbott's work is wider than the two novels she attributes to him as lovesongs. The last of Abbott's full-fledged noir tales, the

novel *Bury Me Deep*, shows the stylistic influence of Ellroy in the twisted affair between the main characters Marion Lane and Joe Lanigan. Lane and Lanigan are modelled on Winnie Ruth Judd and Jack Halloran, and the novel is a fictional portrayal of the Trunk Murderess case. Abbott had been fascinated with the case since childhood and had long planned to write about it, but she felt intimidated at first as the events took place in Phoenix in the 1930s, taking her outside of LA and the classic noir age of Ellroy's novels. She toyed with the idea of moving the action forward to a 1940s setting she was more comfortable with, but decided against the idea, concluding that 'the pivot the story marked, poised between a crushing hangover from the Jazz Age and the harsh realities of the Great Depression, seemed critical' (Abbott 2009a). Instead, many of the thematic connections between *Bury Me Deep* and Ellroy's work stem from Ellroy and Abbott's mutual appreciation for the 1954 film noir *Private Hell 36* directed by Don Siegel. As I shall argue, *Private Hell 36* introduced the concept of the *homme fatale*, a character as seductive and dangerous as his feminine counterpart, and Abbott would provide a brilliant rendering of the character in Joe Lanigan. This opened up, for the first time, a major division between her work and Ellroy's, as Ellroy had never created a seductive, leading male character who could use sex as maliciously as Lanigan. After all, underneath their macho personas, Ellroy's protagonists like Bleichert were more tortured by their inability to protect women, whereas Lanigan sees women as easy prey. And yet there would be still many connections between both authors in how they approach the issue of sex in a noir narrative.

*Bury Me Deep* begins with Dr Everett Seeley dropping his wife Marion off in Phoenix while he takes up a new job in Mexico after losing his medical licence due to his morphine addiction. Marion begins a job at a private clinic and is soon befriended by a nurse Louise Mercer, and Louise's unstable tubercular roommate Ginny. All three women are under the spell of the dashing, politically connected Joe Lanigan. Lanigan has the wealth and clout to ease their financial burdens and the charisma to fulfil their sexual desires. Marion soon begins to think she has found love, or something close enough to it, with Lanigan, but it is a compromised love from the start and only exists because of these compromises. Her husband's attitude veers wildly between neglect and, in the coda, paying the ultimate self-sacrifice for her, which leads Marion to view him more with contempt than anything else. Marion says of him, 'He was a kind husband. You couldn't say he wasn't kind' (Abbott 2009: 3). Lanigan's attractive power stems from the fact that he is not what Marion pitifully describes as 'kind'. Marion and

Lanigan's initial attraction is sexual, a feeling made more powerful as Lanigan knows exactly when to withhold affection and when to display it. Marion, like many of the other female characters in the novel, has had difficulty enjoying sex. She remembers the words of a church friend, Evangeline, who married at seventeen:

Oh, Marion, wait long as you can. I'm riven in two and I never knew from such pain like a hot poker stuck. Each time like wire sticking in me. Don't relent till you can't wait for a baby a moment longer. Once I get two children I'm turning face to the wall in bed each night and just he try and make me lay still for him one more time. Just he try. (Abbott 2009: 34–5)

Evangeline, 'Vangy', fills Marion with dread about what awaits her in the bedroom, and while her own experiences on her wedding night are not exactly poker and wire, they are still awkward: 'He had to coax her for hours with patting strokes or nothing ever would have happened at all' (Abbott 2009: 34). But Lanigan helps her through this; it's not just their sexual relationship which is so satisfying, it is the chemistry they share in each other's company which is the key to the physical attraction: 'When he looked at her, she could feel it like his finger, the tip of his finger, was tickling the lace bristles on her underthings' (Abbott 2009: 34). Things progress explicitly and the sex scenes run the gamut of intimacy, from a rough encounter in a car where 'she felt herself slide flat against the car seat, as she found herself gripping tight the fine linen of his coat in her hands, lashes fluttering against his face and the roughness of his cheek good and hard on hers, very good', to a more sensual, 'time slow and stretched fine and lovely as blown glass' (Abbott 2009: 49). The contrast in Lanigan's sexual technique parallels the changes in his seductive character; from behaving like the perfect gentleman and looking after Marion when she receives a small injury, to asking for sympathy when he describes the stresses of looking after his ill wife, and finally sounding more like a salesman she cannot fully trust when he says, 'he had waited life long for something to mean half as much' (Abbott 2009: 49). However Lanigan behaves, Marion is surprised at how she feels, 'there were no tears, no tears at all for her', as one man has finally vanquished Vangy's ominous words about sex from her mind. But the affair acts as a catalyst for a violent showdown which will reconfigure all of the main relationships of the novel.

Ellroy also uses intense sexual relationships, or in some cases sexual inadequacy, as a conduit for violence. In *The Cold Six Thousand*, the Mormon sheriff Wayne Tedrow Junior is deeply attracted to his stepmother Janice,

despite being happily married and rigidly faithful to his wife Lynette. Tedrow is introduced to the reader flying to Dallas on the day JFK is assassinated:

John F. Kennedy – dead.

His wife's crush. His stepmom's fixation. JFK got Janice wet. Janice told Wayne Senior. Janice paid. Janice limped. Janice showed off the welts on her thighs. (Ellroy 2001: 5)

Janice has affairs and Tedrow's father, Wayne Senior, gets sexual pleasure from voyeuristically spying on her trysts then physically punishing her. Janice has teased the younger Tedrow for years, often by flaunting his father's abuse. Ultimately, this twisted oedipal attraction cannot be sustained indefinitely while unconsummated. The pain from Wayne Senior's beatings hide the fact that Janice is suffering from terminal cancer, 'Wayne f\*\*ked Janice in his father's house and made sure that Wayne Senior saw it,' but this form of revenge seems insufficient to Tedrow given his father's perverted desires (Ellroy 2009: 18). Tedrow tips off his connections in organized crime that Wayne Senior is planning to extort them and he receives permission from the Mafia to have his once untouchable father killed. Tedrow chooses a symbolic method, handcuffing his father to a bar rail in his own home and letting in the mortally ill Janice who proceeds to beat him to death with a golf club:

She walked past Wayne. She looked at him. He smelled her cancer breath. She walked inside. She let the door swing.

Wayne stood tiptoed. Wayne made a picture frame. Wayne got a full window view. The club head arced. His father screamed. Blood sprayed the panes. (Ellroy 2001: 672)

On the surface, Wayne Senior and Janice have a legitimate relationship – they are married, but even here the relationship is tainted with scandal as 'Wayne Senior ditched Wayne's mom' (Ellroy 2001: 7). By contrast, Tedrow's feelings for Janice's are quasi-incestuous and he rushed into marriage with Lynette partly to share the details of their intimacy with Janice, 'They f\*\*ked on a golf course. Sprinklers doused them. He told Janice all' (Ellroy 2001: 8). Despite this, Tedrow displays a tenderness for Janice she has never found in other men, and even by making her a murderer it seems both loving and just. Janice is a keen golfer and the club is the perfect phallic weapon for the socialite who surrendered her self-respect to Wayne Senior for money. Tedrow's brief whiff of her 'cancer breath' is faintly erotic, and he subjects his father to the voyeurism he inflicted

on Janice, watching the murder, 'stood tiptoe' with a childlike fascination for the forbidden, gazing through 'a picture frame' and 'full window view'. Violence is the last thing to, quite literally, hit the screen in this unholy trinity of sex, voyeurism and murder, 'Blood sprayed the panes.'

Ellroy's protagonists such as Wayne Tedrow Jr and Bucky Bleichert are too wrapped up in oedipal complexes to fully inhabit the role of *homme fatale*, which the always smooth and in control Joe Lanigan seems to have been born for, but they still exhibit some dangerous tendencies. As a male writer, Ellroy has professed himself to be fascinated by the redemptive power of women. He has described the theme of the LA Quartet as 'bad men in love with strong women' (Phipps 2004: 129). However, Tedrow Jr and Bleichert still have a seductive draw, even if they do not knowingly use it for malicious ends. Women are attracted to them because they eschew many of the machismo values of their male-dominated world. Both men are looked down upon by their fathers. And yet their emotional motives remain enigmatic as they are locked in a circle of seducing and being seduced, caught between protecting their women and driving them to destruction. Yet Ellroy himself has shown a re-evaluation of his male characters as *hommes fatales* in later novels, such as in *Blood's a Rover*, Janice expresses her regret to Wayne that she killed his father. This unexpectedly casts Wayne in a cruel and manipulative light. He had once been the inexperienced younger lover to his domineering stepmother, but in saddling her with a murderer's guilt right at the end of her life he comes across almost as callous as his father.

Abbott prefers to avoid such unexpected jolts in character development, especially with Joe Lanigan in *Bury Me Deep*. The reader, following Marion's first-person narration, has a sense of Lanigan's amorality right from the start. Abbott portrays the breakdown in Lanigan and Marion's affair as grimly inevitable. It comes about with two violent deaths which are the centrepiece of the story. Louise and Ginny become increasingly jealous of Marion's affair with Lanigan. Ginny threatens to inform Marion's husband of the infidelity. She threatens Marion with a Colt pistol and in the ensuing struggle Ginny is shot dead, Marion is shot and wounded and Louise is also presumably killed. A desperate Marion calls Lanigan for help. He arrives promptly, and when the wounded Louise suddenly makes a Lazarus-like resurrection it is Lanigan who shoots her dead. Louise had been presumed dead from the first bullet-wound but nothing in this scene is at it seems. Lanigan appears to be Marion's protector, implicating himself in the crime by finishing off Louise

and calling on his butcher friend Abe Worth to dismember and dispose of the bodies. But it is revealed later that Lanigan had drugged Ginny, gave her the pistol and manipulated her into thinking she should shoot Louise who was extorting him. When the plan backfires and Ginny attacks Marion, Lanigan seizes on the opportunity to kill Louise upon arriving at the scene. He has not implicated himself for Marion's sake; in fact he actively sets her up in a double-homicide rap.

The change in Marion's feelings for Lanigan, brought on by being ostracized and going to prison, is not just self-realization, it is an about-turn. Given her desperate situation she starts to ask herself not what she feels for Lanigan but what he has done for her. Love turns to self-loathing and then anger as she realizes that not only has Lanigan failed to help her, but she has walked right into a set-up. Abbott's skill as a novelist is to take the reader to this point and make the conclusion seem inevitable without letting the narrative regress into the predictable. Marion knows what Lanigan is like, so do the other women in his life, as does the reader and even Lanigan himself, 'I know what I am. Believe it,' he confesses to Marion in the coda (Abbott 2009: 229). Marion's epiphany comes when she accepts she never truly loved Lanigan, she was more in love with the idea that she loved him, but truthfully the absence of love only made the sex better:

I gave for you and gave for you. I would have laid down my pasteboard life for you, Joe Lanigan. But I'm through now. I'm all through. And the nails you struck across my mouth have all been pried loose and my mouth is one hundred miles wide and here I broadcast, my voice tinny, lost but no less your-reckoning-day judge, what you have done to me, to those lovely girls, to my dearest Doctor, to us all. I will speak now, Joe Lanigan, with mighty breaths, and will keep speaking until the caul you hide behind is lifted evermore. (Abbott 2009: 212–13)

Unlike her heroines in *The Song Is You* and *Die a Little*, Marion not only reclaims her physical body but also becomes a mouthpiece, a significant symbol considering the Dahlia motifs in Abbott's other works, for the truth.

Lanigan's crime is essentially no different from the role traditionally played by the femme fatale – seduction and then abandonment for personal gain. In this regard, Lanigan is Abbott's second *homme fatale*, her first appearing in *Queenpin*, the novel immediately preceding *The Song Is You*. Abbott describes her own inspiration for the *homme fatale*, the LAPD detective Cal Bruner, played by Steve Cochran in the film noir *Private Hell* 36 (1954): 'You find

yourself begging for Cochran's character to sink lower and lower just for the erotic kick he gives it' (Abbott 2009a). In the film, Cochran's character must convince his partner and a nightclub singer-cum-love interest to hide the money retrieved from a dead counterfeiter while ostensibly investigating the case. Cochran cajoles and seduces the nightclub singer and his partner. The latter professional relationship and friendship is the more subliminal doomed love story of the film which according to Abbott 'link the pair to not just other cop partner movies but to countless noir lovers who turn against each other when money and guilt enter the picture' (Abbott 2009a). In *Bury Me Deep*, Abbott's version of this tale is to make Lanigan the seducer and drag down Marion into hell, but by the ending she has wreaked her revenge even if her own future is uncertain. Abbott invokes Ellroy's name twice in praising *Private Hell 36* (Abbott 2009a).

Crucially, Ellroy was also an admirer of the film and Steve Cochran's performance as Bruner. Indeed, Ellroy wrote a novella 'Hollywood Shakedown', first serialized in *GQ* and then republished in the anthology *Crimewave*, set against the backdrop of the troubled production of *Private Hell 36*. Ellroy's novella does not explore the *homme fatale* as much as it punctures myths of the lead actress of the film, Ida Lupino, throwing her pioneering work as the first woman to direct a noir into question by suggesting her involvement in directing a pornography ring. Ellroy's demythologization is not to empower the female through historical revisionism but to portray her as equally tainted.

With *Bury Me Deep*, Abbott had completed her quartet of noir novels. With her next work *The End of Everything*, she would embark on a change of direction in her writing, embracing a small-town locale in novels based more contemporarily in the 1980s and onwards. The Ellroy blurb, proclaiming her as 'poised to ascend to the top rung of crime writing' was suddenly dropped from her book covers, and it seemed that Abbott may have definitively turned her back on the influence of Ellroy as he himself claimed to do on the work of Raymond Chandler. While it is true that her more recent novels have not been as suffused and inspired by Ellroy tropes as her initial four books, the *homme fatale*, the destructive nature of sexuality, the twisted family relationships and the transmuting character arcs continue throughout her psychological thrillers set in the world of teenagers. This is evidenced most recently in *You Will Know Me* (2016), wherein the refrain 'there's a hundred ways that sex can ruin you' haunts the narrative (Abbott 2009: 316). Here, obsession is for athletic competition, and teenage gymnast Devon's desire to make the



Olympic squad, clouds her family and community with its singular purpose. Hired to work on installing a landing pit in the gym, young construction worker Ryan is more the tempter than the *homme fatale*, with gymnasts' mothers and their daughters alike desiring him. But rather than merely being a tale of lost innocence, for Abbott, sex remains a catalyst for murder. Devon's sexual jealousy of her mother provokes her to sleep with Ryan. When Ryan expects more from the relationship, Devon unremorsefully causes his death. Yet more shocking than her daughter's lack of remorse is how her husband and the close-knit gymnast community intent on her winning have colluded to help Devon escape punishment. At The Night Owl Café, a distinct reference to *L.A. Confidential*, Devon's mother identifies a man she knows was a witness to the murder. Booster Chief Gwen, who is with her, acknowledges that he is one of her employees and that his memory as a witness is not great: it is in that moment that Devon's mother understands how much the community knows, and has concealed, about Devon. Abbott has departed from Ellroy in her setting and scope, but not in her characters. By demythologizing the world of cheerleaders (in *Dare Me*) and gymnasts, she has provoked new controversy, yet reintroduced Ellrovia elements.

Abbott herself recognized that within the genre certain milestone works become 'reference points':

*Chinatown* has taken a canonical position alongside *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon* as ceaseless referent points within the noir genre. One need only think back as far as *L.A. Confidential*, the 1997 adaptation of James Ellroy's novel; upon its release, scarcely was the film referenced without mention of its similarity to (or even differences from) *Chinatown*. *Chinatown* has become the pivot to the past, to 'original' noir or even to the American 1930s and '40s themselves. Indeed, when Fredric Jameson discusses the Art Deco-style credit titles of the neo-noir *Body Heat*, he suggests that they are designed to 'trigger nostalgic reactions (first to *Chinatown*, no doubt, and then beyond it to some more historical referent)'. (Abbott 2003: 321)

Ellroy has now become one such canonical reference point and Abbott does not escape his long shadow. She has, however, created a destructively sexual world that is unique in its female purview. Even if her characters do not have the power of Ellroy's men in 1950s LA, they possess more of its tragedy. Ultimately, Abbott's revisionist take on the *femme* and *homme fatale* is an extension of Ellroy's work as she believes in his central premise that the women of noir are stronger than

the men. As she wrote in a tribute to the author, 'You're just *there*. You're in the patrol car. You're at the crime scene. You're not reading Ellroy anymore; you're in Ellroy's world. And strong, broken women are slipping through desperate men's fingers, and the loss is so great the pages shudder' (Abbott 2007a). Through her emergence as one of the critically acclaimed crime writers of her generation, Megan Abbott has proved that a novelist can both find their own voice and still remain part of Ellroy's world.

## Individual and Institutionalized Corruption: The Influence of James Ellroy's LA Quartet on the Novels of David Peace

David Bishop and Steven Powell

*White Jazz was the Sex Pistols for me. It reinvented crime writing and I realised that, if you want to write the best crime book, then you have to write better than Ellroy.*

(Wroe 2008)

When David Peace compared James Ellroy's novel *White Jazz* to a punk rock band, it would not, at first glance, appear to be the kind of compliment Ellroy would appreciate, not least for the fact that he 'devoutly dislikes' rock music and its 'state of perpetual reaction and perpetual rebelliousness' (Powell 2009: 196). The Sex Pistols' most successful single 'God Save the Queen' charted in 1977, when Peace was ten years old and the simple anti-Jubilee, anti-prog rock, anti-establishment message ingrained itself onto Peace's psyche. *White Jazz* would have a similar visceral effect when Peace first read it, and rather like how the young rock fan Peace was a very different character than the Sex Pistols' demented lead singer John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten), there was much in terms of personality that separated David Peace the aspiring crime writer from the abrasive James Ellroy, demon dog of American crime fiction. Peace is circumspect and intellectual in interviews. Ellroy, like Lydon, cultivated an unhinged persona for commercial reasons. It is not surprising that both Ellroy and Lydon are far more conservative than many of their admirers assume. Peace, by contrast, has continued to hold left-wing views instilled in him from his teenage days when he passionately supported the National Union of Mineworkers in its struggle against the Thatcher government, an event which would figure prominently in his writing. And yet, despite their political differences, Peace has managed to

successfully and seamlessly adapt many of the themes and stylistic idiosyncrasies of Ellroy's novels into his own work.

The focus of this chapter is the influence that James Ellroy's LA Quartet has had on David Peace's Red Riding Quartet as well as the specific influence of *White Jazz* on the first novel in the Tokyo Trilogy, *Tokyo Year Zero* (2007). The thematic and stylistic parallels between Ellroy's and Peace's novels are extensive, and their similarities have perhaps been an impediment as well as a driving force in developing Peace's literary reputation. The novels of the Red Riding Quartet, *Nineteen Seventy-Four*, *Nineteen Seventy-Seven*, *Nineteen Eighty* and *Nineteen Eighty-Three* (published 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002, respectively) are key texts in the development of the modern British crime novel. Combining elements of the Northern realist tradition with tropes from the hard-boiled tradition, these books also resonate with themes familiar from Ellroy's work. But Peace adds his own unique twist, creating an occult history of his native Yorkshire. This lends the institutional corruption and endemic violence that Peace portrays even greater potency as a theme.

Peace breaks free of Ellroy's influence at key junctures, specifically in language and in fictionalizing history, going beyond Ellroy's Quartet in his portrayal of the corruption deeply embedded in individuals and the institutions they serve. As a contemporary and fairly prolific writer there is still relatively little critical work on David Peace, but this is gradually changing and the most prominent Peace scholar Katy Shaw is quick to play down any suggestion that the British author is merely an Ellroy imitator: 'His novels may concern crime, but provide more than a Yorkshire version of the James Ellroy series' (Shaw 2010: 8–9). Despite this disclaimer, Shaw does make a conscious effort to explore the parallels between the two authors' works:

Both Ellroy and Peace use crime fiction to focus on the dark side of contemporary life, mobilizing sprawling plots with complicated conclusions to outline institutionalized lawlessness. Navigating a fine line between criminality and respectability, the LA Quartet follows deeply flawed protagonists operating in an unstable society. Set against the rise of big business, corrupt housing developments and a society built on 'a foundation of lies', both Peace and Ellroy use their respective series to offer counter-narratives on twentieth-century history. Their reconstructions locate crime and the historical record in 'preposterous, testosterone-fuelled male power games' using crime fiction as 'the perfect vehicle for social commentary'. (Shaw 2010: 66)

For these 'counter-narratives' to appear plausible, the society in which they are set must be as vivid and realistic but oppositional to the culturally accepted historical narrative the reader is already familiar with. Ellroy's Los Angeles and Peace's Yorkshire are not incidental to the narrative; they resonate as vital, authentic places that the two authors know intimately. To legitimize their counter-narratives, both men use popular culture – newspapers, television, radio programmes, popular music – to enclose their novels in specific time periods, each of Peace's Red Riding novel covers a year whereas in his larger historical novels Ellroy sets his narrative over the course of five years. This discipline with the timeframe and setting bleeds through into their characters who are very much of their era and setting, and yet the parallels between Ellroy's Dudley Smith and Peace's Detective Inspector Maurice Jobson resonate strongly despite the latter being every inch the cynical Englishman.

One way of continuing this balance between history and its counter-narrative is in employing historical figures in the narrative to interact with the fictional characters. Ellroy has cited Don DeLillo's *Libra*, a fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, as one of his inspirations for his Underworld USA Trilogy (Wiener 1995: 36). DeLillo's revision of Oswald is both narrower and more severe than the approach Ellroy takes to historical figures in his LA Quartet: Ellroy's starlets and mobsters are much more in the background compared to his fictional protagonists, yet they are not inconsequential to events in the same way DeLillo makes Oswald in relation to the killing of President Kennedy. Ellroy's garish mixture of Hollywood glamour and the criminal underworld climaxes in *L.A. Confidential* with Johnny Stompanato being stabbed to death by Cheryl Crane, the daughter of his lover Lana Turner. But both the stabbing and Turner are kept out of scene: Ellroy uses this hidden narrative to portray a golden age of Hollywood riven with mobsters and confidence men, and by keeping certain lurid events out of sight, Ellroy suggests to the reader the ubiquity and the normalcy of this hidden world. Unlike DeLillo who contained history within the paranoid mind of a select number of key players, Ellroy makes his readership paranoid, concerned with the many criminal and morally reputable acts that fill in the story.

As Peace would find, using more recent events and characters can make this blending of historical figures and fiction problematic, but no less effective in evoking paranoia. Peace has described the Red Riding Quartet as his attempt to understand the murders of Peter Sutcliffe – the Yorkshire Ripper: 'Why wasn't it the Cornish Ripper? It was the Yorkshire Ripper – it happened at

this time and in this place, and I don't think it's by chance' (Hasted 2001). The 'Yorkshire' tag given to the murderer presents a communal and regional ownership not present in its Victorian predecessor, Jack the Ripper, where 'Jack' stood for the everyman, a title which carried no greater resonance than suggesting it could be any man in London. The use of 'Yorkshire' identifies with location and people and brings its own sensitivities in approaching the crime, as its effects – its terror, its grief and shock – belong to the community. Despite his desire for an emotional understanding of the crime, Peace avoids using real names which would make the Yorkshire setting resonate more strongly. Sutcliffe is given a pseudonym – Peter David Williams – and the names of his victims and the officers investigating the case are also changed. Peace has admitted this is a narrative dilemma: 'If you're going to write about real people, and things that really happened like the Yorkshire Ripper, you have a great responsibility' (Bishop 2014). There is a clear tension present between the desire to use the backdrop of real-life crimes and the need to create the distance Ellroy uses to his advantage in his novels set half a century before. Peace achieves this distance in the same way the close ownership was created, through changing their names. The historical characters are portrayed under the security of fictional names, a technique Ellroy does not widely employ. Even in less-known historical figures, such as Dick Contino, Ellroy finds a way to retain their names as if telling the story without them as individuals would lessen its power. At this early point in his writing career, Peace felt uncomfortable about portraying real events so closely; therefore, he makes the line between what is real and what is fictional much clearer than in Ellroy's brashly iconoclastic Quartet.

Ellroy and Peace do not make a distinction between the language of real-life or purely fictional characters: both authors use a fractured, often disturbed, grasp of language to enter the minds of the characters and the settings they portray. *White Jazz* is the starkest example of this in Ellroy's Quartet, with a narrative voice that achieves a hyperkinetic pace by being economical with words. Ellroy's narrator, the corrupt police detective Dave 'the Enforcer' Klein, talks in an idiosyncratic, largely verbless language. Arriving at a seedy hotel, Klein describes his surroundings:

The Red Arrow Inn: connected cabins, two rows, a centre driveway. A neon sign: 'Vacancy'.

I pulled up to cabin 19: dark, no car out front.

I walked over. Evidence: doorjamb jimmy marks – *recent* – fresh splinters. The room itself: small, linoleum floor, no furniture. The bed: slashed sheets, ripped mattress spilling kapok. (Ellroy 1992: 95)

To Klein, even as a dirty cop, everything is evidence and is internally catalogued as such. This thought process focuses the reader's attention to detail even though description is kept to a minimum so as to internally catalogue the characteristics of the room. But the location, sparingly described by neon signage, cabins and limited furnishings, brings you into a potentially dangerous setting with the detective. Peace uses similar techniques throughout his own *Quartet*. At the beginning of *Nineteen Seventy-Four*, journalist Eddie Dunford describes the interior of a police station, waiting for a press conference to start:

9 a.m. and no bugger had been to bed; straight from the Press Club, still stinking of ale, into this hell:

The Conference Room, Millgarth Police Station, Leeds.

The whole bloody pack sat waiting for the main attraction, pens poised and tapes paused; hot TV lights and cigarette smoke lighting up the windowless room like a Town Hall boxing ring on a Late Night Fight Night. (Peace 1999: 3)

The middle sentence is dry and merely sets the scene by stating the location. Dunford, like Klein, has an attention to detail and his trade is the written word. This is sandwiched between two lines where Peace allows Dunford to more colourfully describe those present as 'bugger' and 'whole bloody pack'. Peace, like Ellroy, uses internal monologue as a reflection of the social standing and psychology of a character. But it also evoked a distinctly British, historical and seedy, setting like a Town Hall 'stinking of ale' and 'cigarette smoke'. This stilted glimpse inside Dunford's mind not only normalizes the setting through its casual description, it also shows how the reporter has the knack for producing good copy.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Three*, one of Peace's three narrators, the rent boy BJ, talks about himself in third person – and the effect of the repetition results in, not journalistic distance, but a dislocated voice:

Sat on back seat, BJ suddenly shaking and crying and BJ can't stop shaking and crying because of all things BJ seen and all things BJ done, things they've made BJ see and things they've made BJ do, all those f\*\*king things they've made BJ do and BJ thinking of Grace and BJ shaking and crying because BJ knows what they'll have done to her and what they're going to do to BJ, all the people they've killed and all people they're going to have to f\*\*king kill. (Peace 2002: 17)

For BJ, there is nothing outside of his fear. This third-person thought process only establishes how powerless BJ is to act in the situation, and his lack of description of his setting makes him seem cut adrift from the place and time wherein his torture occurs. Identifying his behaviour is the limit of his powers. In *Nineteen Eighty-Three* Peace's two other narrators speak in first and second person. Their descriptions draw the reader more fully into the narrative, and go some way towards explaining the violent reactions these men often have, and the fear they feel. As both Ellroy and Peace's Quartets progress, the language becomes increasingly complex, mirroring the violence and attendant mental trauma that the reader has come to expect from these worlds. BJ does not possess Dunford's skill with words. He is, paradoxically, rhythmically out of tune, but rather like Dave Klein, logic and coherence can be detected if the reader follows the music in Klein and BJ's head. BJ's lewd initials reoccur in the text so often that the numbing repetition denotes how the character has lost all sense of linear thinking through the indignity and pain that comes with his criminal life.

In both their Quartets, Peace and Ellroy are writing secret histories of a period and a locality, ones which suggest other hidden stories taking place alongside well-documented ones. Real-life crimes are used as a starting-off point for larger conspiracies that are so wide-ranging that they become impossible to grasp, and in both novelists' works the reader and protagonist can exert but a fleeting grip on them. This is evident in the role that real crimes played during both authors' childhoods. The LA and Red Riding Quartets describe periods of time that coincide with each author's youth. The LA Quartet covers the period from 1947 (the year of the Black Dahlia murder and a year before Ellroy was born) up until the end of the 1950s when Ellroy was on the cusp of adolescence. The Red Riding Quartet covers a period of nine years, a time when Peace was aged between seven and sixteen years old. Peace has frequently acknowledged his awareness of the Yorkshire Ripper when the murders were happening, and the fear he felt as a teenager in the early 1980s. Part of Peace's fear stemmed from his childhood worry that his own mother would become a victim of the Yorkshire Ripper. This echoes the symbiotic connections Ellroy weaves between his own mother Geneva Hilliker Ellroy and the Black Dahlia, Elizabeth Short. Both are victims of unsolved murders and Ellroy perceives the Dahlia as his mother once removed: 'I wanted to honor Elizabeth Short as the transmutation of Jean Hilliker Ellroy' (Rich 2008: 185). Both authors' mothers play a role in the development of each Quartet, albeit as an off-stage but significant presence. As far as literary influences go this is fairly coincidental, as any writer's family life is



bound to have an impact on their work, and this is not to say that Peace chose to set his series around the Ripper murders in precise imitation of Ellroy. But it remains a vivid demonstration of just how enduring the events of childhood can be, and the comfort Peace found in Ellroy's writing as it allusively paralleled his own emotional experiences.

However, this desire for emotional comfort can also lead to some inexplicable Occult-like moments in Peace's *Quartet*. In *Nineteen Seventy-Four*, the journalist Eddie Dunford comes into contact with a psychic medium who at their first meeting suddenly becomes terrified of him. She displays knowledge of the child murders Dunford is investigating that appears wholly unknowable:

Miss Wymer rose quickly from her chair. 'Would you care for some tea?'

'That'd be nice, if it's no trouble?'

The woman almost ran from the room, stopping suddenly in the doorway as though she had walked into a plate of glass.

'You smell so strongly of bad memories,' she said quietly, her back to me.

'Pardon?'

'Of death.' She stood in the doorway, shaking and pale, her hand gripping the frame of the door. (Peace 1999: 124)

The scene moves from a socially amicable setting, the offer of tea, to a strange tension followed by uncontrollable shouting and screaming. There is an indicator to this transition, however, in that earlier Dunford had made a crass joke that the psychic did not foresee her husband abandoning her. Being riled by Dunford might be a rational motive for Miss Wymer's otherworldly response. This is consistent with Peace's portrayal of a time and a place in the novel with its own set of rules, not fully comprehensible to outsiders or characters whose sense of morality does not exactly fit 1970s and 1980s Yorkshire. The same journalist, Dunford, finds himself out of favour with the West Yorkshire police. They throw him out of the back of a moving police van shouting "THIS IS THE NORTH – WE DO WHAT WE WANT" (Peace 1999: 265). On one level this hard-boiled line was Peace's attempt to transplant the noir sensibility of the classic crime fiction setting of post-war Los Angeles to the northern England he grew up in. On another level 'this is the North' is a message to the reader itself, independent of the history of the crime genre Peace writes in, which serves to highlight the unique cultural and political landscape that the north of England holds in the British psyche. Similarly, in *Nineteen Seventy-Seven* the veteran reporter Jack

Whitehead is haunted by angels and the ghost of his dead lover. These visions are partly a result of Jack's own guilt-driven delusions and fragile mental state, both of which are exacerbated by his alcoholism. In other parts of the Quartet, Peace draws on the natural environment – forests, lakes, the Moors – as well as animal imagery to reinforce this idea of a haunted, forbidding locale.

Two detectives at the centre of the series are nicknamed the Badger and the Owl, with the latter in particular taking on a more sinister aspect. All-seeing detective superintendent Maurice Jobson – known as 'the Owl' for the thick-rimmed glasses he wears – becomes one of the narrators in *Nineteen Eighty-Three*. Jobson sees everything, and is implicated in much of it. It is his steady gaze and reluctance to intervene that simultaneously bears witness to and responsibility for the violence that is to follow. Mark Fisher describes Jobson as 'Peace's equivalent of Ellroy's anti-hero Dudley Smith. Where Smith is charming, charismatic and flamboyantly loquacious, Jobson is taciturn, abstracted, immobile, blank, in a semi-fugue state of disassociation from the atrocities he participates in' (Fisher 2014: 69). However, in *Nineteen Eighty-Three*, the reader is given insight to the personality traits behind Jobson's steely exterior.

I picked up my glasses. I put them back on, the thick lenses and the black frames.

I sat up and stared into his eyes, thinking –

I am the Owl:

I am the Owl and I see from behind these lenses thick and frames black, see through everything –

Unblinking –

The usual bollocks –

Everything. (Peace 2002: 7)

This early scene is quite functional in that Peace has to clarify that this is Jobson's voice, but then Jobson's view of himself is more colourful than what the outside world sees. His obvious delight in the sobriquet the Owl, even though it stems from the fact his glasses make his eyes seem big and unappealing, reveal that Jobson delights in his own corruption. Jobson's nocturnal nickname adds to the themes from fairy stories and nursery rhymes which abound in the Red Riding, and Peace draws on the underlying dark side of these narratives to lend his books additional weight and depth. This mythic undertone is missing in Ellroy: as dark, ominous and violent as his Los Angeles may be, it is a largely secular, increasingly urbanized place. If

myths do exist they are of the city and the criminal underworld, not an occult one, such as the missing heroin which drives the plot of *The Big Nowhere* and *L.A. Confidential*, and the aura of Dudley Smith being untouchable by either his rivals in the LAPD or the Mob rackets. Peace's Yorkshire by contrast is somewhere where religion and magic are very much a part of his fictional world – if not in actuality then for the hold they exert over his fictional characters. Once he had completed the Red Riding Quartet, Peace would embrace new settings and would continue to incorporate Ellroy's themes into his work but in a more confident, subliminal style.

In neither Quartet is there a comparative, isolated, Philip Marlowe-style private eye: a man 'who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid' (Chandler 1944: 44). Rather, they are what Ellroy described as the 'toadies' of the system: police detectives, lawyers, journalists and low-level criminals, all of them attempting to use the system to their advantage and bend it to their will. Fear is very much part of their lives and that comes through in the anxiety of their inner voice. The closest there is to a hero is the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty*, Peter Hunter. Hunter is a senior police officer with the Greater Manchester force, brought in to assist in Yorkshire as the local force comes under immense pressure to catch the Ripper before he strikes again. Hunter has previously made his name investigating institutional police corruption; therefore, he is despised by those he has come to help. He is given the nickname 'Saint Cunt', in recognition of how his self-righteousness is roundly hated on the force. In this respect, Hunter shares some similarities with Danny Upshaw, one of the main characters in Ellroy's *The Big Nowhere*. Sheriff's Deputy Upshaw's seemingly implacable personality is often at odds with macho LA police culture, albeit the reason behind this is initially left ambiguous. It is only later in the novel that Upshaw's homosexuality becomes clear; and once this becomes common knowledge on the force he is offered up as a sacrifice, much like Hunter in *Nineteen Eighty*. Because of their principles, both men finally embrace a fate that can only end in professional disgrace and suicide.

The leading protagonists in both Quartets are all men. Whether journalists, lawyers and policemen they are all conflicted in some way: they drink, they fight, they abuse women and they kill; and they look the other way when others do the same. This breadth of character palette has another important outcome and bleeds into a second key theme that both Quartets share: corruption. In both Los Angeles and the Red Riding, institutionalized corruption is far-reaching and all pervasive, so it infects every individual working for the institution or caught

within its sphere of influence. It is only natural that this state seeps into the individual's morality, and this is why Hunter and Upshaw stand out.

Another parallel between the two writers is that the first book in each Quartet stands somewhat apart from the others. Ellroy has stated that *The Black Dahlia* was written as a stand-alone novel; it was only when he completed it that the possibility of a longer series emerged (Duncan 1996: 71). Similarly, the dark force behind the next three books, Lieutenant Dudley Smith, does not appear in *The Black Dahlia* – and yet it is his presence which largely binds the rest of the Quartet together. David Peace has talked about his own discomfort with *Nineteen Seventy-Four*. Speaking in 2014, Peace commented: '*Nineteen Seventy-Four* is the most made-up of anything I've written. And it's a book I don't like, I don't like at all' (Bishop 2014). Peace has come to regard the text as lurid and extreme. And yet the links between this book and the other parts of the Red Riding Quartet are much stronger than those found in *The Black Dahlia* and the three novels which followed it. Despite his reservations, Peace uses the three later books in the Quartet (especially the last, *Nineteen Eighty-Three*) to revisit what has already happened. As is so often the case in crime fiction, corruption is a result of past deeds gone unpunished, until finally the infected wound bursts. To take the body horror metaphor a bit further, Peace portrays the murder of a child in *Nineteen Seventy-Four* where body wings are sewn into the back of the corpse, a detail which is lifted directly from *L.A. Confidential* where the child actor Wee Willie Wennerholm is found dead with bird wings attached to his back. It is not difficult to see why Peace thought that the narrative was too violent, due in part to his realization that he had taken his Ellroy inspiration too far.

### *GB84 and Tokyo Year Zero*

Ian Rankin has described David Peace as 'the English James Ellroy' (Morton 2007). In the following section I will demonstrate how Peace moved beyond a conscious imitation of Ellroy's writing style which was both a help and a hindrance in his development as a stylist. However, in his ongoing ambition to write a crime novel superior to *White Jazz*, as referenced in the epigraph of this chapter, inevitably the influence of Ellroy would remain even when he was trying to surpass it.

In Peace's follow-up to the Quartet, *GB84*, events surrounding the Great Miner's strike are relayed through a number of characters' perspectives, highlighting how

the strike affected a diverse array of individuals and institutions. *GB84*, although by no means a crime novel, shares structural techniques with the Red Riding novels in that the strike lasted almost exactly a year, giving Peace a narrative timeframe he had utilized before, right down to his choice of title, to portray events. Ellroy's Underworld USA novels all end with the assassination or death of major national figures; John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and finally J. Edgar Hoover. These individual deaths mark the end of an era, and their passing symbolizes how American society could change so rapidly, over the relatively short space of half a decade, in its tumultuous post-war state. By the end of *GB84*, Britain has irrevocably changed, as Peace portrays the miner's strike as the last hurrah of the trade union movement, a recognizably socialist Labour Party and the economic and cultural identity of the northern mining towns that withered and died after the strike failed.

While the epic ambition of Peace's narrative might seem bold and visual, his work as a prose stylist is less colourful and action driven than the Red Riding Quartet. The political indignation festering in the language comes, ironically, from the same banal repetition that BJ uses in *Nineteen Eighty-Three*. The character of Peter is one of the striking miners, and his version of events might seem pathetically simplistic if it did not, quite skilfully, expose the bureaucracy of union politics:

I was a delegate from Thurcroft Strike Committee; delegate took his orders from South Yorkshire Panel at Silverwood; South Yorkshire Panel took its orders from Yorkshire Area Strike Co-ordinating Committee at Barnsley, along with other three Yorkshire panels; Strike Co-ordinating Committee took its orders from National Co-ordinating Committee in Sheffield. In theory – Fat f\*\*king chance. It was a mess. (Peace 2004: 118)

Peter hits certain words such as 'Yorkshire', 'Committee', 'Panel' with such a tortuous persistence that it becomes a numbing read. The image is built up piecemeal with Peace never reversing to edit it into a perfectly formed thought, as though the anger was best preserved in the imperfection of the description. This imperfection was achieved by years of honing the hard-boiled style. Like Ellroy, Peace developed a lean prose gradually excluding adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions from the text. As he became more competent with this technique, ironically, critical opinion turned against him for the first time. This occurred with the second of his football-themed novels, *Red or Dead*, a fictional biography covering twenty-two years in the life of Liverpool manager Bill Shankley. It

might seem that the subject of football would give Peace a clean break from the influence of Ellroy's work, but, in fact, the opposite happened. While by no means savaged by critics, the prose style was identified as being problematic, as Tim Martin put it 'Peace joins a select band of writers dependant for their effects on their capacity to pummel and exhaust the reader' (Martin 2013).

Ellroy is the unnamed writer in this exclusive group. Several critics finally lost patience with him as a stylist with the release of the second Underworld novel *The Cold Six Thousand*. Unlike Peace's *Red or Dead*, the novel is clearly still in genre territory covering events such as the Mafia's incursion into the Las Vegas gaming industry and the escalation of the US military presence in Vietnam. Such epic scope could be contained within the confines of a single novel as the direct writing style relayed events at an increased pace. Ellroy described the extreme pared-down prose as telegraphic 'straight sentences – subject, verb, repetitions with slight modifications' (Rich 2008: 188). This creates a narrative where violent action overwhelms logic or coherent thought. There is not much room for thought processes in the language as murder is often an unemotional act, as in the quote below where the character of Wayne Tedrow is experimenting with drugs on a Vietnamese prisoner.

He prepped water. He prepped a spike. He prepped a spoon. He prepped horse. He cooked it. He siphoned it in.

Bongo coughed foam. Bongo coughed blood. Bongo bit his tongue off. Wayne stepped up. Wayne stepped on his head. Wayne cracked his skull. (Ellroy 2001: 361)

Ellroy uses repetition to build detail, in this instance explicitly violent detail, around the act as opposed to comma splicing which could portray the victim's body shutting down into one extended sentence. Although Peace and Ellroy had both taken their experiment in reductive text to its furthest point, Ellroy's narrative was still dependant on crime and violence, whereas Peace had moved the style out of the genre. Reviewers were quick to lampoon Ellroy's method: 'Sometimes this gets monotonous. Sometimes your concentration flags. Sometimes you miss things' (Miller 2001). Essentially Ellroy had formed a method of conveying violence in a matter-of-fact voice that loses its capacity to shock when, ironically, the full weight of graphic physical and conspiratorial crimes in the novel should make it one of Ellroy's most shocking works.

Once he had proved that he could step outside the genre with *GB84*, and his football novels, David Peace resolved to fulfil the contract he had set himself, to

write a superior book to *White Jazz* and thereby have a claim to writing the best crime novel ever published. The ambition would require a complete change of setting and, by extension, a radical break in the political context and cultural influence on the text. Peace had written much of the Red Riding Quartet in Japan where he moved to work as a teacher. Living on the other side of the globe had not diminished the authenticity of the Quartet. The narratives had still been suffused with a Yorkshire voice and ambience even when peppered with hard-boiled references inspired by his reading of Ellroy. Now Peace wanted to write a novel about his adopted home, the first of a trilogy of works set in Japan, and crucially Ellroy's themes would remain present even if, in other ways, he was moving away from the author's influence.

*Tokyo Year Zero* begins on the day Emperor Hirohito announces Japan's surrender, bringing an end to the Second World War. The full text of the speech is replicated so that the oft-quoted line '*the war has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage*' is placed in the broader context of the collapse of the old political order (Peace 2007: 22). Detective Minami is called to the Naval Clothing Department where the corpse of a woman has been discovered. One more murder uncovered on the day the most destructive conflict in history ends might not seem significant, but achieving justice in this case becomes integral to Minami's search for inner peace and redemption. He witnesses a chilling reminder of how justice can be corrupted at the crime scene when an ageing Korean 'Yobo' is found and used as a scapegoat for the murder. He is buried alive, the sort of retribution meted out to ethnic minorities of little standing. His death is only momentarily delayed so that the officers can listen to the radio broadcast announcing Japan's capitulation by the emperor, and he may have escaped such a brutal fate were he not the victim of an imperial power in its dying days and the Military Police, *Kempeitai*, have resorted to extreme sadism out of spite.

The narrative then jumps forward by exactly a year; more murders occur and the case comes back to life. The novel is a fictionalized account of the investigation of a series of women murders committed by Kodaira Yoshio. Now transplanted outside the Yorkshire setting in which he was raised, Peace is comfortable enough to refer to Yoshio by his real name, and not employ a pseudonym for the murderer as he had for Peter Sutcliffe, even though Yoshio's crimes bear strong parallels to the Ripper murders. Peace's Japan reads as a noir successor to *White Jazz*, arrived at via the gateway drug of the Red Riding Quartet. By trying to outdo *White Jazz*, Peace essentially continues the spirit of its narrative, although it is only an allusive continuation as events are set thirteen

years prior to the date *White Jazz* ends. However, as Steven Powell has argued, Ellroy uses the final novel of the LA Quartet to portray a fictional LA on the brink of a complete societal breakdown brought on by an uncontrollable crime wave which he dubs 'Apocalypse Noir' (Powell 2015: 157). By the last few pages, Ellroy has dragged both the anarchic events and the hyperbolic tone back into a form of conservatism. The power structure survives; crime falls back to a manageable level; and the 1950s end on the same delicate facade on which it had begun. However, the spectre of Vietnam and civil unrest suggest that it cannot continue into the 1960s for long. Peace's setting is a Japanese society that has fallen apart, and experienced an apocalypse which is far more than just a metaphor as the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki led to a sudden holocaust. Peace examines not just how society survives the threat of breakdown, as Ellroy explored in *White Jazz*, but how it recovers, and here the parallels between the two novels become even stronger.

Tokyo, like all Japanese cities, has to be rebuilt after the war and, as the bamboo gives way to bricks and mortar, it is clear that Peace finds much ugliness in this rebirth:

The reconstruction work starts early; the surviving buildings being repaired or demolished, new ones built in their place; the roads being cleared of the rubble and ash, the rubble and ash tipped into the canals, the canals filled up and hidden. But the rivers and roads of Tokyo still stink of piss and shit, of cholera and typhus, of disease and death, death and loss. (Peace 2007: 52)

As the canals are filled up with rubble and ash, the 'piss and shit' is literally pushed to the surface. The spread of disease and stench worsens. The rebuilding of Tokyo deliberately echoes Ellroy's portrayal in *White Jazz* of the displacement of thousands of Mexican Americans from Chavez Ravine to allow for the construction of Dodger Stadium. The rights of the individual, specifically the ethnic-minority individual, are bypassed in the drive for progress. Peace's Japan is one where starvation and crime are still rampant. The contemporary reader knows the country has a prosperous future, but at times it feels as though the text is stubbornly refusing to acknowledge it. The threat of anarchy seems all the more likely, given Japan's emergence as a post-war economic powerhouse, and is not lessened by it.

Minami is a walking metaphor for this cycle of societal breakdown and rebirth. He is of a nervous disposition. He vomits black bile, yellow bile and even when there is nothing left in his stomach he keeps on retching. He is frequently



humiliated by the local Yakuza Boss Senju, and in response is forced to grovel in deference. Senju is an emperor of all he surveys. He is the leading aristocrat of the underworld, and just as his gangsters wear the best American suits and sunglasses, the traditional Japanese nobility are frowned upon by Minami and his colleagues as they go hunting with American generals. In a blurb for the novel Ellroy described *Tokyo Year One* as ‘part Kurosawa crime film’ (Ellroy 2007b). Akira Kurosawa was one of Japan’s most distinguished film directors, known for incorporating a film noir style into his films on post-war Japanese life, two of which, *Drunken Angel* (1948), *Stray Dog* (1949), Peace names in the closing acknowledgements.

This cinematic influence is apparent in that much of the text is Minami’s internal dialogue, and here his thoughts veer between disjointed hallucinations and coherent analysis of the case, echoing in part the hard-boiled voiceover narration and dream sequences common to film noir, ‘*In the half-light. This labyrinth of corridors and rooms. Here where the dead come*’ (Peace 2007: 79). The action, and it occurs rarely in this meditative novel, is staged like a set-piece from a crime film. In one sequence the police station is besieged by five truckloads of vengeful Formosans:

The fifth truck with its tailgate down. *Nerves*. The fifth truck with a machine gun mounted in the back. *Nerves*. The machine gun mounted in the back that now opens fire, that cuts through the night, that sends policemen running, hitting two policemen, cutting them down, other officers scrambling for their own revolvers, firing back –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

Now I see Senju’s men and Tokyo policemen side by side –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

Formosans firing back from the trucks. Formosans falling from the backs of the trucks, bleeding. Formosans lying in the street –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

One, two, three, four, five, six Formosans lying in the street –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

Through the windscreen of a Formosan truck, the driver hit –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

The truck up on the sidewalk. The truck fast into the wall –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

Formosans spilling out of the back of the truck –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

They have iron clubs. They have pickaxes –

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!...*

We have revolvers. We have bullets. (Peace 2007: 191)

The exclamation *Bang!* is repeated so many times it becomes ludicrous, but upon assuming this absurdist edge its inclusion and repetition makes perfect sense. Each gunshot serves as a cutaway shot to another Formosan thug falling, and it becomes clear in the lines sandwiched between the endless gunfire that the battle is turning against the Formosans with each bullet fired. Violent action acts as a framing device so that while events may appear chaotic it remains coherent to the reader. Yakuza gangsters and police fight alongside each other against the hated ethnic minority. The surviving Formosans are taken into the station and executed with Samurai swords, a scene that exceeds the ‘Bloody Christmas’ beating of Mexican prisoners in *L.A. Confidential* in terms of police brutality.

The thin line separating the police from the Yakuza echoes Dave ‘the Enforcer’ Klein’s relationship with his Mob handlers in *White Jazz*, and can be seen in that Senju meets Minami at a black market he runs where the traders pay him protection money and the police look the other way. This is the ‘new Japan’, Senju happily exclaims. The feudal, agrarian and absolute monarchical theocratic regime is being swept away by a free market system, and Senju is there for his cut of the profits in this mass selling-off of the nation. Senju’s gangsterism is essentially an American import; for all its ancient myths and honour codes the Yakuza is operated on similar corporate principles to Mickey Cohen’s criminal organization in the LA Quartet. Minami benefits on a personal level as Senju gives him black-market Calmotin to ease his insomnia. For the most part, Minami’s mild personality and passive attitude around Senju leads the reader to believe he will never escape the gangster’s grasp, but like Dave Klein (who smothers Mob Boss Jack Dragna to death) he eventually resorts to murder to escape the blackmail.

Senju laughing looks up at me again now –

He, he, he, he! Ho, ho, ho, ho...

‘Suddenly you’re a brave man, are you? With your grey hair and your stench of death, suddenly you’re a hero again, are you? Suddenly, back from the dead. Go on then, corporal. ...’

The 1939 army-issue pistol pointed at him –

‘Corporal what... ? What’s your name... ?’

The 1939 army-issue pistol aimed at him –

‘Who are you today, cor –’

I pull the trigger. *Bang!*

His forehead shatters. ( Peace 2007: 365)

Senju is not scared by Minami’s presence, and if it were not for him goading the detective then perhaps Minami would never have worked up enough anger to pull the trigger and shoot Senju dead. Minami’s gradual mental disintegration means that he is not fully aware of his past but the Yakuza Boss cynically helps him piece it together. Senju mockingly addresses Minami as corporal, alluding to a war crime committed during Minami’s army service in China. The crime faintly echoes the Yoshio murders.

Similarly, Peace takes the Yoshio murders and inserts details which are references to his reading of Ellroy. In one of the killings cause of death is revealed in an autopsy to be ligature strangulation, echoing the murder of Geneva Hilliker Ellroy and repeating the innate fear of violence towards women and fear of losing mother figures Peace first explored in *Nineteen Seventy-Seven*. David Thomson has argued:

The author of *L.A. Confidential* and David Peace are equally addicted to the torrential voice which begins as barbed talk among characters, but which ends up as the music or wind blowing through its shattered terrain. (Thomson 2011: 108)

For Minami the music of this shattered terrain comes through in his increasingly fractured interior monologue which by the coda implies he has been committed to a mental institution. Earlier in the novel, when looking at the murdered woman’s corpse in the morgue his impending breakdown is alluded to:

The marble table washed down with a bucket of water –

*I swallow bile. I swallow bile. I swallow ...*

Her blood running away in rivers. (Peace 2007: 84)

The remnants of physicality to the scene disturb Minami who as a war veteran and detective would have witnessed many grisly scenes. The blood is washed away with brutal practicality and a part of her is gone, except in Minami’s mind which is slowly descending into madness. The novel ends with a quote from Kodaira Yoshio which describes his guilt and bewilderment after capture, suggesting he

is also wrestling with madness while enduring the agonizing wait before he is executed for his crimes. This creates another parallel between the murderer and Minami, as the corrupt detective, war criminal and adulterer spends the novel awaiting punishment for a multitude of sins. The murder victim in the morgue remains unidentified which, as Peace hints at in the epilogue, allows room for him to manoeuvre as a historical novelist, and it is telling that he should reference a tragedy from Ellroy's life with this unnamed but pivotal character. It shows how pervasive the influence of Ellroy has been on David Peace's writing, and even if Peace eventually surpasses the self-proclaimed demon dog of American crime fiction in terms of critical praise it is doubtful that the debt he owes him will ever go away. Peace will have merely fulfilled his task of writing a superior novel to *White Jazz*, as in his own words 'I [make] no bones about it. To me the greatest mystery or crime writer of the last 25 years is James Ellroy' (Flood 2010).

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