THE POST-*NOIR* NOVEL: PULP GENRE, ALIENATION, AND THE TURN FROM
POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department
of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2020

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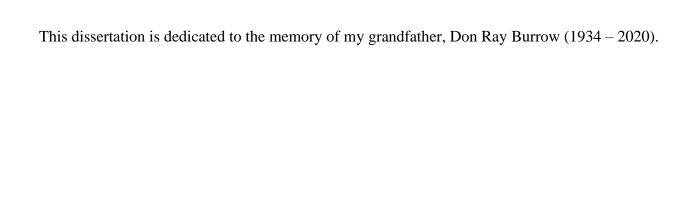
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ABSTRACT

Kenneth Lota: The Post-*Noir* Novel: Pulp Genre, Alienation, and the Turn from Postmodernism
in Contemporary American Fiction
(Under the direction of Jennifer Ho)

This dissertation intervenes in critical debates about the aesthetic and ethical character of the

contemporary literary moment by providing an in-depth case study of the evolving function of

genre in the aftermath of postmodernism. It does so by examining the adoption and reinvention

of the style, tropes, and themes of 1930s/40s hard-boiled crime fiction and *film noir* in a group of

contemporary novels published between 1999 and 2013. The crux of the argument is that

contemporary, post-postmodern writers turn to the *noir* tradition because it reflects a widespread

sense of social alienation – of the estrangement of the individual from other people, from society

as a whole, and even from oneself. In their reworkings of the genre, however, these

contemporary authors seek ways of escaping that alienation and producing narratives of re-

integration.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which engages a theme

appropriated from the classic *noir* period. The first chapter focuses on Jonathan Lethem's

Motherless Brooklyn and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, two quasi-hard-boiled-detective

novels that explore their protagonists' mental states through a focus on the relationship between

language and knowledge. The second chapter traces the deconstruction of the hard-boiled male

archetype along the lines of sexuality and race in Megan Abbott's *The Song Is You* and Mat

Johnson's graphic novel *Incognegro*. The third chapter analyzes the role of communications

technology in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, comparing

classic noir's technological anxieties to contemporary concerns about the Internet. The fourth

chapter turns to Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and China Miéville's *The City & the City* to explore the significance of the city as a noir environment in contemporary literature. Overall, the dissertation offers one of the first thorough, systematic investigations into just what it means for contemporary writers to inhabit popular genres as a way of moving beyond postmodernism.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Don Ray Burrow (1934 – 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION: THE POST-*NOIR* NOVEL

I.   *Noir* **and the Contemporary Novel Beyond the Postmodern**

Noir is everywhere. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, we are still steeped

in the themes, narrative conventions, style, iconography, language, and worldview of a tradition

that begins in the late 1920s with the hard-boiled detective and crime fiction of Dashiell

Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Dorothy B. Hughes, and James M. Cain, among others; grew

more popular with films of the 1940s and 50s like *Double Indemnity* (1944, dir. Wilder), *Detour*

(1945, dir. Ulmer), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955, dir. Aldrich); and soon reemerged from the 1970s

onward as the neo-*noir* in films like *Chinatown* (1974, dir. Polanski), *L.A. Confidential* (1997,

dir. Hanson), and *Sin City* (2005, dir. Rodriguez) and in the novels of writers like James Ellroy

and Walter Moseley. The *noir* tradition finds its most popular contemporary manifestations in

the films of David Fincher and the Coen brothers and in TV series such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-91,

2017), *True Detective* (2014 – present), *Fargo* (2014 – present), *Veronica Mars* (2004 – 2007,

2019), and *Jessica Jones* (2015 – 2019). The Noir City Film Festival has provided a travelling

noir-themed film festival in various cities across the United States for over a decade. The cable

television channel Turner Classic Movies features a weekly "Noir Alley" slot for broadcasting

classic *noir* films. J.K. Rowling, the author of the blockbuster *Harry Potter* series, offered her

own addition to the hard-boiled detective tradition with her "Cormoran Strike" novels. The

enduringly popular sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* released a *noir* parody episode

titled "The Janitor Always Mops Twice" (a nod to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) in October

2019, casting lovable dunderhead Charlie (Charlie Day) in the role of a hard-boiled detective.

Noir even appears in children's culture: "BMO Noire," a 2012 episode of the animated series *Adventure Time*, fits the character BMO, an anthropomorphic video game system, into an absurd hard-boiled mystery involving a missing sock and a *femme fatale* chicken, all portrayed in black-and-white with voiceover narration. Even Calvin, the protagonist of Bill Watterson's classic newspaper comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, has a *noir* alter-ego named "Tracer Bullet." The tradition is so popular that the 2011 video game *L.A. Noire* was able to put the word "noir" right there in its title. Whatever it was that *noir* first began to tell Americans about themselves the better part of a century ago, clearly we still need to hear it.

Alongside *noir*'s cultural ubiquity, the contemporary novel is going through its own transformations as the hegemony of postmodernism wanes. A succinct definition of postmodernism is provided by Rachel Adams: literary postmodernism is the "dominant form of avant-garde literary experimentalism during the Cold War, a period marked by the ascendance of transnational corporations, the upheavals of decolonization, fears of nuclear holocaust, and the partitioning of the globe into ideological spheres" (250). In Adams's reading, as well as my own, the most salient characteristics of literary postmodernism are its "dark humor; themes of paranoia, skepticism, and conspiracy; preoccupation with close reading and textuality; and complex formal experimentation" (250). It is within the context of this dominant postmodernist aesthetic – which, not coincidentally, shares many features with *noir* – that the contemporary literary novel arises. The exact ways in which the contemporary literary novel both departs from and evolves from postmodernism are a matter of continuous debate among critics. Various names and descriptions for the contemporary period have been provisionally asserted: for Jeffrey Nealon, we are simply living in "post-postmodernism," which actually intensifies and exacerbates the cultural tendencies of postmodernism; for Alan Kirby, the rise of

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communications technology means that we are living through "digimodernism"; Adam Kelly, noting the influence of David Foster Wallace's work on other contemporary writers, describes a movement of "New Sincerity." Mary K. Holland emphasizes the humanistic dimension of contemporary literature while not forgetting about its postmodernism-influenced focus on language and representation. Robert McLaughlin stresses that contemporary fiction is distinguished by its desire to re-engage actual social life after the insular, deconstructive projects of postmodernism, while Irmtraud Huber claims that contemporary novels work as "reconstructive fantasies." No matter what label we do or do not assign to literary fiction written in and since the 1990s, the one thing there is agreement on is that we are, as the title of a 2007 *Twentieth-Century Literature* issue put it, "After Postmodernism."

The goal of this study is to map out the territory where these two larger trends intersect. I examine a series of novels in which the traditions and tropes of hard-boiled/*noir* fiction and film are employed in the service of creating a viable aesthetic and philosophical perspective that moves beyond the deconstructive quandaries and dead-end ironies of literary postmodernism. The core of my argument is that contemporary writers engage with *noir* as a way of tackling the problem of social alienation and ultimately imagining hopeful possibilities for social re-integration. *Noir* has traditionally centered on deeply alienated characters who find themselves out of place and at odds with their societies, characters for whom a jaded, cynical fatalism is the only sensible position from which to engage the world. The classic *noir* character knows that he or she is alone and cannot imagine any other way to be. As a minor character who appears near the end of Delmer Daves's 1947 *film noir Dark Passage* puts it, "You know, we've got something in common – being alone." The novels under examination in this study seek a way out of the alienation and solipsism associated with both *noir* and postmodernism and towards new

possibilities of community and belonging, but do so using *noir*'s own toolbox. The resources of this popular pulp genre turn out to be essential to the contemporary novel's attempts to overthrow the postmodern.

Paul Schrader, in his foundational article on *film noir*, lists a number of defining characteristics of the trend, including the influence of hard-boiled crime fiction (56). Other key qualities include a dark, shadowy visual style influenced by German expressionism, a tendency to use voiceover narration, and "a complex chronological order" relying on flashbacks and other manipulations of cinematic time (Schrader 57-58). While these and a number of other traits do unify the corpus of works considered *noir*, the most salient characteristic for my study – the one I will be highlighting the most consistently – is the theme of alienation. Across the board in *noir* works, central characters find themselves alienated – from their society, from their friends and family, and even from themselves. They live fundamentally isolated lives and experience no true satisfaction in being with other people. Tzvetan Todorov, in his useful precis of Northrop Frye, defines "two principal tendencies of literature: the comic, which reconciles the hero with society; and the tragic, which isolates him from it" (11). In this broad scheme, I would argue that *noir* could be considered a version of the tragic in which the protagonist is already isolated from society when the narrative begins and remains so when it ends. Classic *noir* as a whole never did find a way to reconcile its protagonists with the worlds around them: two of the most significant late-period *noir*s, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), both end with images of apocalypse.

The problem of alienation also seems to be a universal concern for the post-postmodern novel of the late 1990s and 2000s-2010s. Virtually every critically-esteemed author self-consciously writing in the wake of postmodernism writes about characters who are for one

reason or another alienated from their society and desperately trying to find some way to remedy their isolation and discontentment. Social alienation is a recurring concern across the fictions of David Foster Wallace, Colson Whitehead, Jonathan Lethem, Junot Díaz, Dave Eggers, Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Chabon, Danzy Senna, Alison Bechdel, Chang Rae-Lee, Dana Spiotta, George Saunders, Paul Beatty, Charles Yu, Alexandra Kleeman, Percival Everett, Ottessa Moshfegh, A.M. Homes, and many others. Virtually everyone writing in the post-postmodern/New Sincerity period seems to be concerned with the same issue. While one could certainly argue that alienation was a central problem for postmodern writers such as (early) Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Kathy Acker as well, there is a key difference: whereas postmodernist writers tend to simply reflect or perform the alienation they sense in the world around them, the writers of the present generation actually seek to remedy that alienation through their fiction. One of the ways in which these writers ameliorate late 20th/21st-century alienation is by reevaluating the way postmodernism engaged with pulp genres, and incorporating those genres into their own fiction in a new way. The post-postmodern engagement with the *noir* tradition yields what I will term "post-*noir*." As I will demonstrate in my readings of the eight texts at the core of this study, the post-*noir* narrative shares many of the tropes and stylistic tendencies of earlier types of *noir* but seeks more optimistic thematic conclusions. In short, if classic *noir* and neo-*noir* both present us with an unsolved "case" in the form of the protagonists' alienation from society, post-*noir* returns to the scene of the crime in order to finally solve the case.

II.   Genre in the Contemporary Period

Indeed, hard-boiled/*noir* fiction is only one of the many older pulp genres that contemporary fiction has turned to in its attempts to build a new aesthetic regime. As Tim

Lanzendorfer puts it in the introduction to the edited collection *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*, "we must understand genre as a salient aspect of contemporary literary production, and as a powerful tool for literary and cultural diagnosis" (3). Andrew Hoberek, in the introduction to the "After Postmodernism" issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, also concedes that genre is a key element for differentiating contemporary fiction from postmodern fiction:

> Any effort to distinguish post-postmodern trends must … adduce specific aspects
> of fictional form that both occur across a range of contemporary writing and
> depart in some way from postmodern norms. One such formal feature occurs in
> the context of what might at first seem like evidence for postmodernism's
> ongoing influence: the blurring of high and mass culture central, for instance, to
> Chabon and Lethem's fascination with comic books or, from the other direction,
> the rise of the graphic novel to the status of a serious literary mode. But while
> postmodernism embraced popular forms in ways that modernism never did, there
> is a difference between the transitional but still self-consciously 'literary'
> appropriation of popular genres in the work of authors like Barth and Pynchon …
> and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves.
> (Hoberek 237 – 238)

While critics have recognized the fact of the broader turn towards genre, much work remains to be done on understanding the full depth and significance of this phenomenon. As Lanzendorfer notes, "the consequences of what is possibly a 'turn' to genre in the contemporary novel have remained under-theorized, both with regards to understanding how and what genre is and does, and to the extent of the turn to genre" (3). On the one hand, self-consciously entering into a well-

established generic tradition and trying to reinvent or subvert it from within is by now an inherently postmodern gesture; one of the characteristics that distinguishes the post-postmodern novel from simple realism is that it cannot forget the postmodernist insight that all language and representation are artificial and in some ways governed by external conventions. However, the point at which the post-postmodern writer departs from the postmodern writer is when s/he decides what to actually do from within that artificial generic tradition. While it is true that "many contemporary texts seek a more productive relationship both to the idea of genre and the many different genres in which they write," there have been relatively few sustained and systematic investigations into contemporary fiction's engagements with any particular genre (Lanzendorfer 6). Therefore, I will continue this broader project of understanding the importance of genre to the contemporary novel by focusing my entire study on the ways in which contemporary writers engage just one such popular form: the hard-boiled/*noir* narrative.[1]

      Throughout this project, I adopt a methodology very similar to that employed by scholar Theodore Martin in his 2017 study *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. Martin's work uses the evolution of genre across time as a framework for understanding the contemporary cultural period. Genre is useful as a sorting device because, as Martin notes, "[t]oday more books are published, more films are released, and more art is produced than ever before. Without the benefit of hindsight, without the aid of an agreed-on periodization, and without the help of an established canon, it is a daunting if not impossible task to make sense of the constant proliferation of contemporary cultural objects" (5). Genre's

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[1] At this point, some scholars are likely to object that *film noir* in particular is not in fact a genre at all, as Steve Neale has argued in *Hollywood and Genre*. I understand these objections, given *film noir*'s peculiar critical history as a phenomenon that was only labelled retrospectively by French critics and was not known as such to the people who made the films, as well as the fact that no single signifier or trope is common to all the films that have been agreed upon as *films noir*. However, for the purposes of my study, I do not think it especially matters whether *noir*, in literature or cinema, technically meets the definitions of a genre or not. The contemporary fiction writers I am studying effectively treat *noir* as if it were a genre, and therefore I shall do the same.

usefulness as a critical concept is not limited to its sorting function, however. I fundamentally

agree with and will rely upon Martin's conception of genre:

> Genre…describes how aesthetic forms move cumulatively through history. The
> accretive history of genre is a measure of both change and continuity, diachrony
> and synchrony, pastness and presentness. Genres explain how aesthetic and
> cultural categories become recognizable as well as reproducible in a given
> moment, and they demonstrate how the conventions and expectations that make
> up those categories are sedimented over time. (Martin 6)

This dialectic of "pastness and presentness," the way that "[g]enres lead distinctly double lives,

with one foot in the past and the other in the present" and "contain the entire abridged history of

an aesthetic form while also staking a claim to the form's contemporary relevance," is key to my

argument and method in this project (Martin 6). As Tzvetan Todorov put it in his influential

formulation of the concept of genre, "[g]enres are precisely those relay-points by which the work

assumes a relation with the universe of literature" (8). It is important to remember that the

relationship between an individual text and the genre(s) it inhabits is a two-way one: "we must

understand that a text is not only the product of a pre-existing combinatorial system (constituted

by all that is literature *in posse*); it is also a transformation of that system" (Todorov 7). The texts

I analyze in this study are shaped by the *noir* tradition, but they also re-shape the tradition in

turn. In each chapter, I consider the way in which contemporary literary texts appropriate and

transform specific tropes and concepts drawn from the history of *noir*. The degree to which a

noir quality stays the same across time indicates important cultural continuities between the

midcentury era and the contemporary moment; the way in which that *noir* quality changes across

time indicates cultural change and, I am arguing, progress. Or, as Martin puts it, genre is "a

necessary starting point for coming to grips with the complex status of contemporary history"

and "shows us what differentiates the present from the past as well as what ties the two together"

(Martin 7).[2]

       Although, as Martin's study amply demonstrates, the contemporary literary novel turns to

a wide variety of popular genres for inspiration – including science fiction, zombie horror,

Lovecraftian horror, superhero comic books, etc. – there is something particularly appropriate for

the contemporary writer about choosing *noir* as a playing field upon which to work through post-

postmodern concerns. In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language & Humanism in Contemporary*

American Literature, Mary K. Holland argues that contemporary literature seeks to revive

"literature's and theory's ability to be about something, to matter, to communicate meaning, to

foster the sense that language connects us more than it estranges us," in order "that we can come

together in ways that build relationship and community rather than the alienation and solipsism

of antihumanistic postmodern literature" (6). If one of the principal drives of contemporary

literature seems to be overcoming the stifling alienation portrayed in (and arguably sometimes

produced by) a great deal of postmodern literature, then it only makes sense that contemporary

literature would pursue this goal through *noir*, the generic tradition that has always most strongly

been associated with alienation. Classic *noir* novels and films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Detour*,

Kiss Me Deadly, and *In a Lonely Place* (1950, dir. Ray) tend to symptomatize an intense sense of

the alienation produced by the disruptions of the Great Depression, World War II, and the partial

breakdown of prewar patriarchy, all without offering any solution or amelioration for this

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[2] It is appropriate here to situate my own work in relationship to Martin's, given the degree of similarity between our
projects. It is true that I conceived and wrote the majority of the present study before I encountered Martin's work;
nevertheless, there is remarkable consonance between our methodologies and arguments. Martin treats a number of
different genres across the chapters of his study, including *noir*, the Western, and the post-apocalyptic tale. My
study, by examining one genre across several chapters, is in many ways like a more "zoomed-in" version of
Martin's. Both works should demonstrate the fruitful possibilities for further scholarly research on the role of genre
in contemporary literature.

alienation. There is rarely a happy ending for the characters in a classic *noir* narrative; and if there is, it usually feels contrived and unsatisfactory, the result of catering to Production Code demands rather than a genuine belief in the possibility of resolution. Morris Dickstein, in his study of postwar American fiction, notes that the political alienation felt by artists in that period "is reflected in the brutal fantasies of pulp fiction … and in the dark patterns of film noir, where the outlook is often so bleak, the milieu so dark and corrupt that the appointed czar of the film industry threatened to forbid the export of American movies for fear of tarnishing our image abroad" (85). Classic *noir* reflects and reinforces the widespread social alienation of the milieu in which it was produced without seeking to offer any clear remedies or alternatives. If *noir* illustrates a symptom of culture-wide alienation and discontent, then a solution to such alienation might well begin on *noir*'s own terms. By inhabiting this tradition but rewriting it in order to be able to authentically reach positive resolutions – or at least less nihilistic ones – the post-*noir* novel uses the *noir* tradition as a way to overcome problems of alienation. While, as mentioned earlier, an extremely wide swath of contemporary literature is in one way or another concerned with alienation as a problem to be solved, the texts studied here find *noir*'s particular repertoire of themes, images, character types, plot devices, and so on to be especially useful in pursuing this goal.

III.   **A Brief History of Hard-Boiled Fiction and *Film Noir***

My primary focus in the present study is a set of texts published between 1999 and 2013, but the aesthetic history that these works tap into is a long and complex one. The *noir* tradition began in the hard-boiled detective fiction of the late 1920s and early 1930s. This subgenre, which originally appeared alongside other types of male-oriented adventure stories in the pages of cheap pulp magazines like *Black Mask*, distinguished itself from its British counterpart, the

well-heeled "Golden Age" detective fiction of writers such as Agatha Christie, in both style and content. Where Golden Age detectives such as Christie's Hercule Poirot tend to be erudite and sociable, the hard-boiled detective is a street-smart loner: "[h]e replaces the subtleties of the deductive method with a sure knowledge of his world and a keen moral sense. Finding the social contract vicious and debilitating, he generally isolates himself from normal human relationships" (Grella 414). Where Golden Age detective fiction plots tend to be elaborately puzzle-like and invite the reader to try their hand at solving the mystery in a game-like fashion, the plots of hardboiled detective fiction are often chaotic, violent, and not a little confusing. Whereas Golden Age detective narratives tend to end in a clear identification of a villain and the subsequent restoration of a comfortable status quo, the world of hardboiled fiction is always already a corrupted and wicked one. As Grella says in his classic study of the form, "The general shabbiness is another symptom of society's debilitating influence; wherever human beings gather, evil results. The social contract breeds not happiness but culpability" (420). The most prominent and prestigious early practitioner of hard-boiled detective fiction was Dashiell Hammett, whose novels *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) are still among the most widely-read examples of the genre. Raymond Chandler, whose own fictional detective Philip Marlowe remains the most iconic hardboiled sleuth, differentiated his predecessor from the British tradition in vivid terms: "Hammett wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. … Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish" (14). The issue of "attitude" that Chandler raises goes to the heart of what distinguishes *noir* from other types of detective and crime narrative: its fundamental sensibility. Andrew Pepper rightly argues that a common worldview links the

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hardboiled and *noir* categories which other critics sometimes separate: "Hammett deployed many of the traits or features that would later be cited as characteristic of a 'noir' sensibility: an unknowable, morally compromised protagonist who is implicated in the sordid world he inhabits, an overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness, and a socio-political critique that yields nothing and goes nowhere" (58). While any number of tropes and signifiers recur many times across the *noir* canon, it is the "fatalism and bleakness" and pessimistic "socio-political critique" that truly unite the texts of the classic *noir* period. As I will argue throughout this study, the contemporary writers who re-invent *noir* do so in order to engage with this sensibility and ultimately write their ways out of it and into a more hopeful perspective.

The bleak sensibility that expresses itself through the fictional output of Hammett and others quickly found its way to the American cinema in the form of *film noir*. It is no coincidence that one of the earliest and most influential *noir* films, John Huston's 1941 *The Maltese Falcon*, was adopted from a Hammett novel. Humphrey Bogart, the star of *The Maltese Falcon*, would also later play Philip Marlowe in Howard Hawks's 1946 *The Big Sleep*. Bogart himself drew the connection between the two works in a fascinatingly metatextual way: a trailer for *The Big Sleep* features Bogart in a book store asking a clerk to help him find "a good mystery on something off the beaten track, like *The Maltese Falcon*" and the clerk handing him a hardback copy of *The Big Sleep* in response. Although the original *film noir* cycle eventually found itself drifting away from its direct literary roots somewhat (later *noir* films are less likely to be direct adaptations than earlier ones), that trailer indicates that Hollywood filmmakers were aware of the debt their films owed to hard-boiled fiction.

Although *noir* was generally seen to have run its course in both literature and film by the end of the 1950s, it did not take long before the neo-*noir* cycle emerged. Neo-*noir* is a self-

conscious genre which deliberately appropriates many of the tropes and stylistic tendencies of

classic *film noir* but applies them to contemporary settings or with contemporary sensibilities.

Curiously, neo-*noir* has now lasted much longer than the original run of *film noir*, which only

endured for about twenty years. Neo-*noir* emerges in 1970s films like *The Long Goodbye* (1973,

dir. Altman) and *Chinatown* and continues through the 1980s and 90s in the novels of James

Ellroy and Walter Moseley and films like *Body Heat* (1981, dir. Kasdan), *Blood Simple* (1985,

dir. Coens), *Pulp Fiction* (1994, dir. Tarantino), *Seven* (1995, dir. Fincher), *L.A. Confidential*,

The Big Lebowski (1998, dir. Coens), and *The Limey* (1999, dir. Soderbergh). *Noir* aesthetics and

thematics continue to surface regularly in the contemporary period, but many contemporary *noir*

or *noir*-ish works (especially those at hand in this study) can be best understood not simply as

more neo-*noir* but as embodying a new direction I will call "post-*noir*."

Neo-*noir* texts, as is widely understood, self-consciously use many of the narrative

strategies and signifiers of classic *noir* to examine ongoing issues of alienation, crime, and

corruption. Thematically and philosophically, however, neo-*noir* works tend to either

hyperbolically reinforce the pessimism and cynicism of classic *noir* (cf. the ending of

Chinatown)[3] or to use it as a basis for pastiche and parody (cf. *The Big Lebowski*).[4] Post-*noir*

works, however, work on a different register thematically than neo-*noir*. Post-*noir* narrative

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[3] The ending of *Chinatown*, which was changed by director Roman Polanski away from the more optimistic version in Robert Towne's script, is one of the most infamously bleak and nihilistic resolutions of any major Hollywood film. The final scene finds the sympathetic female lead Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) murdered, villainous tycoon Noah Cross (John Huston) getting away with all his numerous crimes, and private detective Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) powerless to help anything. The cynical resignation of the final line of dialogue – "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown" – condenses the film's bleak outlook, which was likely shaped by Roman Polanski's experience of having his wife Sharon Tate murdered by members of the Manson family.

[4] The Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, a comedy that has attained a unique cult status over the years since its initial release, parodies many of the conventions of the Chandlerian hard-boiled detective narrative. The wisecracking, hard-boiled detective protagonist is recast as a shiftless, pot-smoking slacker (Jeff Bridges); the convoluted mystery which he finds himself caught up in is humorously absurd and ultimately beside the point.

assumes many of the same stylistic tendencies as classic *noir* and neo-*noir* but seeks to move

beyond the problems of alienation and loneliness that traditionally go unresolved in *noir*.

IV.   **Definitions of *noir***

One of the difficulties of writing about *noir* is the fact that there is no single universally

agreed-upon definition for just what constitutes a *noir* novel or film. Some of the definitions that

have been offered hinge on subject matter (crime, violence, sexuality, guilt); some on style (the

chiaroscuro lighting of *noir* films, the Hemingway-esque voice of hard-boiled fiction); some on

historical context (the social environment of the Depression and the postwar years). While no

one definition is universally applicable, there have been several attempts to explain *noir*'s

essence in recent scholarship that I find helpful.

Paula Rabinowitz offers one of the broadest and yet most useful descriptions of *noir* in

her study *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*. Rabinowitz defines *noir* as a form

of historical "sensibility," one which is "expressed almost daily during the late 1990s in the

pages of the *New York Times*, on Hollywood screens, in fashion, and in the cultural fascination

with lurid murder trials involving white women and black men" (15). She argues that in its

original context, "Film noir provides a medium for understanding the peculiar ways in which

America expressed its uniquely hokey modernism. They offer a theory of its pulp modernity"

(Rabinowitz 6). While I admittedly find Rabinowitz's work surprisingly sprawling, I appreciate

the suppleness of defining *noir* as a sensibility; thinking of *noir* in this way explains why it

translates so easily to literature, film, television, cartoons, video games, and other media.

Furthermore, if classic *noir* reflects midcentury America's "pulp modernity," the recent

reinventions of it help to define its "pulp postmodernity," or even its "pulp post-postmodernity."

Christopher Breu in *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* offers a similarly helpful and flexible definition of *noir*. Rather than thinking about *noir* as a genre per se, Breu claims that "noir is best characterized as a resolutely negative cultural fantasy, one that finds expression in a wide range of twentieth-century literary and filmic texts and that functions as both a condensation of and a catalyst for various forms of social negativity that are distinct to the era of corporate capitalism" (24). For Breu, "the noir narrative refuses both identification and comfortable resolution" (26). I am drawn to Breu's definition of *noir* as a "cultural fantasy," insofar as the idea of its being a fantasy, much like its being a sensibility for Rabinowitz, gives it a degree of flexibility and latitude that helps to explain why it is both so pervasive and so tricky to nail down. Breu's point that the classic *noir* avoids identification and resolution also helps to explain the particular innovation or twist on the fantasy that contemporary writers are making within *noir* by encouraging identification and achieving – or at least gesturing towards – satisfactory resolutions.

In *Noir Anxiety*, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo define *noir* as a way of expressing a variety of anxieties in the postwar period. In their interpretation, "Behind the free-floating anxiety of noir is a primal anxiety over borders and boundaries that manifests itself in specific fears and phobias of race, sex, maternity, and national origin" (Oliver and Trigo xiv). Their way of thinking about *noir* is very useful for relating it more concretely to historical contexts, and also offers a way into some of the thematic innovations brought to *noir* in the contemporary period. The identity-centered anxieties that Oliver and Trigo find in *noir* likely resonated particularly well with a wide population of alienated white males reeling from the upheavals of the Depression and World War II.

Perhaps the most vivid way to define the essence of *noir*, however, is through an example. Here I turn briefly to Robert Rodriguez's film *Sin City* (2005), which self-consciously tries to embody *noir* at its most extreme. In particular, this film extends the ideas and impressions of the *noir* vision of life as far as they will possibly go. If other films have offered a *noir* way of seeing modern life, *Sin City* gives us a world which has itself *become noir*. Dimendberg, writing of classic-period *noir*, notes that "[v]iewed from the position of the modernizing postwar era, let alone the twenty-first century, the universe of *film noir*, with its harassed working-class protagonists, petty criminals, seedy gambling joints, ramshackle urban neighborhoods, and threatening skyscrapers, seems akin to a modern vision of purgatory" (4). *Sin City* offers the viewer exactly such a purgatory. Everything extraneous to the *noir* vision has been drained away in Rodriguez's film, effectively transforming *noir* from an adjective into a noun. It is through thinking about the film in this way that the thematic appropriateness of Rodriguez's choice to shoot the entire film in front of a green screen, a technique rarely done before then, becomes apparent. By creating the background of every shot digitally, Rodriguez is able to filter out any non-*noir* elements that might have intruded in physical reality.

In the world of *Sin City*, it is always night time; daylight is never once seen in the film. It is unclear what state Sin City (officially named "Basin City") is in, but the location is unmistakably *noir* terrain. Tall black buildings with pure white light in their windows dominate most of the visible landscape. There are no references to any real specific geographic locations in the film. The occupations of every character in the film seem to exist solely because of human vice: every major character is a cop, a stripper, a prostitute, a thug, a hitman, a serial killer, or a corrupt politician. The characters are all archetypes with names like "Marv," "Goldie," "Jackie Boy," "Hartigan," and "the Yellow Bastard." The police have ceded authority of the part of the

city known as "Oldtown" to a gang of prostitutes, who have organized into their own extremely well-armed peacekeeping force. Murder and homicide are utterly commonplace. Every single visual and narrative element of the film is both simplified and heightened into a more intense version of its real-life counterpart. Consider for example the jail cell Hartigan (Bruce Willis) sits in for years after being framed for the crimes of the man he was investigating. The cell is a small square with bars stretching upward as far as the camera can see, and it is surrounded by an inky black void. Nothing exists except for that which contributes to the character's suffering. The world of *Sin City* is the ultimate visual expression of the alienation and paranoia that have characterized *noir* since Hammett's earliest writings. Through Rodriguez's highly stylized images, *Sin City* does not so much transform the *noir* vision of the city as uncover the mental image that was always there just beneath the surface of physical reality in the *noir* narrative. *Sin City* shows us a place that does not literally exist, but one that many people across the world live in psychologically.

Although all these definitions of *noir* are quite useful in their sophistication and capaciousness, at this point I would like to add my own definition of *noir* into the mix. While *noir* is certainly legible as a sensibility, a fantasy, an expression of anxiety, or all three, I think the most precise way to define it is as an ethos. If I were to offer a shorthand definition, I would call *noir* "the ethos of the alienated." While *noir* is definitely associated with certain character types, settings, visual and verbal styles, narrative structures and techniques, and themes, the thing that most sets *noir* apart from anything else is the attitude or ethos it portrays, both explicitly on the part of the characters and implicitly on the part of the author or filmmakers. It is the weary, suspicious, cynical stance of the individual relative to the rest of the world that makes *noir*, *noir*. In this way, *noir* functions in a similar manner to irony, as discussed by Lee Konstantinou in

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Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction. According to Konstantinou, "irony cannot be casually adopted or easily discarded. Irony is not a method or a tone or an affect or merely a property of language or a feature of communicative action. It is an ethos that consumes the whole person, a whole life, and, in the view of some critics, threatens the integrity of the person" (16-17). *Noir* might not necessarily consume a whole person in the way irony does – although one suspects it might well have done so for writers like James M. Cain or Jim Thompson – but it can certainly consume a whole text. *Noir*, like irony, is not determined strictly by the content of a text, but by its attitude towards that content.

Not only are *noir* and irony the same type of thing, in my view, but the post-postmodern project relates to them both in a similar way. In his famous early 1990s critical essay/artistic call-to-arms "E Unibus Pluram," David Foster Wallace both highlighted the crucial cultural work that irony had performed in postmodernist fiction and argued for a need to move past it. In fact, Wallace's description of why irony can only go so far applies almost equally well to *noir*: "irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67). Classic *noir*, much like irony, is both entertaining and entirely negative; it reflects broad currents of alienation, guilt, cynicism, and paranoia without offering any sort of real cure. The Maltese Falcon is exposed as a fake; the lovers in the novel *Double Indemnity* agree to a mutual suicide; the protagonist of *Detour* is arrested, seemingly for no reason at all. There is virtually never redemption nor a realistic hope of a better future in classic *noir*. We can see what is wrong, but not how to fix it. Thus, if there is a broad trend in contemporary literature to move beyond irony without forgetting about irony's lessons – what Konstantinou calls "postirony" – then the writers

I am discussing in this study are trying to move beyond *noir* without forgetting about what it had to show us. If the contemporary novel in general is post-irony, these novels are post-*noir*.[5]

V. Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter of this study begins by describing and analyzing a key concept or trope drawn from the history of hard-boiled/*noir* fiction and film. I then turn to two primary texts in each chapter, examining the ways in which those texts appropriate and re-invent the relevant *noir* idea in a way that helps push the text beyond the aesthetic and philosophical dead-ends of both classic *noir* and postmodernism. The scope of the chapters broadens further outwards as the overall project progresses: the first two chapters deal primarily with the alienation individuals experience from themselves, while the third and fourth chapters explore the ways in which individuals can be alienated from others and indeed from society as a whole.

Chapter One deals with the theme of self-articulation through language and thought in the post-*noir* novel. I provide an overview of the history of *noir*'s characteristic linguistic style and the ways in which storytelling itself has traditionally been positioned in *noir*. I then turn to Jonathan Lethem's 1999 novel *Motherless Brooklyn*, tracing the ways in which the protagonist Lionel Essrog's Tourette's syndrome both plays with the conventions of the hard-boiled detective narrative and symptomatizes a broader cultural condition, one from which the novel ultimately seeks to liberate him. Finally, I examine Colson Whitehead's 1999 novel *The Intuitionist*, in which the alienated and lonely protagonist Lila Mae Watson finds herself unwillingly thrust into the *noir* predicament of trying to solve a mystery in which she herself is implicated. I argue that much as Lionel has to find the right language in which to properly

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[5] "Post-*noir*" not, of course, simply being the same thing as "not *noir*." One of the main points of Wallace's essay is that the contemporary writer cannot skate past irony as if it had never happened and innocently return to some pre-ironic sentimentalism. The contemporary writer must go through irony on the way to sincerity. Similarly, the post-*noir* novel must go through *noir* on its way to something else.

articulate himself to move beyond his initial *noir* problems, Lila Mae's real challenge is to learn

to articulate the story of herself as a black woman in America.

Chapter Two takes as its primary object of concern the trope of the hard-boiled male, the

most pervasive character archetype in the *noir* canon. While providing an overview of the history

of this archetype, I argue that the figure's presumed whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality

are actually key factors in the estrangement that characterize him. I then analyze two texts which

deconstruct the archetype along different axes. I show how Mat Johnnson and Warren Pleece's

2008 graphic novel *Incognegro* challenges the presumed whiteness of the hard-boiled male with

its white-passing African American protagonist, who uses the logic of white supremacy to

undermine American racial order. I then argue for the presence of a queer subtext in Megan

Abbott's 2007 novel *The Song Is You* and show the ways in which this subtext contributes to a

critique of the usually unquestioned sexual logic of *noir*.

Chapter Three picks up on a strain of technological paranoia in classic *noir* and shows

how the post-*noir* novel updates that anxiety for the contemporary moment. The chapter begins

with a brief history of the role of telephones and other forms of communications technology in

classic *noir*. I then show how the fears surrounding these devices in classic *noir* have

transformed into worries about the Internet in Thomas Pynchon's 2013 *Bleeding Edge* and

Gillian Flynn's 2012 *Gone Girl*. I argue that Pynchon's novel uses a retrospective point of view

on the Internet's recent history in order both to defamiliarize for readers the role the Internet has

come to play in everyday life and to search for the ways in which familial connection can protect

the individual from the chilly alienation produced by Internet use. I then turn to *Gone Girl*,

reading Amy's narration in the first half of the novel as a self-performance through the lens of

social media. In both cases, the novels seek alternatives to the isolation produced by contemporary communications technology.

The fourth and final chapter takes the broadest scope, exploring the topic of individual alienation not from the self or from other individuals but from society as a whole as imagined through the trope of the *noir* city. This chapter reads Michael Chabon's 2007 *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and China Miéville's 2009 *The City & the City* as thought experiments in what it means for the individual to live in an urban space. Both novels take place in imaginary cities, each of which is governed by byzantine and fantastical rules that serve to keep their residents isolated and alienated from each other. Nevertheless, both novels ultimately gesture towards the possibility of reintegration through a re-conception of how the individual can related to society as a whole.

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CHAPTER I: ARTICULATING THE SELF IN THE POST-*NOIR* NOVEL

The epigraph for contemporary *noir* novelist James Ellroy's *White Jazz* (1992) comes from his predecessor Ross MacDonald: "In the end I possess my birthplace and am possessed by its language." Given that *White Jazz* is a famously extreme example of Ellroy's ultra-compressed, telegraphic prose style, the choice of an epigraph about language is appropriate. An interviewer describes Ellroy's linguistic style thus: "In these books Ellroy refined a style that is all his own, incorporating elements of street slang, FBI officialese, and Hollywood gossip-rag shorthand. The Ellroy sentence is jumpy, overcaffeinated, spring-loaded — always ready to pounce" (Rich). The thing Ellroy instinctively understands and that his fiction embodies is the inextricability of a hard-boiled/*noir* sensibility from the verbal style that expresses it.[6] As James Baldwin noted in a different context, "A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey" (782). While Baldwin was speaking specifically about what he called "Black English" (today known as "African American Vernacular English"), this general principle applies equally well to the evolution of *noir* language. The social, political, and economic conditions that combined to shape the *noir* sensibility in fiction and film are reflected in the language that expresses it. The way in which *noir* characters articulate themselves, the way they tell their stories, is one of the tradition's defining qualities.

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[6] While Ellroy's choice of epigraph makes his indebtedness to the hard-boiled crime fiction tradition clear, he is not shy about the influence of cinema on his work either; as he says in the same interview, "It's the first thing you get in any author's note: James Ellroy was born in Los Angeles in 1948. I was hatched in the film-noir epicenter, at the height of the film-noir era" (Rich).

Scholar Theodore Martin, in his study of the evolutions of various popular genres in the contemporary period, defines *noir* "as a prolonged study in the problem of situating ourselves in the present" and argues that "*noir's* revival compels us to rethink the very idea of the 'historical situation'" and thus "expands our sense of what it means to be contemporary, providing a longer view of the postwar social structures that continue to determine and disorient us" (21). I generally agree with Martin's claim that one of the primary motives behind *noir* is to situate the self in the present historical context; I would add, as a related claim, that in order to situate oneself in a broader context, one must first articulate oneself *as a self* at all. That problem of self-articulation is the focus of this chapter; the protagonists of both Jonathan Lethem's 1999 *Motherless Brooklyn* and Colson Whitehead's 1999 *The Intuitionist* must contend with powerful external forces in order to articulate understandings of themselves *to themselves*. Both protagonists start their respective narratives in places where they are not quite able to adequately understand themselves and thus cannot fit comfortably into their worlds; at the end of both novels, these characters are finally prepared to begin the difficult work of really and truly articulating themselves.

From its earliest literary and cinematic roots, the *noir* tradition has been as much about words and storytelling as it is about anything else. In focusing so intensely on language, of course, *noir* is also therefore concerned with thought itself, with which language is deeply intertwined. Given that the particular linguistic style of *noir* has become increasingly intense and distilled over the decades since Dashiell Hammett and others introduced it, it was perhaps only a matter of time before language and thought themselves became explicit subject matter for novelists working in a *noir* mode. In *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Intuitionist.* Lethem and Whitehead stage self-reflexive investigations of language and thought in order to understand

noir's particular investment in them and, ultimately, to move beyond this *noir* way of writing and thinking.

A Brief History of Hard-Boiled Language and Thought

From the earliest days of hard-boiled and *noir* narrative, language has been one of the tradition's key distinguishing factors. In the introduction to the 2010 *Black Lizard Big Book of Black Mask Stories*, Keith Alan Deutsch argues that the hard-boiled narratives first published in *Black Mask* magazine introduced "a new kind of narration told with the vernacular language of the streets" to American literature (xi). It was this particular linguistic style that allowed hard-boiled crime writers to elevate the literary prestige of detective fiction as a whole: "soon after the publication of *The Maltese Falcon*, Gertrude Stein declared [Dashiell] Hammett, not [Ernest] Hemingway, the originator of the modern American, declarative, narrative sentence" (Deutsch xi). While Stein's elevation of Hammett over her friend Hemingway is surprising and debatable (I certainly do not mean to understate Hemingway's influence on American literature as a whole), it does suggest what an impact Hammett's prose style had, and how the appeal of the hard-boiled/*noir* tradition is inextricable from the style of its telling.

The importance of hard-boiled/*noir* language was certainly not lost on *noir* authors themselves. In Raymond Chandler's famous description of his ideal of the hard-boiled detective at the end of his essay "The Simple Art of Murder," Chandler emphasizes the vernacular quality of the archetype: "He talks as the man of his age talks – that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness" (18). Chandler did not see his own or Hammett's works as emerging out of a vacuum but as the logical culmination of a trend that had been growing in American literature for decades beforehand: "A rather revolutionary debunking of both the language and the material of fiction had been going on for some time" in

the works of Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and (according to Chandler) even Walt Whitman (14). The hard-boiled school, by applying this "debunking" to the detective genre, expanded its influence to broader cultural territory. Chandler was cognizant of this stylized language's effects on its readers:

> He [Hammett] had style, but his audience didn't know it, because it was in a language not supposed to be capable of such refinement. They thought there were getting a good meaty melodrama written in the kind of lingo they imagined they spoke themselves. It was, in a sense, but it was much more. All language begins with speech, and the speech of common men at that, but when it develops to the point of becoming a literary medium it only looks like speech. … I believe this style, which does not belong to Hammett or to anybody, but is the American language (and not even exclusively that any more), can say things he did not know how to say, or feel the need of saying. (Chandler 15)

Of course, Chandler did not only recognize the significance of the hard-boiled narrative style in Hammett's work; he also perfected it in his own novels. Dennis Porter notes that "[i]t is characteristic of Chandler that, even more than the weaponry and the motivation of modern American crime, he highlights the importance of language" (97). It is the world-weary, witty voice of Chandler's Philip Marlowe (rather than, say, the oft-confusing plotting of his novels) that is his real, lasting contribution to the genre of detective fiction and to American literature in general. As Porter describes it,

> If Philip Marlowe speaks in an American vernacular, it is the vernacular with a difference, the vernacular heightened and burnished to the level of street-wise poetry - poetry, that is, not so much in the high-brow literary tradition as in the

sense Roman Jakobson gave to the word when he described the poetic function of language as that in which the medium knowingly and suggestively reflects back on its own materiality as patterned sound. (104-5)

Marlowe's speech throughout Chandler's novels becomes more than a means of relaying the winding mystery plots that ostensibly are the novels' *raison d'etre*. His voice, particularly in the "one- or two-liners" whose "finality," according to Porter, "elevates the wise-crack of an American, urban folk tradition to the level of a hardboiled conceit" becomes the novels' true signature (105). It is a voice that is by turns cynical, romantic, and self-aware of the contradictions between its own cynicism and its romanticism.

One could point out plenty of examples of the influence of Hammett's and Chandler's linguistic styles on contemporary *noir* fiction and film (in the works of Ellroy, Walter Mosley, Frank Miller, the Coen brothers, Megan Abbott, Nic Pizzolatto, and many others), but I here focus on one especially revealing example: writer-director Rian Johnson's 2005 debut film *Brick*. This film, which imagines an anachronistic criminal underworld in the unexpected setting of a contemporary suburban California high school, is notable for its unique twist on numerous hard-boiled/*noir* tropes, including a teenage outcast who becomes a hard-boiled detective, a popular girl who becomes a *femme fatale*, and a drug-dealing "Kingpin" who still lives with his mother. While the film's plot and character archetypes clearly reflect Johnson's fascination with the *noir* tradition, it is in the dialogue that the film's homage to Hammett and Chandler registers most clearly.

The young, mostly white, middle-class characters of *Brick* speak in a language almost entirely composed of words and phrases from the hard-boiled/*noir* archive. Indeed, the only time anyone drops the *noir* act is when the Kingpin's kindly mother offers some of the characters

refreshments. Although the film exhibits plenty of carefully mannered style on the level of

performances and visual direction, the dialogue is *Brick*'s mostly thoroughly stylized element.

To illustrate what I mean, I will here include a partial list of some of the anachronistically used

words, phrases, and lines of dialogue that are heard in the film:

"patch-up"
"specs"
"sister" used to address an acquaintance
"Still picking your teeth with freshmen?"
"I got all five senses and I slept last night. That puts me six up on the lot of you."
"Stonewall him, he won't bite."
"spook story"
"tail" as a verb
"blow" meaning "to leave"
"sap" (a word famously used in the climax of *The Maltese Falcon*)
"yegg"

"curtains" meaning "death" or "ruin"
"fall guy"
"nut" meaning "head"
"ape" referring to a henchman
"clam" meaning "to stay silent"
"rub" meaning "to kill"
"cad"
"muscle" referring to a henchman
"kablooie"
"bulls" meaning "the police"
"tale" instead of "story"
"giving me the straight"
"It's duck soup.

The 1930s/40s flavor of these verbal choices for mid-2000s high-schoolers might initially seem

jarring for the viewer, but the film is so thorough and consistent in its use of this style that the

language eventually creates a comprehensible and coherent universe of its own. Thematically,

the dialogue reflects the sense of alienation and isolation felt by all of the film's characters, a

loneliness that is frequently reinforced by the way the film repeatedly frames the characters alone

against large amounts of empty space. It is as if, having failed to associate with each other

enough to create their own slang, the characters of *Brick* have instead reverted back to the slang

of a previous era. Johnson admits in an interview that he "wrote *Brick* out of an obsession with

Dashiell Hammett" and that the film's language "lets the audience know that this isn't supposed

to be a realistic film, that it operates under its own rules" (Garnett). *Brick* might be an especially

extreme example, but it illustrates the broader point that the hard-boiled/*noir* sensibility and the

stylized language used to express it are inextricably bound together even in the contemporary

moment.

  The issue of hard-boiled language in *noir* fiction is directly related to questions of

knowledge and thought, which underlie all detective fiction from Edgar Allan Poe onward. Poe's

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," usually taken to be the first detective story in the English

language, begins with a dense, several-page-long commentary on the issue of thought, the first

paragraph of which I excerpt here:

> The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little
>
> susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects. We know of
>
> them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when
>
> inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man
>
> exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into
>
> action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives
>
> pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is
>
> fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of
>
> each a degree of *acumen* which appears to the ordinary apprehension
>
> preternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method,
>
> have, in truth, the whole air of intuition. (Poe 373, emphasis original)

From the beginning of the genre of detective fiction, there is a tension between reasoning, which

Poe elsewhere called "ratiocination," and intuition, an apparently spontaneous understanding of

events. As amply demonstrated in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Murder of Marie

Roget," Poe's detective Dupin is hyper-rational,[7] laying out his evidence and chains of reasoning to often hyperbolic degrees; but the intuitive method would appear again in later detective stories. As Kirsten Garrison notes, "We can see … how Poe's work examines the rational mind at work *in contest* with its chaotic counterpart, a basic conflict that characterizes detective fiction; however, while the rational mind triumphs in traditional detective novels, the sides are not so clearly marked nor the winner so decisive in the hard-boiled tradition" (106). The classic and "Golden Age" detective story tends to lionize the genius detective's superior reasoning abilities, whether they appear in the form of Dupin's "ratiocination," Sherlock Holmes's deduction, or Hercule Poirot's "little grey cells."

This celebration of rationality and the language through which such rationality is expressed began to splinter in the early 20th-century American context that gave rise to hard-boiled detective fiction. Indeed, hard-boiled detective fiction's linguistic style has often been read as a popular counterpart to the sort of stylistic and epistemological fragmentation that characterizes the high modernist works of authors such as T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway.[8] Regarding the work of Dashiell Hammett, Ronald Thomas argues that "This early twentieth-century American rewriting of the detective novel may be read as an explicit modernist critique of the assumptions that gave rise to the literature of detection in the nineteenth century – confidence in bourgeois institutions of law and order, in the stability of individual identity, and in the scientific ideal of objective truth" (91). In the wake of the confusing, morally incomprehensible chaos of the first World War, the types of moral and

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[7] For the sake of space, I will pass over in silence the fundamentally irrational orangutan-based solution to the murder in "Rue Morgue."

[8] The fact that Faulkner collaborated on the screenplays for the *film noir* classics *Mildred Pierce* and *The Big Sleep* reminds us that high modernist authors themselves were sometimes drawn to the *noir* side of the street.

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epistemological certainties embodied by Dupin and Holmes came to seem dubious from the perspectives of many writers and readers.[9] In the physically and morally grimy world of Hammett's Continental Op or Chandler's Marlowe, the sort of clearly articulated rationality by which Holmes always saves the day just does not apply. As Kristen Garrison argues,

> the hard-boiled novel dramatizes the traps and false leads inherent to the so-called scientific method; the hard-boiled detective lives in a world characterized by relativism, where morality and truth become the fundamental mystery, and the literal murder an occasion for exploring them. The problem becomes not so much the identity of the killer but of a reasonable account of truth, so that the hard-boiled novel explores the harsh reality of pursuing truth without the guiding line of absolutes. (106)

The hard-boiled detective genre, and the *noir* tradition that develops from it, are on this account symptomatic of the same general cultural conditions as literary modernism. In the West in the early twentieth century, Garrison explains,

> Man's relationship to knowledge, both of himself and his world, was disrupted, and the resulting challenges to notions of absolute truth make these same questions relevant and prompt some new ones: not only do we wonder who can tell the truth, but we must take a step back, as it were, and ask, What is truth? Further, given the difficulties in recognizing it, what becomes of truth's pursuit? Of the pursuer? Who is willing to choose this seemingly futile career, and what is the nature of such an endeavor? (108)

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[9] One might read the "Golden Age" detective fiction of the 1920s onward, the type most famously practiced by Agatha Christie, as an already-nostalgic attempt to reclaim a type of confidence in Western civilization that was already on the wane.

Where the classical detective story constructs a world in which the rationality and intelligence of the detective lead almost inexorably to a correct understanding of the truth, the serving of justice, and the restoration of social equilibrium, the hard-boiled detective story is much more cynical about truth's chances. Dashiell Hammett, who had himself worked as a detective for the Pinkerton agency, remarked to an interviewer for *Smart Set*, "That the law-breaker is invariably soon or late apprehended is probably the least challenged of extant myths. And yet the files of every detective bureau bulge with the records of unsolved mysteries and uncaught criminals" ("From the Memoirs" 422). Hammett and his successors understood that access to true knowledge is hardly a given for detectives or for anyone else, and built that understanding into the fabric of their narratives.

Finally, we might put it this way: one of the core problems for *noir* is the difficulty of conceiving and articulating a true account, whether of oneself or of others. The second chapter of Horace McCoy's hard-boiled 1935 novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (preceded only by a one-page flashback in the first chapter) begins, "What could I say? … All those people knew I had killed her; the only other person who could have helped me at all was dead too," as the protagonist realizes that he will be unable to convey to anyone the full truth of his story (McCoy 5). Billy Wilder's 1944 film adaptation of *Double Indemnity* presents itself almost entirely as the verbal account of Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), speaking into a recording device as he tries to tell his boss about how he became involved in two murders and has been fatally shot himself. Many classic *noir* films are dominated in full or in large part by retroactive voiceover, as the protagonists try desperately to explain themselves, either to the viewer or to another character – consider, for example, *Detour* (1945), *Gilda* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947), *D.O.A.* (1949), and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); or, for more contemporary examples, *The Man Who Wasn't There*

(2001) or *Sin City* (2005). In each instance, we witness characters struggling to articulate to themselves and to others how they ended up in the dire circumstances in which they generally find themselves. *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Intuitionist*, in a meta-generic way, use *noir* themes and conventions to allow their protagonists to articulate an even more basic problem: who they are in the first place.

"The Language of Myself": Speaking through Culture in *Motherless Brooklyn*

It is in response to this decades-long history of cynicism and skepticism that Lethem and Whitehead create their unique contributions to the hard-boiled detective/*noir* tradition. Both Lethem and Whitehead have made a habit of filtering their philosophical, political, and historical concerns through the lens of genre. Lethem's first novel, *Gun with Occasional Music* (1994), is an explicit blending of the Chandlerian detective narrative[10] with Philip K. Dick-esque science fiction, while his later works have dealt with superheroes, aliens, and alternate realities. Whitehead, in a similar vein, has explored issues of race, consumerism, and history through comedic satire, zombie horror, and magical realism. When both authors turned to the hard-boiled/*noir* tradition in the late 1990s, they created works that juxtapose literal mystery plots with their characters' attempts to solve the peculiar mysteries of their own subjectivities.

In one interview, Lethem forthrightly acknowledges his debt to both the literary and cinematic heritage of *noir*.[11] Noting that the "strong" influences of "traditional *film noir*" on his work have more to do with the films' use of language than their visual style, Lethem claims that "the great *noirs* of the forties and fifties are full of talk – vibrant, hostile, punning, impossible

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[10] The cover of the 2003 Harvest edition of *Gun with Occasional Music* even uses the same photograph as does the cover of the 1992 Vintage Crime edition of Chandler's *Trouble Is My Business*.

[11] Indeed, Edward Norton's 2019 film adaptation of *Motherless Brooklyn* makes the text's *noir* connections all the more explicit through changing the story's setting from the late 1990s to the 1950s and incorporating a number of other classic *noir* tropes. However, given the fact that Norton's film changes essentially everything about the novel's plot, characters, and themes, I will not mention it again outside of this footnote.

language" and that "[n]oir is one of the great fountains of American language," citing as examples the films *The Big Sleep*, *To Have and Have Not*, and *Force of Evil*, as well as the novels of Hammett, Chandler, McCoy, and Kenneth Fearing (Jackson 34). Working downstream from this "fountain," Lethem finds a way to both re-invigorate the genre and to re-negotiate its traditional worldview through the Tourettic narrator of *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel Essrog. As James Peacock has noted in his critical study of Lethem's career,

> Lethem's engagement with genre is much *more* serious than some other contemporary 'postmodern' writers, notably Paul Auster, who are also known for subverting genres. Auster is similarly self-conscious about his employment of genre conventions, but ultimately sees little value in them at all. His starting point in a text such as *City of Glass* is the assumed redundancy of the detective genre and its disassociation from reality, whereas Lethem, for all his talk of 'bankrupt categories', does appreciate their value in the first instance, recognizing that they have more of a connection with the ways we structure reality than a writer like Auster might care to acknowledge. (2)

For Lethem and, indeed, for all of the authors I discuss in this project, genre is not simply a commercial strategy to be exploited or a set of clichés to be deconstructed and mocked, but an integral layer to the creation and reception of a literary work. As Matthew Luter notes, *Motherless Brooklyn* becomes "a Chabon-like example of purely joyful quasi-fan fiction" in which Lethem "revels in the possibilities and the limitations of genre fiction alike" (29). Genre shapes how readers understand a text, yes; but it can also shape how a text understands itself, particularly in relation to established literary history. It is within this conception of genre that *Motherless Brooklyn* engages with the hard-boiled/*noir* tradition.

Motherless Brooklyn, which is set approximately in the late 1990s in the New York City borough of its title, builds a Chandler-esque murder mystery plot around the life of one of the most unique narrators in contemporary American fiction. Lionel Essrog is an employee at a Brooklyn-based limousine service that secretly doubles as a detective agency. He is employed by Frank Minna, a charismatic small-time gangster who influenced Lionel, an orphan, in his earlier life, and whom Lionel looked up to as a surrogate brother-figure. Lionel has a severe case of Tourette's syndrome, a medical condition that causes him to frequently yell out random-seeming words and to move suddenly and unpredictably.[12] His verbal and physical tics have long since earned him the nickname "Free Human Freakshow" from Minna, who treats Lionel's condition as an endearing and entertaining eccentricity. As critic Jennifer Fleissner describes Minna's attitude, "Minna alone seems able to enjoy the way Lionel's freakishness momentarily exposes an underlying freakishness organizing the social whole" (391). When Minna is murdered under mysterious circumstances, Lionel undertakes a personal investigation, one that ultimately leads him into encounters with geriatric Italian mob bosses, a large Polish hit man, and a corrupt Zendo. All along the way, Lionel's Tourette's syndrome is a factor in his detective work, often providing him with a means of understanding the world around him but also frequently manifesting itself at comically inconvenient moments.

Lionel's frequent tics may startle and confuse the other characters he meets, but the reader encounters Lionel as a profoundly self-aware and reflective narrator. Early on in the novel, Lionel considers the way in which his Tourette's syndrome has affected the way he sees the world: "Tourette's teaches you what people will ignore and forget, teaches you to see the

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[12] I should make clear that I do not take Lionel to be a particularly realistic example of a Tourette's syndrome patient, nor do I think he is intended as such. Whether or not this depiction lines up with the actual symptoms of Tourette's syndrome is not important in the context of the novel; Lethem's depiction of Tourette's is meant to be understood in more metaphorical than literal terms.

reality-knitting mechanism people employ to tuck away the intolerable, the incongruous, the

disruptive – it teaches you this because you're the one lobbing the intolerable, incongruous, and

disruptive their way" (Lethem 43). He recounts being on the same bus as a man with a loud

belching tic, and paying attention to the way the other riders notice but then collectively resolve

to ignore the man. Witnessing this deliberate erasure of another person with compulsions

comparable to his own, Lionel reflects that "[c]onsensual reality is both fragile and elastic, and it

heals like the skin of a bubble. The belching man ruptured it so quickly and completely that I

could watch the wound instantly seal" and concludes that "[a] Touretter can also be The Invisible

Man" (Lethem 44). Lionel's implicit comparison of himself to H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*,[13]

to someone written out of the mental reality of those around him, suggests that he feels a

profound sense of social isolation and alienation, that he does not understand himself as fitting

into the broader society around him. While a sense of social alienation is common to essentially

all *noir* protagonists, few are as self-reflective about the reasons for their separation from others

as Lionel is.

Lionel's isolation, while partially attributed to his Tourette's syndrome, is also linked to

his status as an orphan. Indeed, the word "Motherless" in the novel's title alludes to Lionel's lack

of familial bonds; the title's application of the adjective to the rest of Brooklyn implies that, to

some extent, everyone in the city shares in Lionel's orphaned condition. Lionel's desperation to

connect manifests in his childhood creation of "Bailey," a purely imaginary figure towards

whom he directs many of the things he says during tics. "Bailey," Lionel tells us earlier in the

novel, is a "name embedded in my Tourette's brain," his "imaginary listener" who "had to bear

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[13] The capitalization of "The" in front of Invisible Man leads me to believe that the primary allusion is to H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* rather than Ralph Ellison's definite-article-less *Invisible Man*. However, the fact that Lionel is only socially invisible rather than literally invisible does make the allusion resonate with Ellison's version as well.

the brunt of a majority of my solitary swearing" (Lethem 10). The name Bailey recurs often

throughout the novel in many of Lionel's most baroque linguistic flourishes.[14] The concept of

Bailey becomes deeply linked with Lionel's sense of identity: later in the novel, when Gerard

Minna asks Lionel if he remembers the time when Frank had to leave New York for a period,

Lionel thinks to himself, "Did I recall! Suddenly Gerard threatened to solve the deepest puzzles

of my existence. I practically wanted to ask him, *So who's Bailey?*" (Lethem 235). At one point

late in the novel, Lionel lists the different mysteries he is trying to solve, with each question

appearing in a separate paragraph:

> What was the giant waiting for?
>
> What did Tony want to find in Minna's files?
>
> Why were his sandwiches in the car?
>
> Why had Julia flown to Boston?
>
> Who was Bailey anyway? (Lethem 246)

The implication that the nonexistent "Bailey" is one of the "deepest puzzles" of Lionel's life

suggests how thoroughly his Tourette's has shaped his worldview, while the inclusion of Bailey

in the list of mysteries to be explained suggests that this imaginary figure is equally as important

(or unimportant) as the other things Lionel seeks to understand. Lionel's eventual last words on

the subject of Bailey at the very end of the novel, as I argue below, provide both the most

obvious and the most profound answer to his question about who Bailey is.

Lionel's largely futile desperation to connect to other people is captured in one

particularly poignant anecdote: one day, Lionel looks up the three other "Essrogs" listed in the

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[14] Just to give some other examples of Bailey's (non)appearances: "Eat shit, Bailey!" (11), "*Pianoctamum Bailey!*"
(26), "*Stickmebailey!*" (78), "*Skullamum Bailey*" (151), "*Saint Vengeance Home for Bailey*" (301),
"Baranabaileyscrewjuliaminna" (303).

Brooklyn telephone book and calls them. Murray Essrog answers, and Lionel lies and gives his name first as "Baileyrog" and then as "Bailey" (Lethem 69). ["Baileyrog" seems to be a conflation of Bailey and of Lionel Essrog himself.] After Lionel hangs up on one Murray Essrog without saying anything further, he memorizes the three phone numbers and, although he never actually meets any of the other Essrogs, he occasionally calls them: "I made a ritual out of dialing their numbers and hanging up after a tic or two, or listening, just long enough to hear another Essrog breathe" (Lethem 69). Although so many of Lionel's relationships with other people are influenced by his unusual relationship to language, he chooses to leave language out of this particular special connection entirely. Lionel wishes to connect himself to his potential family members in the way that he constantly connects words and ideas to each other, but does not trust language to help him to do so.

Without a biological family to provide him with a sense of identity in his childhood, Lionel turns to various realms of culture in search of an understanding of himself. The young Lionel looks for "signs of my odd dawning self" in old books and TV shows (Lethem 37). The particulars of his inquiries are interesting: His reading includes "Theodore Dreiser, Kenneth Roberts, J.B. Priestley, and back issues of *Popular Mechanics*" (Lethem 37). All three of the authors he names were very influential and acclaimed in their own times in the first half of the 20th century, but have since been eclipsed by others of their contemporaries in popular memory and, to a lesser extent, in the academic canon. The TV shows Lionel watches, "those endless reruns of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* and *I Love Lucy* and *Gilligan* and *Brady Bunch* by which we nerdish unathletic Boys pounded our way through countless afternoons," have generally shared a similar trajectory from enjoying massive popularity in their own time to later being remembered as quaint products of an earlier era (Lethem 37). Despite all the time he

devotes to such reading and watching, Lionel tells us that these efforts failed and he "couldn't find the language of myself" in the cultural products he consumed (Lethem 37). He admits that he came closer to self-discovery through identification with more exaggerated and absurd figures – specifically, the Looney Tunes character Daffy Duck and Art Carney's character Ed Norton on *The Honeymooners*. As Lionel puts it, "Daffy Duck especially gave me something, if I could bear to imagine growing up a dynamited, beak-shattered duck. Art Carney on *The Honeymooners* gave me something too, something in the way he jerked his neck, when we were allowed to stay up late enough to see him" (Lethem 37). It is significant that Lionel was unable to find an accurate reflection of himself in the realism or naturalism of authors like Dreiser or the goofy but ultimately normal protagonists of midcentury sitcoms; it is only the (sometimes literally) cartoonish[15] that seems to explain young Lionel to himself. Daffy Duck, with his severe lisp and tendency to shout, provides the verbally-challenged Lionel with a figure he can instinctively understand.

Later on in the novel, Lethem makes clearer the link between the culture Lionel is steeped in and the verbal dimension of his Tourette's. After recounting "The Kissing Game," which thinly masked a kissing tic in his childhood, Lionel steps back from his narration to note that "[m]eanwhile, beneath that frozen shell a sea of language was reaching full boil" (Lethem 46). The particular examples Lionel uses to illustrate his burgeoning verbal tendencies are telling in their mixture of cultural references:

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[15] It is worth noting here that Lethem published a short story collection titled *Men and Cartoons* five years after *Motherless Brooklyn*. Two of the stories in *Men and Cartoons* feature a goat-themed superhero and a giant talking crab respectively, while another metaphorically likens two of its characters to the Marvel superheroes The Vision and Scarlet Witch. The blurring of the line between the realistic and the cartoonish is a recurring concern across Lethem's oeuvre.

It became harder and harder not to notice that when a television pitchman said *to last the rest of a lifetime* my brain went *to rest the lust of a loaftomb*, that when I heard "Alfred Hitchcock," I silently replied "Altered Houseclock" or "Ilford Hotchkiss," that when I sat reading Booth Tarkington in the library now my throat and jaw worked behind my clenched lips, desperately fitting the syllables of the prose to the rhythms of "Rapper's Delight" (which was then playing every fifteen or twenty minutes out on the yard), that an invisible companion named Billy or Bailey was begging for insults I found it harder and harder to withhold. (Lethem 46)

The wide range of references here is not incidental to Lionel's issues. The first phrase that he reimagines, "to last the rest of a lifetime," is an advertising cliché, used in commercials to guarantee the ostensible dependability of a product (or, in jewelry commercials, the longevity of the romantic love that purchase of a particular diamond ring will supposedly ensure). Commercials, particularly in the heyday of broadcast television that Lionel would have grown up in, occupy a strange cultural niche: they are a genre that no one consciously seeks out, but that everyone who watches TV is incessantly inundated with. Thus, Lionel's nonsensical jumbling of the syllables and changing of the vowel sounds in the phrase registers a small reaction to, if not a rebellion against, a widespread cultural phenomenon that is imposed on many if not most Americans on a regular basis. Lionel's next reference point, Alfred Hitchcock, whose name Lionel likely heard through re-runs of the 1950s/60s TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, embodies both high and low registers as a cultural icon. Hitchcock is widely seen as one of the greatest film directors of all time, and yet worked almost exclusively in the modes of the thriller and the horror film, genres often associated with the lowbrow until recent decades. One need

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only think of *Psycho*, which Hitchcock made on a low budget and thought of as something of an exploitation film, but which is one of the most revered and intensely studied films ever made, in order to understand the mingling of cultural influences that Hitchcock represents. Lionel's last reference – adapting the prose of Booth Tarkington to the rhythm of "Rapper's Delight" – is the strangest, but also most clearly embodies the way in which culture imprints itself on Lionel. Tarkington, the author of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, is, like the other writers Lionel mentioned earlier, an early 20th-century novelist who was highly esteemed in his own lifetime but whose renown has since steadily declined. Although Tarkington still has some traction[16] with teachers of literature, his work would have been seen as comparatively minor even in the late 1970s of Lionel's childhood. The juxtaposition of Tarkington's old-fashioned (and very white) fiction with the African American Sugarhill Gang's 1979 hit song, which helped bring hip hop to the American cultural mainstream, is surprising, even absurd. It is hard to imagine two artists that could have less in common than Tarkington and the Sugarhill Gang, yet Lionel's condition compels him to mash them together.

The net effect of all these references is to illustrate the way in which Lionel's subjectivity is shaped by the various forms of popular culture around him. In the absence of a biological or adoptive family, Lionel has effectively been raised by television, film, literature, and music – by all the major forms of mass media that dominate post-World-War-II American culture. With no authoritative guidance through this oft-confusing world and no system for organizing or framing the things he consumes, Lionel's brain is colonized by a wild array of cultural products vying for his attention. In short, Lionel is a nearly pure product of a postmodern media environment. His scrambled, hyperactive language reflects the equally chaotic mediascape that has installed itself

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[16] I myself was assigned to read *The Magnificent Ambersons* in high school in the 2003-4 school year.

in his brain and, by extension, the brains of everyone raised with the ubiquity of TV, movies, radio, and books in America in the second half of the 20th century.

Among the many media influences that have shaped Lionel, *film noir* and the hard-boiled crime novel are attributed especial importance. After Minna's murder, without his friend and mentor to look up to, Lionel instead begins to emulate the hard-boiled detective heroes he has seen and read about so many times before. Describing the morning after the murder, Lionel tells us that "I'd woken into the realization that I was Minna's successor and avenger, that the city shone with clues" and, in a sentence that appears as its own paragraph, says, "It seemed possible I was a detective on a case" (Lethem 132). Although the novel's generic orientation towards the hard-boiled detective narrative has been fairly obvious from the beginning, it is in this moment of the plot that Lionel first becomes self-aware about his role as a hard-boiled protagonist. Other characters notice that Lionel has inhabited the role of detective: his fellow former Minna Man Tony tells Lionel, "'You're the jerk I've gotta deal with. You're Sam Spade,'" a characterization to which Lionel implicitly agrees when he quotes Spade almost verbatim by responding, "'When someone kills your partner you're supposed to do something about it'" (Lethem 183).[17] When Tony tells him, "'The problem with you … is you don't know anything about how the world really works. Everything you know comes from Frank Minna or a book. I don't know which is worse,'" Lionel replies, "'Gangster movies…I watched a lot of gangster movies, like you. Everything we both know comes from Frank Minna or gangster movies'" (Lethem 184).[18] This

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[17] Cf. "When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it" (Hammett, *Maltese* 213); the line is also reproduced exactly in the 1941 film version.

[18] Furthermore, it is worth noting that much of what Frank Minna himself knew also came from hard-boiled/*noir* sources. Late in the novel, when Lionel is recounting decades-old history between Frank and Gerard Minna, Frank's older brother who is revealed to have been behind Frank's murder, Lionel tells us about the brothers' respective reading habits: "The older brother read Krishnamurti and Watts and Trungpa, while the younger read Spillane and Chandler and Ross Macdonald, often aloud to the girl, and it was in the MacDonald especially that the girl heard something that taught her about a part of herself not covered by Nantucket or Zen or the bit she'd learned in college"

conflation of Frank Minna and gangster movies as the source of all knowledge for Lionel and his

compatriots suggests that the two are inextricably linked in Lionel's head. When Frank is lost,

Lionel turns to the only other thing he knows – *noir* – in order to try to find out why. Later, when

Lionel is arguing with Tony, he confides in the reader, "Tony still brought out the romantic in

me. We'd be two Bogarts to the end" (248), referring to the actor Humphrey Bogart's portrayals

of the two most iconic of all hard-boiled detectives, Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, in the *noir*

films *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. Huston) and *The Big Sleep* (1946, dir. Hawks). Even some

of Lionel's tics reveal his immersion in *noir* fiction: at one point, while telling a joke to Frank's

older brother (and, we eventually learn, the man behind Frank's murder) Gerard, Lionel shouts a

series of apparently nonsensical words starting with the letter "F": "'*Flip-a-thon! Fuck-a-door!*

Flipweed! Fujisaki! Flitcraft!'" (Lethem 230). Although the words might seem mostly random,

the reader versed in hard-boiled crime fiction will recognize the name "Flitcraft" as a reference

to a parable-like interlude about fate, randomness, and repetition in Dashiell Hammett's *The

Maltese Falcon*.[19] Lionel may have had a wide range of media images shaping his subjectivity

from childhood on, but in the situation Minna's murder thrusts him into, the *noir* tradition

becomes his main reference point for how to think and act.

(Lethem 288). While Gerard's reading apparently covered Eastern Zen philosophers, Frank's favorite authors –
Spillane, Chandler, and Macdonald – are all hard-boiled crime novelists.

[19] A note on the Flitcraft parable: In the midst of the action of *The Maltese Falcon*, detective Sam Spade pauses to
tell his client/would-be *femme fatale* Brigid O'Shaughnessy about a case he once investigated, in which a
respectable suburban businessman and family man named Flitcraft suddenly disappeared from his life in Tacoma,
only to be discovered years later in Spokane living a very similar life to the one he had abandoned. Spade learns that
Flitcraft disappeared after narrowly avoiding being killed by a falling beam from a building under construction, an
incident that to Flitcraft "'felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works'" (Hammett 63).
The irony that he had walked out on his life due to a random near-accident, only to re-establish a very similar life,
eludes Flitcraft: "'I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out
of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them
fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling'" (Hammett 64). The joke-like structure of the Flitcraft parable
relates not only to the joke Lionel is telling Gerard at this moment in the narrative, but to *Motherless Brooklyn*'s
larger themes of chaos and order.

Of course, the novel's investment in *noir* does not only manifest in the extent to which Lionel has internalized *noir* fiction and film as a reader and viewer; Lionel also lives in a *noir* universe himself. In one memory of Lionel's early life with Minna, Minna suggests that he likely knows all of the orphan boys' long-lost mothers: "'We're not talking the international jet set here – bunch of teen mothers, probably live in a five-mile radius, need to know the goddamn truth'" (Lethem 67). Lionel's reflection on this revelation suggests that, psychologically, he has always been at the center of a *noir* mystery plot: "So it was, with this casual jaunt against Tony's boasts, that Minna appeared to announce what we already half suspected – that it was not only his life that was laced with structures of meaning but our own, that these master plots were transparent to him and that he held the power to reveal them, that he did know our parents and at any moment might present them to us" (Lethem 67). The idea of hidden "structures of meaning" and "master plots" that lay omnipresent but invisible around ordinary people is common to *noir*'s construction of its literary and cinematic worlds. One need only think, for example, of the impossibly convoluted explanation for the protagonist's poisoning at the end of Rudolph Maté's 1949 film *D.O.A.* – a resolution that makes little logical sense but fits perfectly the paranoid emotional tenor of *noir* – to understand Lionel's realization here.[20] Whereas the detectives of the classical tradition – Holmes, Poirot, etc. – take seemingly inexplicable events and untangle them into a coherent narrative, thereby restoring the (only temporarily) disrupted sense of social order, characters in *noir* are always already enmeshed in "structures of meaning" that they cannot see or understand. It is impossible for a *noir* character to "repair" their world in the godlike way a Hercule Poirot does, because they never had access to all the layers – "wheels within wheels," as

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[20] The famously complicated plot machinations of Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, *Out of the Past* (1947, dir. Tourneur), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948, dir. Welles), *Touch of Evil* (1958, dir. Welles), virtually any Pynchon novel, or even *The Big Lebowski* (1998, dir. Coens) help illustrate the same principle.

Minna puts it several times in the novel (74) – to begin with. Thus, even as a child, before the intrusion of murder or detective work or the novels of Hammett and Chandler into his world, Lionel already experienced life through a *noir* lens.

In his relationship to the orphans as they grow up, Minna deliberately keeps Lionel and the others in the dark with regards to the world around them. Their status as orphans is linked to their desire to connect things: "By implication we orphans were idiots of connectivity, overly impressed by any trace of the familial in the world. We should doubt ourselves any time we imagined a network in operation. We should leave that stuff to Minna" (Lethem 74). Not wanting the orphans to question his authority, Minna refuses to explain the workings of the world to them, arrogating that power to himself exclusively: "Just as he knew the identity of our parents but would never reveal it to us, only Frank Minna was authorized to speculate on the secret systems that ran Court Street or the world. If we dared chime in, we'd surely only discovered more *wheels within wheels*. Business as usual. The regular fucking world – get used to it" (Lethem 74, emphasis original). By simultaneously not helping Lionel and the other orphans to understand their environment and pretending such a lack of understanding is the normal status quo that must be accepted, Frank permanently relegates them to a *noir* mental universe, where everyone is fundamentally isolated, and no one can possibly see the big picture.

As Lionel grows up, he learns to project his own Tourette's syndrome onto the world around him in general, and on to New York City in particular.[21] As one scholar puts it, "Lionel is conscious of how the urban environment of New York, what he refers to as the 'Tourettic city,' reifies his tourettic brain" (Eagle 141). Describing the compulsive lottery-ticket buyers he regularly sees at a newspaper shop, Lionel parenthetically notes that "New York is a Tourettic

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[21] In a typically self-aware moment, Lionel claims that he has "meta-Tourette's," an uncontrollable tic to relate everything he thinks about or encounters to his Tourette's syndrome (Lethem 192).

city, and this great communal scratching and counting and tearing is a definite symptom" (Lethem 113). At one point he claims that "[t]here is nothing Tourettic about the New York City subways," but later corrects himself: "On second thought, there *is* a vaguely Tourettic aspect to the New York City subway, especially late at night" (Lethem 192, 237, emphasis original). To Lionel, the "Tourettic" elements of the subway include "that dance of attention, of stray gazes in which every rider must engage"; the problem of having to think about what you can and cannot touch and in what order; and the fact that "the tunnel walls are layered, like those of my brain, with expulsive and incoherent language" in the form of graffiti and advertisements (Lethem 237). While Lionel himself may explain away his tendency to link his Tourette's to things outside himself as a mere symptom of his "meta-Tourette's," I argue that the novel does want us to think about the implications of seeing New York as a "Tourettic" city. Think of Times Square, with its profusion of extremely bright lights, advertisements, and businesses jostling for the attention and money of the thousands upon thousands of people who pass through its space every day. To stand in Times Square is to stand at the epicenter of the postmodern, late capitalist system famously described by Fredric Jameson. Unless one actively guards against it by filtering one's attention as much as possible, Times Square renders the brains of everyone in it as Tourettic as Lionel's, jumping frantically from one image or word to the next with no overarching system of organization.

The stakes of New York City being "Tourettic" for Lionel become clear when, for the first time in the novel, he leaves the city behind. In his pursuit of the tall Polish hit man who killed Minna, Lionel ends up on the coast of Maine, far away from the environment that has shaped him for his whole life. In the natural surroundings of rural Maine, Lionel achieves a new

self-awareness about the relationship between himself and the world he grew up in. In a remarkable passage, Lionel describes this jarring change:

> Waves, sky, trees, Essrog – I was off the page now, away from the grammar of skyscrapers and pavement. I experienced it precisely as a loss of language, a great sucking-away of the word-laden walls that I needed around me, that I touched everywhere, leaned on for support, cribbed from when I ticked aloud. Those walls of language had always been in place, I understood now, audible to me until the sky in Maine deafened them with a shout of silence. I staggered, put one hand on the rocks to steady myself. I needed to reply in some new tongue, to find a way to assert a self that had become tenuous, shrunk to a shred of Brooklyn stumbling on the coastal void: Orphan meets ocean. Jerk evaporates in salt mist. (Lethem 264)

The "loss of language" Lionel experiences away from the city implies a causal relationship between his having grown up in the crowded and densely structured environment of New York ("the grammar of skyscrapers and pavement") and his Tourette's syndrome (another example of why the novel's treatment of Tourette's is much more metaphorical than literal). It is not simply the case that Lionel happens to have Tourette's because of any inherent abnormality in his brain; rather, New York City (and the profusion of cultural materials Lionel absorbed growing up) has continuously stuffed his mind with words, until he overflows, and the words spill out seemingly at random. In the absence of his usual source of incessant language input (he "cribbed from" the city's walls when he "ticked aloud," suggesting that the walls might indeed be what prompt him to tic in the first place), Lionel finds himself adrift and seemingly non-existent – he literally cannot stand up straight without the structures the city's language provides him, and his "self" – not merely his sense of self – had become "tenuous." Rather than simply accept the possibility

that there might be anything outside of language, Lionel still insists on framing this experience in terms of language – Maine's lack of sound is to him "a shout of silence," to which Lionel feels compelled "to reply in some new tongue." Lionel does not recognize that perhaps no language is necessary here; instead, his mind automatically goes to the assumption that *a different* language is what he needs. Lionel's trip to Maine brings the nature of his relationship to words into sharp relief, even as it demonstrates his inability to conceive of any other way of experiencing the world.

Some of *Motherless Brooklyn*'s most explicitly meta-generic moments provide important clues to untangling the novel's complicated themes. One such moment comes about a third of the way through the novel, when Lionel hears that a minor character named Ullman, who has never actually appeared in the novel's narrative directly, has been murdered. After learning about Ullman's demise, Lionel asks the reader, "Have you ever felt, in the course of reading a detective novel, a guilty thrill of relief at having a character murdered before he can step onto the page and burden you with his actual existence?" (Lethem 119). Lionel then reflects, in a way that echoes a common complaint about *noir* narratives, "Detective stories always have too many characters anyway. And characters mentioned early on but never sighted, just lingering offstage, take on an awful portentous quality. Better to have them gone" (Lethem 119). This moment does not merely allow Lethem to playfully subvert a minor trope; Lionel's observation about the proliferation of minor characters in hard-boiled detective fiction allows him his first glimpse at an element of the world that cannot be made to fit into either his mystery-plot investigation or his linguistic construction of everything around him. The importance of the seemingly unimportant Ullman is made clearer when he unexpectedly recurs at the novel's very end.

Near the end of *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel reflects on both his Tourette's syndrome and the hard-boiled/*noir* detective tradition as a whole, in another meta-generic moment. Lionel (and through him, Lethem) argues that "in detective stories things are always *always*, the detective casting his exhausted, caustic gaze over the corrupted permanence of everything and thrilling you with his sweetly savage generalizations" (Lethem 307, emphasis in original). This observation can indeed be borne out by reference to many of Chandler's Marlowe novels, as well as to other *noir* novels in general.[22] Lionel, in his compulsive but insightful way, explicitly links this tendency of the hard-boiled detective to his own Tourette's: "Assertions and generalizations are, of course, a version of Tourette's. A way of touching the world, handling it, covering it with confirming language" (Lethem 307). This point helps to explain the enduring appeal of *noir* across the decades, an appeal that might seem strange to readers and filmgoers who normally look to narrative for happy endings and inspiration. Why do people embrace the repeated re-enactments of alienation, guilt, and despair seen across the *noir* tradition? Because, *Motherless Brooklyn* suggests, there is a dark pleasure in having the awfulness of the world articulately confirmed for those who already see the world as an awful place. The "exhausted, caustic gaze" of the hard-boiled detective mirrors the jaded reader's own gaze, and the "sweetly savage generalizations" (307) put into words what the reader already inchoately felt.[23]

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[22] To further illustrate Lionel's point, consider these words uttered by Takeshi Kovacs, the hard-boiled detective protagonist of Richard K. Morgan's 2002 *noir*/cyberpunk novel *Altered Carbon*, in that novel's denouement: "'Kristin, nothing ever *does* change. … You'll always have people like Kawahara and the Bancrofts to push their buttons and cash in on the program. People like you to make sure the game runs smoothly and the rules don't get broken too often. And when the Meths want to break the rules themselves, they'll send people like Trepp and me to do it. That's the truth, Kristin. It's been the truth since I was born a hundred and fifty years ago, and from what I read in the history books, it's never been any different. Better get used to it' " (Morgan 374). Kovacs's world-weary cynicism here neatly illustrates an un-ironic version of the "exhausted, caustic gaze" Lionel describes.

[23] For a highly visible contemporary example of this phenomenon, look no further than the way Matthew McConaughey's career as an actor was to a large degree resuscitated by his role as Rust Cohle on Nic Pizzolatto's *noir* HBO series *True Detective*. McConaughey showed remarkable depth and range in this role, but the scenes that were most popular were those interview-room monologues in which his character expounded on the fundamental

Unlike most works in the classic *noir* tradition, however, *Motherless Brooklyn* is unwilling to end with a reaffirmation of the pessimism and fatalism so common in previous texts. As the novel concludes, Lionel is not doomed to the dark fate of so many *noir* protagonists; nor does he simply accept the customary return to loneliness and alienation that tends to mark the endings of Chandler's novels. Rather, Lionel accepts the inevitability that not everything in the world can be connected to each other or fit into his linguistic universe, finding a type of peace that was unavailable to him earlier in the novel. As I discussed earlier, Lionel links *noir* itself with Frank; once he ultimately solves the mystery of Frank's murder, he is able to lay both Frank and the genre to rest. A key difference between Chandler's Marlowe and Lionel is that Lionel only has to become a hard-boiled detective to solve the murder of his surrogate father; once he has done so, he can cast the role aside. Moreover, Lionel learns that being hard-boiled is not all it is cracked up to be: during his final conversation with Julia, the woman who had been romantically involved with both Frank and his brother Gerard, Lionel realizes that "Julia had always been the hardest-boiled of us all" and that the hard-boiled demeanor is ultimately a defense mechanism: "She was the hardest-boiled because she was the unhappiest. She was maybe the unhappiest person I'd ever met" (Lethem 303). When Lionel realizes he can never be (and does not want to be) as hard-boiled as she is, he no longer needs to adopt the Marlowe-esque persona.

In the first paragraph of the novel's final chapter, Lionel accepts that the *noir* mystery of which he has been a part has come to its conclusion and that he no longer needs to live by its standards. He likens the entire mystery plot of the novel to a song: "This was the finishing of something between two brothers … something playing out, a dark, wobbly melody. The notes of

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darkness of the universe. Even those viewers who would not ultimately agree with Rust's bone-deep pessimism (including McConaughey himself) generally found him compelling.

the melody had been other people, boys-turned-Minna Men, mobsters, monks, doormen. And women, one woman especially. We'd all been notes in the melody, but the point of the song was the brothers, and the payoff, the last note struck … Let it finish in silence" (Lethem 304). He recognizes that, ultimately, he has been a supporting player in Minna's *noir* story but that that story is now complete. Having played his hard-boiled detective part in Minna's narrative, Lionel can now move on to his own song, his own story.

Recalling his earlier meta-generic comment about the minor character Ullman being rubbed out before he could even appear in the story, Lionel brings Ullman up again in the final paragraph of the novel:

> That left who? Only Ullman. I know he haunts this story, but he never came into view, did he? The world (my brain) is too full of dull mean, dead men, Ullmen. Some ghosts never even get into your house they are so busy howling at the windows. … I can't feel guilty about every last body. Ullman? Never met the guy. Just like Bailey. They were just guys I never happened to meet. To the both of them and to you I say: Put an egg in your shoe, and beat it. Make like a tree, and leave. Tell your story walking. (Lethem 311)

The abrupt way Lionel mentions Ullman here at the end of the novel, when the reader could easily be forgiven for never having expected to hear about the character again, suggests that there is a real thematic importance to his absence. (The reference to ghosts "howling at the windows" recalls one of the Zen lessons Lionel interrupted earlier: "'Those who study gaki Zen chase after enlightenment like spirits who crave food or vengeance with a hunger that can never be satisfied. These ghosts never even enter the house of Zen they are so busy howling at the windows!' " [Lethem 200].) Throughout the narrative, Lionel frequently (indeed compulsively) makes a point

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out of his need to connect things, as manifested by his Tourette's syndrome. His need to "cover" the world "in confirming language" metaphorizes the hard-boiled detective's twin tendencies to both solve mysteries and to offer gloomy pronouncements about the hopeless corruption of everything. Admitting that Ullman simply did not enter Lionel's world and thus cannot be connected to everything else in his life is a way of admitting the futility of the *noir* desire to describe the entire world in totalizing terms. Moreover, Lionel goes a step further by linking Ullman (the sound of whose name suggests "All men" as well as "null men" or "no men") to Bailey, the imaginary target of many of Lionel's tic-utterances since childhood. This connection suggests that Lionel is now willing to accept how many of his attempts to connect everything have hinged on nothing. As I pointed out above, Lionel seems to believe that "knowing" who Bailey "is" will give him the answers he needs to live peacefully. So it is surprising that Lionel ultimately concludes that Bailey is essentially no one, just a guy "I never happened to meet." The passage suggest that Lionel is being freed from his compulsive need to connect everything on a linguistic level, even as it rehearses old jokes and puns about "putting an egg in your shoe and beating it" and "making like a tree and leaving." His final words in the novel, "Tell your story walking," are an echo of an old catchphrase of Minna's, but it is the last word that should really capture our attention: "walking." Lionel is not abandoning language here at the end, but he is realizing the futility of language divorced from action, from existence in the world, from "walking." In coming to this epiphany about the way he can relate to the world around him, Lionel is able to escape the linguistic prison he has been trapped in for so long and discover a type of freedom unavailable to so many of his hard-boiled/*noir* predecessors. Lionel is realizing that he can articulate a version of himself that does not have to be obsessively connected to every single other thing in the world. He can be an independent agent in the world, not just someone

who observes and compulsively forces patterns onto the things around him. By shedding his need to fit "the language of himself" into an imagined structure of meaning, Lionel gains the ability to tell his own story in his own language.

"Depends on How Your Brain Works": Thinking the Self in *The Intuitionist*

Just as *Motherless Brooklyn* uses the occasion of a literal *noir* murder mystery plot in order to force its protagonist to reconcile with the way his mind has been shaped by his environment, Colson Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist* also stages a *noir* mystery in order to work through its protagonist's way of thinking. Although, as noted in my discussion of Poe above, the activity of thought itself has provided the plot engine of detective fiction from its earliest days, *The Intuitionist* is unique in the way it contextualizes and thematizes its central character's habits of thought. Ultimately, by allowing its protagonist to realize the true nature of the connection between her own intellectual practice and the world around her, *The Intuitionist* suggests the possibility of a hopeful future for thought's role in the world. One critic describes *The Intuitionist* as "a complex, postmodernist take on detective fiction, one that challenges readers to believe in a metaphysics of elevators and solve the crime of a sabotaged elevator in the city's newest municipal building" (Knight 30 – 31); while I certainly agree that *The Intuitionist* is incredibly complex, I argue it differs in significant ways from postmodernist versions of detective fiction such as Paul Auster's *City of Glass* or Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. In the postmodernist version of detective fiction, the quest for solutions or answers is revealed to have been doomed from the start, as Auster's Daniel Quinn eventually goes mad and Pynchon's Oedipa Maas waits for a resolution that never comes. At one point late in *The Intuitionist*, Lila Mae is described as having been "a practicing solipsist since before she could walk," but the events of the plot do "irreparable damage to her condition" (Whitehead 235). While Lila Mae

starts the narrative in a similar philosophical and psychological position to her postmodern antecedents, she differs crucially from them in that she is eventually able to break out of her own head by finally embracing what it means for her to live as a black woman among other black people in the United States. Whitehead, an African American author, consistently deals with subjects and themes specific to African American life across his oeuvre. While much of the social and political dimension of Whitehead's novels links his work to a mainstream tradition of African American writers like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, he also consistently finds unusual metaphors and innovative approaches to genre that mark his work as distinctly post-postmodern. By the end of the novel, Lila Mae has come to understand the significance of her connections to other black people and is thus ready to continue her quest for knowledge beyond the final pages of the narrative. In such a way does the contemporary literary moment depart from the postmodern: while the contemporary author acknowledges all the layers of difficulty and complexity that postmodernism (and, in its way, *noir*) had worked to make us aware of, s/he nevertheless holds out the possibility of real solutions.

Before turning to *The Intuitionist* in depth, it is worth briefly noting that Whitehead in general is an author acutely aware of his own playful relationship to genres, categories, and traditions. *The Intuitionist* is his version of the hard-boiled/*noir* tradition; his *Zone One* is a highly allegorical and relatively plot-free approach to the (for a few years) wildly popular trend of zombie films and novels; *The Underground Railroad* is an innovative historical/magical realist novel. Derek C. Maus describes Whitehead's generic practice thus: "his relationship to literary categories (that is, genres and subgenres) is quite strong and explicit throughout his work … Whitehead engages in an intentional flirtation with genres and their conventions, one that inherently involves first suggesting and then frustrating the easy interpretations they seem to

offer to both writers and readers" (1). While Whitehead's attitudes towards genres might seem slightly cooler and more reserved than those of contemporaries such as Lethem or Chabon, he still clearly fits well into the overall post-postmodern trend of seriously playful (and playfully serious) genre experimentation and rehabilitation.

The Intuitionist, which was Whitehead's first published novel, is set in a time that seems very much like the late 1950s or early 1960s and in a place that seems very much like New York City (both time and place are left deliberately vague, however). The plot centers on Lila Mae Watson, who we quickly learn is the first black female elevator inspector in the country. In the novel's reality, the business of elevator inspection constitutes a much more dramatic and baroque subculture than it does in reality, often to comedic effect. The reader soon learns that there are two competing schools of elevator inspection: the Empiricists, who carefully look at each and every part of an elevator to determine if it is in need of repair (and who are repeatedly linked to a white racial perspective); and the Intuitionists, who holistically "sense" whether an elevator is in good shape or not (and who are regarded with racially-tinged distrust by the Empiricists). A series of events that begins with the mysterious crash of a new elevator shortly after it is inspected by Lila Mae – a devoted Intuitionist – leads Lila Mae into both of the classic scenarios of the *noir* protagonist: she is simultaneously trying to solve a mystery, and on the run because of others' suspicion about her own possible role in said mystery. As Ramon Saldívar describes it, Lila Mae "becomes entangled in a *noir* parable and fantasy of intrigue, romance, and disillusionment that leads to a secret that will alter the course of history in the novel" (9). As the novel progresses, Lila Mae discovers and solves a secondary mystery about the racial identity of James Fulton, the legendary founder of Intuitionism, whose books profoundly influenced her worldview as an elevator inspector. There is little ambiguity about the novel's engagement with

genre tropes of various sorts; as one critic puts it, "*The Intuitionist* wears its identity as detective fiction, or affectionate parody thereof, on its sleeve" (Tucker 152). In addition to the *noir* plot scenarios Lila Mae finds herself in, the novel also includes such traditional *noir* standbys as criminally corrupt politicians, their dull-witted enforcers, a large and impersonal city, and a hard-driving journalist.[24]

Just as *Motherless Brooklyn* so obsessively focused on the way Lionel's subjectivity expressed itself through language, *The Intuitionist* also devotes much of its thematic exploration to the ways in which Lila Mae's mind interacts with the world around her and makes meaning out of her experience. The opening scene, in which Lila Mae accepts bribe money meant to convince her to not inspect an elevator but then proceeds to inspect it anyway, establishes the importance of Lila Mae's particular way of consciously experiencing her world. As an Intuitionist, Lila Mae does not visually inspect all the parts of the elevator; rather, she rides in it, closes her eyes, and allows abstract figures to form in her mind's eye to represent the elevator's state of health. As the narrator describes this process, "You don't pick the shapes and their behavior. Everyone has their own set of genies. Depends on how your brain works. Lila Mae has always had a thing for geometric forms" (Whitehead 7). The notion that Intuitionists do not choose their own shapes suggests that, much like Lionel Essrog's, Lila Mae's consciousness is largely shaped by external forces. Just as Lionel cannot control the often abstract, seemingly nonsensical syllables his brain makes come out of his mouth, Lila Mae cannot control the images that Intuitionism puts into her head. Still, that Lila Mae's Intuitionist visions take the shape of "geometric forms" suggests something about the way she sees the world – in abstract, mathematical, impersonal terms. The fact of Lila Mae's accurate yet blinkered perspective early

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[24] The journalist being a character named Ben Urich who, in a curious case of intertextuality, is drawn straight from the pages of Marvel Comics' superhero series *Daredevil*.

in the novel is encapsulated in a seeming paradox from the narrator after she correctly diagnoses

a problem with the elevator's overspeed governor: "She is right about the overspeed governor.

She is never wrong. She doesn't know yet" (Whitehead 9). How can Lila Mae never be wrong,

and yet "not know"? What is it that she does not know? The assertion that "She doesn't know

yet" is repeated a few pages later (Whitehead 15), but still with no answer to the question it

implicitly poses. The question of just what it is that Lila Mae does not know, and how she might

learn it, is the novel's most pressing concern.

Indeed, the motif of knowing and not knowing recurs many times throughout the novel,

in various contexts. A passage from Intuitionism founder James Fulton's first book, presented as

an aside with no other narrative context, begins by asserting, "We do not know what is next"

(Whitehead 37). In a flashback to an oral exam from Lila Mae's elevator inspection school, after

Lila Mae impressively rattles off the names and definitions of sixteen different types of

elevators, showcasing her encyclopedic knowledge of the subject, her examiner asks her how

many "colored elevator inspectors there are in this country" and "how many are employed as

such"; she knows the answer to the first question is "twelve," but can only guess that the answer

to the second is "less than twelve" (Whitehead 53). The examiner smugly replies "So you don't

know everything," implying that both 1) for all her hard-won expertise, Lila Mae may still be

doomed to unemployment due to the color of her skin, and 2) she is too naïve about her society

to appreciate that possibility (Whitehead 53). During one conversation which repeatedly returns

to the topic of whether or not it is about to rain, the narrator, channeling Lila Mae's thoughts,

reflects, "This slow debate about the rain: it's not about rain at all, but the fragility of what we

know. We're all just guessing" (Whitehead 64). Questions about knowledge and its acquisition

recur throughout the novel, putting the archetypal *noir* hero's search for knowledge in a more abstract, universal context.

The novel establishes the link between the elevator inspectors' work and their psychologies as being both crucially important and fundamentally mysterious. Describing the ways in which the inspectors enjoy the repetitive and routinized travel associated with elevator inspection, the narrator informs us,

> The intrinsic circuitousness of inspecting appeases certain dustier quarters of her and her colleagues' mentalities, the very neighborhoods, it turns out, where the key and foundational character deficits reside. Nobody's quite up to investigating those localities, or prepared to acknowledge them or remark upon them anyway; to do so would lead to instructive, yes, but no doubt devastating revelations about their jobs, about themselves. (Whitehead 22)

It is remarkable that, in a novel all about knowledge filled with characters who seek to learn about and understand the world around them in various ways, the one thing these inspector characters do not want to know about is themselves. The "dustier quarters" of their minds are the only place off-limits to inspection. The point that this tendency is shared by both Lila Mae and her colleagues suggests it transcends the Empiricist/Intuitionist divide and represents something more fundamental about elevator inspectors or, indeed, about humans. Part of the mystery Lila Mae must solve in the novel is the mystery of herself; like Lionel Essrog, she will be prompted by her involvement in a *noir* mystery to find new ways to articulate herself and therefore to understand herself. Although her Intuitionism is surprisingly, almost supernaturally accurate when it comes to elevators, she still needs to learn how to understand herself – "She is never wrong. She doesn't know yet" (Whitehead 9).

One flashback fairly late in the novel draws a connection between Lila Mae's work-inspired epistemology and her decidedly incomplete self-knowledge. A self-contained episode about Lila Mae's romantic encounter with a beauty-product salesman named Freeport during "her first week on the job" suggests that Lila Mae starts her career working to escape Empiricist influences (Whitehead 171). Freeport, a charming man whom Lila Mae meets on the street and goes on a date with, sells " '[s]kin lighteners and hair straighteners mostly" to a "colored" clientele, thematically reinforcing his connection to the appearance-based, white-dominated world of Empiricism (Whitehead 178). When she agrees to go back to Freeport's hotel room with him, she justifies her decision to herself in terms provided by her work: "Because it had already been decided. She was an inspector. This was an investigation" (Whitehead 178). Lila Mae's thinking of her experience with Freeport (which is strongly implied to be her first sexual encounter) as "an investigation" she is undertaking in her role as inspector suggests that she has yet to overcome a disconnect from other people. The paragraph depicting the actual moment of sex continues the metaphor:

> He said stuff but she ignored it because it did not pertain to the case. … She
> recorded the details of the investigation, his fingers and kisses … Her first
> investigation. Lila Mae made a file for her first investigation and recorded the
> pertinent details. The language of the report was drawn from the lumbering syntax
> of bureaucracy. It preserved the details but did not retain the other parts, the ones
> this language did not have words for. (Whitehead 180)

The dry, impersonal language Lila Mae applies to the most intimate and personal of events reflects her sense of alienation and inability to see herself as one human among others. The bland, dismissive tone of "He said stuff" utterly de-romanticizes the moment for the reader. The

image of Lila Mae "making a file" and recording "pertinent details" makes the encounter seem routine and of no personal significance. Lila Mae's lack of "words for" the emotions and meanings that might come of her relationship with Freeport, in a "file" that exists purely for her own memory, suggests a deficiency in her ability to articulate her own life to herself in a meaningful way. By the end of the novel, Lila Mae's growth will enable her to have truly human connections with others.

One crucial clue about Lila Mae's quest for knowledge is the name of the building in which the elevator crashes just after she inspects it. The building, a new municipal project, is called the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building; and Fanny Briggs, in the world of the novel, was "a slave who taught herself how to read," as a young Lila Mae describes her in a third-grade oral report (Whitehead 12). Lila Mae first learned about Fanny Briggs as a child when she heard a radio performance of Fanny Briggs's story, a memory that becomes linked to Lila Mae's eventual profession: "Tiny particles of darkness pressed beyond the cracked, wheaty mesh of the speaker, the kind of unsettling darkness Lila Mae would later associate with the elevator well" (Whitehead 12). Although there is no obvious explanation for Lila Mae's making this idiosyncratic connection between an escaped, self-taught ex-slave and elevator inspection, the implication is clear that Fanny Briggs's legacy looms large over Lila Mae's journey. Just as Fanny Briggs literally taught herself to read, Lila Mae will metaphorically teach herself "to read" the world around her over the course of the novel – and, eventually, to write, as well. The figure of Fanny Briggs allows Whitehead to, as Tim Libretti suggests, introduce "ways of reading, interpreting and interacting with the world, indeed modes of detection, as contested hermeneutic practices that underwrite and ratify different ways of knowing that implicitly endorse different political perspectives and material socio-economic relationships" (205). While Lila Mae

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encounters different characters in the narrative who each embody particular modes of reading

and thinking, her ultimate challenge is to forge ahead into creating *her own* system of

interpretation.

One conventional way of reading is both presented and critiqued through the character of

Chuck, a white escalator specialist and Lila Mae's only friend in the Department of Elevator

Inspectors. Chuck is portrayed as a nerdy, pragmatic academic who plans to use his knowledge

of escalators, "the lowliest conveyance on the totem pole," to secure a stable living as an

"escalator professor" (Whitehead 21). For Chuck, knowledge is both something to be

systematized and a means to an end: "Specialization means job security, and there's a nation-

wide lack of escalator professors in the Institutes, so Chuck figures he's a shoo-in for a teaching

job. And once he's in there, drawing a bead on tenure, he can branch out from escalators and

teach whatever he wants" (Whitehead 21). Chuck, who is a by-the-book Empiricist, trusts the

official versions of knowledge and the institutions set up to disseminate them without question.

His investment in his subject matter is sincere – as the narrator tells us, "he probably even has his

dream syllabus tucked in his pocket at this very moment, scratched on a cheap napkin" – but he

is also conscious of how it can benefit him materially (Whitehead 21). Like everyone else in the

Department, Chuck is aware of the conflict between Empiricism and Intuitionism, but the

conflict has no immediate stakes to him, even though he does identify with one side. Thus, he

sees the conflict as just one more chapter in a textbook to teach: "Chuck's assured Lila Mae that

even though he is a staunch Empiricist, he'll throw in the Intuitionist counterarguments where

necessary. His students should be acquainted with the entire body of elevator knowledge, not just

the canon" (Whitehead 21). Above all, Chuck's knowledge about elevators and escalators is

what allows him to have a stable job: "Chuck feels his future in the Guild is assured" (Whitehead

21). Chuck's approach to his subject matter is not cynical or insincere, but it is utilitarian, a means for him to earn money and status.

The narrator pokes gentle fun at Chuck on surface-level issues – he wears a "prim Safety" haircut mandated by a textbook and is called "tread jockey" by his colleagues – but his presence does raise serious thematic issues (Whitehead 20, 21). All of Chuck's formal education in the ways of elevator inspection amounts to knowledge *about* rather than knowledge *of*. Chuck knows all the names, dates, facts, and theories of elevator (and escalator) inspection history, but does he *know* elevators? Does he have the same sort of immediate, visceral, indeed intuitive understanding of them that Lila Mae has? There is good reason to suspect not. Later in the novel, there is a scene that begins with Chuck working on a monograph about the issue of elevator use vs. escalator use, arguing that the choice of one or the other is significantly revealing of people's characters. He "relies on primary sources" to make a historical argument, hinging his interpretation on the fact that a sign in front of "the world's first escalator at the 1900 Paris Exposition" read "TEN CENTS ONE ASCENSION" (Whitehead 106). Latching on to a quasi-theological reading of the word "ascension," Chuck essentially tries to argue for the spiritual superiority of escalators (which render their riders "a spirit arms wide, a sky king") to elevators ("the box, the coffin" that turns your elevation into "a magician's banal theatrics") (Whitehead 106). To make this argument, however, Chuck deviates from the scholarly objectivity he idealizes. As the narrator tells us in a parenthetical aside, "There is more than a smidgen of spite in this formulation, unseen by driven Chuck: he's trying to justify his specialty"; he also succumbs to bad scientific practice, "contorting and torturing his data to support his thesis" (Whitehead 106). As any good scientist knows, arguments should always follow from the data, not the other way around. What really motivates the argument of Chuck's monograph is not the

drive for true knowledge, but his own psychological needs and impulses: "Whenever Chuck touches the black rubber of the escalator guard rail … he understands he has made a choice. The right one" (Whitehead 106). Although he does not realize it, Chuck's intellectual work here is every bit as mystical as Lila Mae's – rather than neutrally following the facts where they lead in a truly empirical fashion, he is simply using certain points of fact in order to support a conclusion that he *wants to be true*. In fact, Chuck's veneer of rigorous scientificity is more deceptive than Intuitionism, because it allows him to pretend to himself and others that his work is something other than what it actually is.

If Chuck represents one possible method of thought and "reading" that the novel considers and summarily rejects for Lila Mae, the other major avenue is presented by James Fulton, the founder of her chosen field of Intuitionism. Fulton articulated the roots of Intuitionism in the first volume of his study *Theoretical Elevators* and then greatly expanded on the philosophy in the second volume. Early on in the narrative, Fulton and his work are presented in near-mystical, prophetic terms: Reading volume one of *Theoretical Elevators* "was a conversion experience" for Lila Mae, and the teachers of Intuitionist classes were "broken and cursed under the burden of such knowledge"; one character, Mr. Reed, "preach[ed] the new gospel" of Intuitionism after realizing that Fulton "had pissed on every tenet of [his] former faith" of Empiricism (Whitehead 59). The narrator presents Fulton's book as if it had its own magical agency – "Fulton's words discovered and altered Lila Mae" rather than *her* reading *them* (Whitehead 59). In contrast to the nitty-gritty, nuts-and-bolts epistemology of Chuck, Fulton's philosophy is presented as ineffable yet somehow powerfully effective. Fulton passes away before completing the long-awaited third volume of *Theoretical Elevators*, but rumors swirl about his research concerning the "black box," a new type of elevator that will supposedly usher

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in "the second elevation" (an event seemingly comparable, within the world of the novel, to the second coming of Christ). Although the specifics are vague, the idea of "the black box" becomes a sort of MacGuffin for the elevator inspector elite – apparently everyone with power in the world of the novel is after Fulton's research. The "black box" is apparently a notion that could only have been borne out of Fulton's unique philosophy: "It was Fulton's odd perceptions that made him a technical wiz, his way of finding the unobvious solution that is also the perfect solution. It also allowed him, Lila Mae sees, to pierce the veil of this world and discover the elevator world. Because that's what *Theoretical Elevators* did, it described a world … The black box is the elevator-citizen for the elevator world" (Whitehead 100). What exactly is "the black box" or "the elevator world"? How will the elevator world be different from this world? No one within the world of the novel seems to know exactly, and yet everyone is convinced that they must find the answer.

In order to understand the promise of the black box, however, Lila Mae must first learn the truth about James Fulton. Indeed, the description of Fulton's first book as "a conversion experience" for Lila Mae suggests a depth of loyalty that extends beyond the professional and into the religious (Whitehead 59). Again and again throughout the novel we are told just how important Fulton's work has been for the elevator-inspector world in general and for Lila Mae in particular. However, all of Lila Mae's early learning from and devotion to Fulton and his works occurs under the assumption that Fulton was white. When she eventually learns that Fulton was a light-skinned black man passing as white, and that he wrote *Theoretical Elevators* as a sly private joke on his white colleagues, her faith in him and in herself is initially quite shaken. Not only was he not who he claimed he was, he did not actually believe seriously in Intuitionism. She begins to reconsider the foundations of what has by now become her worldview: "It all flowed

from the books she held in her lap, Volumes One and Two of *Theoretical Elevators*, and it all meant something differently now. Fulton's nigresence whispered from the binding of the House's signed first editions, tinting the disciples' words, reconnoting them. Only she could see it, this shadow. She had learned to read and there was no one she could tell" (Whitehead 151). The reference to "disciples" reinforces the quasi-religious tenor that Intuitionism has for its adherents, but now a "shadow" hangs over Lila Mae's doctrine. Recalling the earlier allusions to Fanny Briggs, the slave who learned to read, Lila Mae now thinks that she has "learned to read" for the first time. Understanding that Fulton was black and that thus all his work was informed by a long American history of racism and oppression fundamentally alters Lila Mae's epistemology, occasioning a crisis of faith. As with many who find their religious beliefs challenged, Lila Mae feels betrayed by Fulton's secret: "She had been misled. What she had taken for pure truth had been revealed as merely filial agreement. And thus no longer pure. Blood agrees, it cannot help but agree, and how can you get any perspective on that? Blood is destiny in this land, and she did not choose Intuitionism, as she formerly believed. It chose her" (Whitehead 151). In this moment, Lila Mae feels that her intellectual identity, on which she had always prided herself, has been revealed as a mere epiphenomenon of her racial identity, which she had always seemed to treat as incidental. She worries that her belief in Intuitionism is not due to its inherent truth or validity (despite the curious point that, as we have been told earlier, it is somehow more accurate than Empiricism), but simply a consequence of both her and Fulton being black. Because Lila Mae has formerly conceived of herself almost as a brain without a body (as evidenced, for example, in the dryly scientific approach she takes to her relationship with Freeport), the thought that her mind might in some way be subordinate to her physical body

is anathema to her. Lila Mae does not want the intellectual identity she has built up to be merely a consequence of her race, but the revelation about Fulton causes her to fear that it might be.

The challenge for Lila Mae, and for the reader, then becomes how to reconcile her individual personality with her place as a black woman in a racist American society. The Lila Mae we meet early on in the novel seems totally alienated from society, including other black people – she has no stable romantic relationships, no contact with her family, and apparently no friends apart from Chuck. She does not seem to consider herself to be a member of any group other than the Intuitionists, a group she joined on what she supposed was a purely intellectual basis. Her complete indifference to other people *as people* results in a moment of poignant irony only the narrator and the reader are privy to: when she is studying to become an elevator inspector, she regularly sees an old man whom she does not know is James Fulton around the library at night. The narrator rhetorically asks, "Would it have changed her response to his wave (nothing, not even a nod, the polite thing to do) if she had known the man was James Fulton and that the following morning a hungover janitor would discover his body on the library floor…? Probably not. That's the kind of person Lila Mae is" (Whitehead 46 – 47). Even though she had already become obsessed with Fulton's ideas at that point, Fulton's actual existence as a person would have meant nothing to her. When her affiliation with Intuitionism comes into question because of the revelation about Fulton, Lila Mae must learn what it means to be a part of a larger group, even if only in her own mind. In essence, she must re-discover what it means for her to be black in America, and therefore must re-learn how to be herself; and for Lila Mae, who equates herself with her intellect, that challenge means discovering a new way to think.

After she discovers the truth about Fulton, Lila Mae's next conversation with Pompey, the only other black elevator inspector she knows, allows her an occasion to rediscover the

meaning of her racial identity in relation to others. Lila Mae had felt a certain degree of contempt

for Pompey earlier in the novel, regarding him as something of an Uncle Tom-like figure –

"'And you shuffle for those white people like a slave'" (Whitehead 195). Pompey's defense of

himself, however, causes her to reconsider how she sees him. Pompey makes it clear that he puts

up with mistreatment from his white colleagues not out of sycophancy or a desire for self-

promotion but for the sake of his children (Whitehead 194-5).[25] He also forces Lila Mae to

recognize the ways in which she herself is indebted to him: "'I was the first colored man to get a

Department badge. They made shit of what I wanted and made me eat it. You had it easy, snot-

nose kid that you are, because of me. Because of what I did for you'" (Whitehead 195). Lila Mae

has no rebuttal to Pompey's account of himself; implicitly, she is not used to the notions of

solidarity and self-sacrifice that he uses to justify himself. Pompey's story forces Lila Mae to

reconsider what it means for her to be a member of a group that she had no choice about joining.

At the beginning of the novel, Lila Mae seems to have shed all non-elevator-related human

contact and to consider herself as simply a vehicle for Fulton's theories; the revelations about

both Fulton and Pompey's family and history force her to reconsider her connections with and

obligations to other black people. The realization that these connections exist and are important

starts Lila Mae on the path to articulating herself as a black woman anew.

Lila Mae's journey towards a new self-definition finds poignant symbolic expression in

her experience at the "Happyland Dime-a-Dance." On the run from a couple of mob henchmen,

Lila Mae escapes into a low-rent dance hall, which her pursuers are prevented from entering by a

couple of bouncers. Looking to blend in for a while, Lila Mae ends up dancing with "the only

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[25] In his conversation with Lila Mae, Pompey expresses fear regarding drug dealing in his neighborhood, worrying that the drug dealers will escalate from "reefer" to "some other poison" (194). He puts up with the racism directed at him personally for pragmatic, economic reasons: "My kids won't be here when that [i.e., selling of more dangerous drugs in the neighborhood] happens. I need money to take them out of here" (194).

colored gentleman" there, an elderly man described as "frail" and "thin and disappearing," a man who has seen "finer times and better circumstances" (Whitehead 215). The man is a stranger to Lila Mae, and yet over the course of their dancing each seems to symbolize an entire lost past to the other: "Who is she now to him: his wife, his daughter, that old sweetheart, all lost now" and "Who is he to her? A ghost" (Whitehead 216). In this simple moment of human connection with a black man, Lila Mae is forced to start telling herself a new story of herself, one in which she means something to other black people and they mean something to her. Lila Mae throughout the novel has thought of herself primarily as an Intuitionist elevator inspector; she has not considered the possibility of being a wife or sweetheart, roles that are defined in relation to another person. Likewise, she has to reimagine who other people can be to her. The old man becomes a "ghost," "someone who is dead and will not answer except in what remains of him, his words" – the narrator's carefully written description implies that the old man has become, for Lila Mae, the ghost of James Fulton specifically (Whitehead 216). After all, Fulton's words, in the form of *Theoretical Elevators*, are all that remains of him. Lila Mae and the old man have an exceptionally elliptical dialogue exchange: she asks him, "Why did you do it?"; he replies "You'll understand"; she claims "I'll never understand"; finally, he reassures her "You already do" (Whitehead 216-7). By regarding Intuitionism on a purely theoretical level and divorcing it from the life of its author or any social context, Lila Mae had critically misunderstood it; once she understands the reality of Fulton's life and experience as a light-skinned black man passing as white, she comes to a renewed understanding of his philosophy. Because Lila Mae had so thoroughly identified herself with Intuitionism, this change in her relationship to the theory and to the person who created it necessarily leads to a change in her relationship to herself. Rather than giving an accurate account of the crash of the elevator in the Fanny Briggs building [a crash

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which, as the narrator eventually tells us, was essentially unexplainable anyway, a "catastrophic accident" that was "beyond calculation" and the result of "fate" (Whitehead 228)], Lila Mae's task becomes to give a true account of Intuitionism and therefore of herself.

Once Lila Mae understands the truth about Fulton's race and how it influenced his philosophy – that Intuitionism started as a satire of white people's perceptions of the world but then morphed into a serious philosophy – then the pieces begin to fall into place for her to be able to explain herself *to* herself as a black woman. When she realizes that Fulton's joke needs an audience in order to be a joke, "Lila Mae thinks, Intuitionism is communication. That simple. Communication with what is not-you" (Whitehead 241). Even though she strongly identifies with Intuitionism professionally, Lila Mae ironically has enormous difficulty with communication – she "can barely speak to people she saw last week" (Whitehead 237). She has been so thoroughly in her own head for so long that she finds herself almost completely unable to relate to others, and her lack of self-articulation hitherto has prevented her from breaking out of this cycle. When Lila Mae is incidentally reminded of religion in this moment, we learn that she "has always considered herself an atheist, not realizing she had a religion [i.e., Intuitionism]," a realization that prompts the narrator to note that "[a]nyone can start a religion. They just need the need of others" (Whitehead 241). The implications here pile up in a revealing way: Lila Mae has not understood that she has a religion, but she indeed does in the form of Intuitionism; to be in a religion is to have a need in common with the needs of others, and the true gospel of Intuitionism is connection amongst black people; therefore, Lila Mae must admit to herself that she has needs regarding other black people, and they have needs regarding her. For a "solipsist" who "can barely speak to" recent acquaintances, this realization is earth-shaking. Lila Mae repeatedly demonstrates throughout the novel a tendency to hold herself apart from

other people and even from herself, to regard other people solely as phenomena to be analyzed rather than subjects to be engaged with. The ironic juxtaposition of her career-long adherence to the theory of Intuitionism and her failure to practice its basic principle in her daily social life comes crashing down on Lila Mae, causing her to re-evaluate her understanding not only of Intuitionism but of everything in her life. A life spent avoiding connections with other people, including with other black people, had left Lila Mae alienated and alone; but now that she can reframe her interest in Intuitionism in light of her new understanding, she can begin to build the connections with other black people that will sustain her in the future.

This gradual acceptance of herself as one black person who has needs among others who also have their own needs is what ultimately enables Lila Mae to fulfill the mission accidentally left to her by Fulton. In the final pages of the novel, Lila Mae sits in a room, writing Volume Three of *Theoretical Elevators*, working from Fulton's notes but providing her own substantial input as well. She "particularly likes the cab design, which takes care of engineering necessity without sacrificing passenger comfort"; she finds that "[t]his third volume of Fulton's truly understands human need" (Whitehead 255). Here, Lila Mae is giving herself too little credit: *she* is the one writing the book now, and she is able to do so because *she* has come to understand the reality of human need. In learning about the way Fulton as a black man was shaped by the society around him, she comes to a new level of self-understanding and self-acceptance. A three-word paragraph on the final page simply says, "She's the keeper" (Whitehead 255). Lila Mae has never before experienced such a straightforward sense of a mission, of a commitment to others, as she does writing this book. She is keeping "the next elevation" not for her own sake, but for the sake of the rest of the world.

This ending, much like the ending of *Motherless Brooklyn*, serves to take its protagonist out of the classically *noir* situation in which she had started the novel – hence my argument for both novels as key examples of post-*noir*. Classical *noir* narratives tend to end on a grim note for their protagonists, who usually end up dead or in jail; at best, all the *noir* protagonist can usually hope for is a continuation of the alienated status quo. For Lila Mae to wind up not only safe, but working towards larger social healing, is unheard-of in classic *noir*. While she started off in the position of many a *noir* protagonist, the place she finds herself in at the end is revolutionary for the genre. By accepting her identity as part of a racialized group, Lila Mae has been able to transcend the isolation and alienation that have plagued *noir* protagonists from the beginning.

Beginning at the Ending

The final paragraph of *The Intuitionist* tells us that Lila Mae "returns to the work. She will make the necessary adjustments. It will come. She is never wrong. It's her intuition" (Whitehead 255). The directness, compactness, and simplicity of these closing sentences signifies a newfound sense of purpose and faith for Lila Mae. Having truly grasped the connections among her racial identity, Fulton's thought and history, and both of their experiences in the larger world, she is at last prepared to complete the story of Intuitionism, and therefore the story of herself. She will be telling her story in a coded way (passing as Fulton, who was himself passing as white), but telling it nonetheless. Her hard-won ability to articulate the truth of herself in relation to others gives her a type of hope she seems never to have felt before.

Compare Lila Mae's "It will come. She is never wrong. It's her intuition" with Lionel Essrog's "Tell your story walking." Both endings point forwards, to new possibilities for the characters who have learned how to think and speak about themselves. The narratives of the novels themselves may be drawing to a close, but there is a clear sense that both Lionel and Lila

Mae are just getting started telling their stories. Contrast these scenarios with the closings of many canonical *noir* texts. James M. Cain's 1936 novel *Double Indemnity* presents itself as the written confession of a man who, with his lover, is preparing to jump off the back of a ship into the waiting jaws of a shark. He tells his story all the way until the moment he has to put the pen down to commit the actual suicide: "I didn't hear the stateroom door open, but she's beside me now while I'm writing. I can feel her" and then in a separate final paragraph: "The moon," which is presumably the last thing he sees before jumping (*Double* 115). Cain's 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* also ends in the moments just before the narrator's death, by execution this time: "Here they come. Father McConnell says prayers help. If you've got this far, send up one for me, and Cora, and make it that we're together, wherever it is" (*Postman* 116). The narrator of the 1945 film *Detour* closes on the certainty that he will end up in jail "for no reason at all." The narrator of the 1949 film *D.O.A.* is dead by the time he finishes telling his story. The narrator of the 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* is dead *before he starts* telling his story. As Jake Gittes is trying to process horrible tragedy at the end of the 1974 *Chinatown*, he is simply told, "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." Classic *noir* narration so often leads to the point where no further narration is desirable or even possible; the classic *noir* protagonist is frequently telling us the story of why he cannot tell any more stories.

For Lionel and Lila Mae to not only come through their respective stories intact, but for them to finally have the resources to *begin* telling their stories anew, signifies a major philosophical revision of the *noir* tradition. By revising their understandings of their own lives, of the cultural and racial histories that have shaped them, Lionel and Lila Mae come to a new understanding and appreciation of their connections to others. Both characters are outsiders, marginalized by mainstream society and relegated to its fringes – Lionel because of his

disability, Lila Mae because of her racial and gender identity. As long as both characters try to ignore or compartmentalize their identity, they remain alienated; it is only once they accept who they are that they can start on the path to wholeness and happiness. Both of them must learn to embrace the fullness of who they are as well as the true significance of their relationships to surrogate father figures – Frank Minna and James Fulton – before they can begin to tell their own stories. Because they can now clearly see how they fit into the bigger picture of the world around them, they can tell themselves the story of themselves accurately for the first time. By changing the nature of the endings, Lethem and Whitehead transform *noir* into post-*noir*: beyond symptomatizing social alienation, these narratives point us beyond it. Lionel and Lila Mae begin their stories in the language of *noir* – the language of alienation, disconnection, and isolation – but end up being ready to speak a new language.

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CHAPTER II: RACE, SEXUALITY, AND RE-WRITING THE HARD-BOILED MALE

In the previous chapter, I explored Jonathan Lethem and Colson Whitehead's re-conceptualization of how the *noir* self is articulated – i.e., how the language and thought that characterize the *noir* tradition constitute the subjectivity of the *noir* protagonist. In this chapter, I move from the *noir* self's more rarefied psychological aspects to explore its bodily dimensions and how those dimensions intersect with race and sexuality. The graphic novel *Incognegro* written by Mat Johnson and illustrated by Warren Pleece and the novel *The Song Is You* by Megan Abbott are both historical narratives[26] that revisit decades of *noir*'s greatest cultural ascendancy in order to revise classic *noir* tropes from African American and queer viewpoints respectively. Critical readings of *noir* have understood the tradition as manifesting anxieties about race and sexuality (among other things) from a predominately white male perspective. One of the central premises of Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo's study is that "[c]ondensations and displacements between various concrete anxieties over race, sex, maternity, and national identity constitute complex interactions between unconscious desires and fears as they become manifest in film noir" (xv). Eric Lott, in a classic article on whiteness in *film noir*, has argued that the "informing presence of racial difference in the American imaginary … suffuses a cinematic mode known to traffic in black hearts and minds" and that, in a cultural moment of high racial tensions, "film noir's relentless cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks … constantly though obliquely invoked the racial dimension of this figural play of light against dark" (542 – 543). I largely agree with these readings of classic *noir*, and it

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[26] The literary equivalents of what James Naremore would call "retro-noirs."

is precisely because of *noir*'s complicated history of representing racial and sexual difference Johnson and Abbott's texts are able to mine its tropes to comment on racial and sexual alienation in the past and the present. The problematic portrayals of African Americans (and characters metaphorically coded as African American in certain texts) and of non-heterosexual characters in classic *noir* offer Johnson and Abbott something to respond to and revise in crafting their own post-*noir* narratives. By writing their *noir* stories as historical fictions rather than setting them in a contemporary period, Johnson and Abbott are able to make a meta-historical argument about the deeper roots of racial and sexual alienation in the present. Just as Lethem and Whitehead used *noir*'s own narrative and linguistic traditions to move past the problems it reflects, Johnson and Abbott similarly use *noir*'s more visceral, embodied elements to seek a way beyond the racism and heterosexism *noir* has often embodied. Their efforts are focalized through a deconstruction of the hard-boiled male, or the "tough guy," as Abbott calls him in her own critical work.

If there is one character archetype that defines the hard-boiled crime fiction of the 1920s through 1950s and the *film noir* of the 1940s and 50s, it is the hard-boiled male. The *femme fatale*, the deadly, seductive woman of hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*, looms larger in the popular imagination than the hard-boiled male seems to – from Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* and Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* in the 1940s through Eva Green in *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* and Rosamund Pike in *Gone Girl* in the 2010s, the *femme fatale* has always been a major selling point of hard-boiled/*noir* narratives. She has also generated more gender-based critical commentary, as evidenced by scholarly works such as E. Ann Kaplan's classic collection *Women in Film Noir*; the interest of feminist criticism in diagnosing and critiquing the *femme fatale* as symptomatic of and/or responding to patriarchal gender roles has driven much

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scholarship. Although the *femme fatale* has received a great deal of critical and popular attention, she is not universally present in *noir* or hard-boiled stories – there are plenty of hard-boiled narratives, such as Orson Welles's *The Stranger* and Nicolas Ray's *In a Lonely Place*, that do not feature a *femme fatale* figure. Instead, the one character archetype that is always present in the hard-boiled or *noir* narrative is the hard-boiled male. Christopher Breu defines the character type in part through behavior: "the hard-boiled male was characterized by a tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions" (Breu 1). Megan Abbott, in her critical study of white masculinity in hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*, offers a definition that takes into account race, social position, sexuality, and the history of American expansion:

> the solitary white man, hard-bitten, street-savvy, but very much alone amid the chaotic din of the modern city. Generally lower-middle or working-class, heterosexual, and without family or close ties, he navigates his way through urban spaces figured as threatening, corrupt, even "unmanning." The idea of the solitary white man trekking down urban streets has forerunners in like-minded navigators of Western space or wilderness, but a relocation to the industrialized American city, combined with the influence of modernist themes of fragmentation and alienation, created a unique new figure. (Abbott *Street* 2)

Abbott's historically astute definition of the hard-boiled male encompasses the things that define him as an archetype beyond his jaded attitude and sharp language. Giving an intersectional definition of the hard-boiled male identity in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, and familial status allows us to understand the sociological roots of the character type's creation and

popularity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Of course, not every straight white working-class male of the period, whether real or fictional, was necessarily "hard-boiled"; the key additional factor that is needed for that quality is a deep personal alienation. As Abbott, argues, we cannot forget "perhaps the tough guy's most important characteristic of all: his fundamental isolation. His refusal to attach himself to a woman, a family, a social network, a community, a business, a country and its ideals – all these things cast this seemingly privileged (he is white; he is male) figure as a potential transgressor, a social renegade" (Abbott *Street* 6). That absolute refusal of conventional relationships and any concomitant sense of belonging is what, on top of the racial, sexual, and class factors, makes the hard-boiled male hard-boiled.

The popular appeal of the conventional hard-boiled male extends into more recent decades, especially in film and television. Jack Nicholson's Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*, while clearly inspired by characters from the 1930s and 1940s, remains one of the most iconic Hollywood characters of the 1970s. In "The Big Goodbye," a 1988 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) relaxes in the USS Enterprise's holodeck by pretending to be Dixon Hill, a character who is a clear homage to Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade. From 2009 to 2011, HBO's *Bored to Death* mined comedy from the contrast between a fantasized hard-boiled male identity and actor Jason Schwartzman's nebbish, hipster-ish persona. In 2011, Ryan Gosling earned a great deal of critical credibility with his portrayal of an almost absurdly laconic hard-boiled male in *Drive*. In 2014, Matthew McConaughey revived his critical and popular reputation by playing the highly intellectual but still thoroughly hard-boiled Rust Cohle on *True Detective*. More than eighty years after the hard-boiled male's advent in pulp fiction, he still regularly enjoys a certain level of popularity and prestige. Given how prominently the hard-boiled male still figures in the American popular imagination, it is important to

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understand (and, as necessary, deconstruct) him in order to understand the broader contemporary cultural world.

In most classic hard-boiled/*noir* texts as well as most critical commentary on such texts, the relationship between the hard-boiled male's race, sexuality, and class and his resolute isolation and alienation goes relatively unexamined. The hard-boiled male's alienation is usually understood as a response to urban modernity, to the Great Depression, to the traumas of World War II, to the changing status of women in the era, and so on. While there is undoubtedly great value to such specific historical interpretations, keeping Abbott's definition of the hard-boiled male in mind allows us to consider other, more basic indentitarian factors. What if the alienation of the straight white male tough guy is traceable not only to these historical ruptures but also to the way he so jealously guards his own straightness and whiteness? What if the hard-boiled male's rigid insistence on the importance and inviolability of the boundaries between black and white and between heterosexual and homosexual is itself a major factor in his alienation? Whiteness as a coherent racial identity depends on the exclusion of those who are deemed nonwhite, while heterosexuality as a meaningful part of identity depends on exclusion of queer people. If part of the hard-boiled male's problem is his tendency to reject commonality with others, perhaps that rejection begins at a much deeper and more basic level of identity-definition.

Asking these questions allows us to see the important cultural intervention Johnson and Abbott are making through their works. Johnson's vision of a hard-boiled male who blurs the line between black and white in *Incognegro* and Abbott's creation of a hard-boiled male with a complicated sexual identity both work to expose cracks in the "shell-like exterior" Breu attributes to the hard-boiled male archetype. If the hard-and-fast boundaries the hard-boiled male relies on to define his identity turn out not to be so secure after all, then we as a culture could

finally begin the work of erasing the lines and healing that hard-boiled alienation. The hard-boiled male, while in some ways a fun figure to identify with, is also symptomatic of much that is problematic about American life. In rewriting him, we can begin to rewrite ourselves. Given that both *Incognegro* and *The Song Is You* are period pieces, set in the 1930s and early 1950s respectively, we cannot reasonably expect the characters in them to fully overcome the alienation they feel, given that as contemporary readers we know that the social conditions producing said alienation will not go away anytime soon. Nevertheless, Johnson and Abbott both work within the original *noir* context in order to show us the beginnings of a way out of it.

Gumshoes and the KKK: *Noir*'s Complicated History with Race

Before moving to a reading of *Incognegro* itself, I want to briefly consider *noir*'s history of depicting race (both literally and metaphorically), the complexity of which has generally been underappreciated. While I generally concur with Oliver and Trigo's and Lott's understandings of classic *noir*, the full truth of the matter is slightly more complicated than *noir* simply reflecting white men's hostile anxieties about African Americans. It is easy enough to point to a moment such as, say, Frank Bigelow (Edmond O'Brien) being poisoned when he visits a nightclub with an African American band playing in the film *D.O.A.* and to read the scene as reflecting a fear of racial contamination. The scene spends a surprising amount of time depicting the African American members of the band (who have nothing to do with the film's main plot) in sweaty close-ups edited at a frenetic pace. Oliver and Trigo persuasively read the film as "the most blatant example of noir's racial paranoia and strong eugenicist undercurrent" (230). However, not all *noir* texts are as clearly racist as *D.O.A.* is with its othering of black people. In fact, at least a few *noir* texts have fairly obviously placed white protagonists into perilous situations

more often suffered by African Americans at the time, suggesting an implicit plea for racial empathy to their (presumed) white working-class readers and viewers.

For example, one of the very earliest hard-boiled detective stories, "Knights of the Open Palm" by Carroll John Daly, pitted its white protagonist against the members of the Ku Klux Klan. Published in 1923, "Knights of the Open Palm" was the first story in Daly's series featuring the private detective Race Williams. In this story, Williams is hired to rescue a white teenage boy who has been kidnapped by the Klan. He does so by infiltrating and subverting the Klan itself, killing several Klansmen along the way. At the end of the story, Race encounters and kills the Klansman he has referred to throughout as "Feather-Face" at a train station and is able to get away on the train consequence-free by pretending to be a Klansman again. Thus we get the ironic final sentence: "After all that is said against the Klan, I sure got to admit that there are times when it serves its purpose" (Daly 441). "Its purpose," as Daly has implicitly shown, is to get away with killing scot-free.

The mere fact of Race Williams's first name literally being "Race" suggests at least a subconscious engagement with issues of race right from the beginning of the genre. Sean McCann reads Race Williams as fighting the Klan by embodying a set of "negative virtues" opposed to the Klan's emphasis on an "orderly community … defined by ethnic exclusivity, moral authoritarianism, and 'exalted ritual'" (56). Race Williams's "disorderliness, egocentric calculation, and disenchantment" serve to "not merely … defeat the Klan but to undermine the basic premises of Klan philosophy and at the same time to clarify the outlines of the hard-boiled protagonist" (McCann 56). While there is something progressive about Daly's attack on white nationalism, Race Williams's lone-wolf ethic can lead to the sort of alienation that plagues later hard-boiled and *noir* narratives: "Thus, while Race Williams's refusal to be a joiner undermined

the Klan's vision of native community, the potential endpoint of such a commitment was a radical skepticism about all forms of social organization – one that would invalidate not just Klannish fantasies of community, but every idea of civic obligation or human solidarity" (McCann 62). While Daly, whom McCann dryly describes as "politically unsubtle," would hardly have the last word on race or community within the hard-boiled/*noir* tradition, it is still remarkable that even the earliest and roughest literary instances of the genre have some critique of racism and white nationalism built in (62).

Of course, part of *noir*/hard-boiled fiction's shunning of the most overt forms of racism arguably stems from white insecurities over race itself. In her critical work, Megan Abbott has noted that, when reading hard-boiled fiction through the lens of racial theory, "we do not locate a calmly self-assured representation of whiteness, secure in its hegemonic invisibility; instead, we see a persistent, crippling dread from within these white male protagonists over the precariousness of their whiteness, and what it would mean for its construction to be revealed" (*Street* 94). Unlike the unquestioned whiteness of, say, classic Westerns, hard-boiled whiteness is always already an anxious category. There is never quite a secure comfort about what whiteness is and means in hard-boiled/*noir* narrative. Nevertheless, no *noir* text before *Incognegro* has quite so explicitly dealt with the question of race's social construction.

The cinematic tradition of classic *noir* has also had at least a couple of instances of critiques of racism and white nationalism. The 1936 film *Fury*, although not usually considered a canonical *film noir* in part due to its preceding most other *noir* films by a few years, does share numerous features with many other *noir* films. *Fury*'s plot centrally features a crime and its aftermath; its visual style includes deep shadows and Expressionist camera angles; it thematically deals with the violent alienation of an individual from the larger community; and it

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was directed by Fritz Lang, who would go on to direct canonical *noir* classics such as *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Big Heat* (1953). The film stars Spencer Tracy as Joe Wilson, an ordinary man who is travelling through a small town when is he wrongly arrested for a murder. The townspeople work themselves into a mad lynch mob that, in the film's most overtly Expressionistic scene, burns down the jail where Wilson is being held. He is presumed dead but secretly survives, and the rest of the film follows his elaborate scheme of revenge against the people who attempted to kill him.

Much like "Knights of the Open Palm," *Fury* asks a (presumed white) audience to sympathize with the plight of a man pitted against a crazed lynch mob. While the particular man in question is played by a white actor (without a doubt the only way the film could have obtained studio funding in 1936), the metaphorical identification of Tracy's character with the many African American victims of lynching of the time is quite obvious. Given that stories of conflict with lynch mobs and the KKK lie at the earliest roots of both the hard-boiled detective genre in literature and *film noir* in cinema, it seems that the *noir* mood begins to become culturally pervasive at the moment when it first becomes possible for white working-class readers and filmgoers to imagine themselves, with however much imaginative displacement, in the position of an oppressed African American.

Of course, *noir* even in its original decades was not solely the provenance of white authors and audiences; Chester Himes made a particularly important contribution to the *noir*/hard-boiled tradition as an African American writer. His Harlem Detective series, centering on the characters "Coffin Ed" Johnson and "Gravedigger" Jones, provided an African American equivalent to Chandler's series of Philip Marlowe novels. Sean McCann describes the series as "easily the most significant innovation in the postwar American crime novel and the last serious

attempt to use the form as an effort to split the difference between popular literacy and literary expertise" (252). Even before Himes came to the hard-boiled detective genre, there are hints of affinity with a *noir* ethos in his earliest work. His first novel, the 1945 *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, while not marketed as a crime novel, does center on a plot that eventually culminates in the (false) accusation of a crime. After the African American narrator Bob Jones is caught in what appears to be a compromising situation with a white woman named Madge who vindictively accuses him of rape, Bob offers a description of his fears that both cuts to the core of the experience of racism and sounds like exactly the sort of thing a white *film noir* protagonist would say:

> But now I was scared in a different way. Not of the violence. Not of the mob. Not
> of physical hurt. But of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The
> people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion – that I was guilty. In
> that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody
> believing it. … The whole structure of American thought was against me;
> American tradition had convicted me a hundred years before. And standing there
> in an American courtroom, through all the phoney formality of an American trial,
> having to take it, knowing that I was innocent and that I didn't have a chance.
> (Himes 187)

Compare Jones's lament to these excerpts from the voiceover monologue of the protagonist Al Roberts (Tom Neal) near the end of *Detour*, a *film noir* released the same year Himes's novel was published:

> It was pure fear, of course. And I was hysterical … Vera was dead, and I was her
> murderer. Murderer! What an awful word that is. But I'd become one. And I'd

better not get caught … I was cooked, done for. I had to get out of there … But

one thing I don't have to wonder about – I know! Someday a car will stop to pick

me up that I never thumbed. Yes, fate, or some mysterious force, can put the

finger on you or me, for no good reason at all.

Both characters, accused of crimes they are not exactly guilty of (Bob is innocent, although he

does at an earlier point *want* to rape the woman who accused him, while Al kills Vera

accidentally and unknowingly), realize their hopelessness in the face of the indifferent hostility

of the world around them. The primary difference is that Al ascribes his misfortunes to "fate, or

some mysterious force," while Bob explicitly blames racism and "American thought" and

"American tradition." Comparing these words from an African American novelist and white

filmmaker side by side, it becomes clear that *noir* always had a closer affinity to African

American cultural production than has generally been recognized.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum from *Fury* sits Robert Wise's 1959 film

Odds Against Tomorrow, one of the very last films of the classic *noir* era and one of the only

ones to feature an African American protagonist. Where *Fury* had only been able to ask the

audience to metaphorically identify with the position of a victim of racism through the figure of a

white actor, *Odds Against Tomorrow* explicitly confronts American racism by positioning a

black protagonist (played by Harry Belafonte) against the stubborn, violent prejudice of a white

man (Robert Ryan). Rather than offering the audience a friendly resolution between the two, as

the Best-Picture-winning Sidney Poitier vehicle *In the Heat of the Night* would do eight years

later, the classically downbeat *noir* ending of *Odds Against Tomorrow* depicts mutually assured

destruction between the two characters. Wise's film, by having both main characters die in a

fiery explosion at the end, evades the question of original responsibility and offers no way out of

the situation it depicts. To find a *noir* narrative that actually offers even the barest hint of a way out of the problems of American racism, we would have to wait another 49 years, until the release of *Incognegro* in 2008.

"A Case of Mistaken Identity": Race and the Hard-Boiled Male in *Incognegro*

The graphic novel *Incognegro*, written by Mat Johnson and illustrated by Warren Pleece, is many things at once: a gripping *noir* thriller, a knowing piece of historical fiction, a study in the power of black-and-white in the medium of the graphic novel, and a deconstructive meditation on race in America. As Sinéad Moynihan notes, *Incognegro* both continues a trend present elsewhere in popular culture and is revolutionary in terms of its particular medium: "While racial passing witnessed something of a resurgence in fiction, memoir, biography and popular culture beginning in the 1990s, *Incognegro* is the first graphic novel devoted to the subject" (45). Like the other works I discuss in this project, it follows the journey of an individual who, in the beginning of the narrative, is defined by his economic function and alienated from society at large. However, whereas the problems keeping Lethem's Lionel Essrog and Whitehead's Lila Mae Watson alienated and isolated stem from their own internal understandings of themselves, the protagonist of *Incognegro* is alienated by a slightly more exterior issue: his skin.

The story of *Incognegro*, set in the 1930s, follows Zane Pinchback, an African American journalist from Harlem who, because of his light skin, is able to pass as white when doing undercover investigative journalism about lynching in the South. At the beginning of the narrative, Zane, having narrowly escaped being lynched himself on his last assignment, is reluctant to continue the work he has been doing in the South under the pen name "Incognegro," a portmanteau of "incognito" and "Negro" that reflects his secret racial passing. Yet he agrees to

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one last journey to Tupelo, Mississippi when he learns that his brother Alonzo has been arrested, accused of murder, and is in danger of being lynched. The twist-filled plot that follows involves Zane and his similarly light-skinned friend Carl posing as white people, investigating the mystery of who did kill the girl Alonzo is accused of killing, and trying to free Alonzo from prison.

Interestingly for a graphic novel so focalized through a single protagonist, *Incognegro* does not depict Zane himself in its first two pages. We read his narration in the captions of those pages, but it is not yet clear who is speaking, to whom, or why. Zane's narration starts by giving the reader some simple, stark facts setting up the historical context of the story, giving us a sense of the casual brutality of the time: "Between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 Negroes were **murdered** by lynch mobs in America. That we **know** of. Now, since the beginning of the '30s, most of the white papers don't even consider it **news**. To them, another nigger dead is not a story. So my job is to **make** it one. That's all" (Johnson 7, bolding original[27]). The lynching might seem to be a banal non-occurrence to the newspapers Zane mentions, but Pleece's extraordinary illustration on this first page makes it into quite a disturbing story indeed. The page depicts approximately 60 white men, women, and children gathered in a crowd around a solitary black man whose neck is already in a noose, about to be tortured and hanged. Three men are actively pulling the rope; one man in a full Klan uniform is facing the victim directly; about a half dozen other men are brandishing baseball bats and sticks, threatening to beat the victim. Nearly as disturbing as those perpetrating the violence are the many others whose stories are told in the illustration of this one page. One man, about two-thirds of the way down the page, is carrying what appears to be a box of drinks, clearly intending to sell them like a peanut vendor at a baseball game. A man to the

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[27] *Incognegro*'s font makes frequent use of **bolded** words, all of which I have preserved in my quotations.

right of the drink-seller holds out his hand in a demanding attitude towards another man drinking

from a flask, apparently not wanting to miss his share of the liquor. Several men are shown

drinking beer, apparently enjoying this violent entertainment. An older man towards the left side

of the page is half-turned away from the victim, engaging in a friendly chat with a younger man

behind him, possibly his son. A mother looks down at her young daughter, whose hand she is

holding, as she likely explains what is going on. A young boy peers around a grown-up to get a

better view. A photographer calmly approaches with his equipment; as we will learn later, he is

there to sell postcards of the lynching. In the bottom-right corner of the page, a group engages in

a friendly, seemingly unrelated conversation. All of these details accumulate into a subtle but

horrifying demonstration of just how prosaic and routine this lynching is to the people

participating in and witnessing it. A man's violent torment and death is treated in the manner of a

minor-league baseball game: passable entertainment for the whole family, but nothing to get

particularly excited about. Tim Caron says of this page, "A black man is shown being lynched by

a white mob that is portrayed as simultaneously brutal in the violence directed at its black victim

and celebratory in the performance of this ritual that will further strengthen the communal ties of

this white Southern community" (145). I would argue, however, that the lynching does not truly

serve to "strengthen the communal ties" of the white characters either. As we will see later in the

graphic novel's depiction of the "Jefferson-White" clan and in its ending, any sense of

community created by this horrific violence is a false one.[28] Cheryl Harris's description of

whiteness as a type of property defined only by exclusion rather than anything intrinsic makes

clear that the supposed strengthening of ties Caron points to only masks a deeper alienation even

for the perpetrators of the lynching: "The fundamental precept of whiteness – the core of its

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[28] Of course, it goes without saying that even if the sense of community thus fostered were "real," it would be truly horrible.

value – is its exclusivity. But exclusivity is predicated not on any intrinsic characteristic, but on the existence of the symbolic 'other,' which functions to 'create an illusion of unity' among whites" (1789). The mob depicted does not even have the dubious merit of true communal action; rather, they are mostly depicted as essentially isolated spectators, a lonely crowd. On its first page, *Incognegro* has set out the essential problem facing Zane and, by extension, African American men in general in this period: how to exist within a society that would derive entertainment from your destruction?

Johnson begins to answer this question for Zane Pinchback a few pages later, when we first see Zane's preparations to go undercover as a white man. The graphic novel at this point begins its particular exploration of the phenomenon of racial passing. Cheryl Harris has introduced the idea of passing thus: "Passing is well-known among Black people in the United States and is a feature of race subordination in all societies structured on white supremacy. Notwithstanding the purported benefits of Black heritage in an era of affirmative action, passing is not an obsolete phenomenon that has slipped into history" (1712 – 1713). In Harris's discussion, passing can become a permanent part of life: "Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination" (1713). However, Zane in his transformation is not exactly "becoming white" in the permanent sense Harris describes; rather, it is a temporary disguise that allows him to act as a secret agent. The first thing Zane says in the caption on this page is "I am **Incognegro**," not "I am white" or "I become white" or anything along those lines (Johnson 18). He is not "becoming white," but rather becoming "an incognito Negro," or secretly black. While passing as white, Zane will

never forget about his "true" identity. Zane explains, "I don't wear a **mask** like Zorro or a **cape** like The Shadow, but I don a disguise nonetheless" and says that "My **camouflage** is provided by my genes" (Johnson 18). Zane's language of disguises and camouflages portrays whiteness almost as a type of clothing, something external to the body; that is, in *Incognegro*, race is not even skin-deep.

Of course, even though he is not "becoming white," Zane is not quite staying black either. His declaration "I am Incognegro" contrasts with the racially affirmative "I am Black" that Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses in her work on intersectionality: "'I am Black' takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity. 'I am Black' becomes not simply a statement of resistance but also a positive discourse of self-identification, intimately linked to celebratory statements like the Black nationalist 'Black is beautiful'" (Crenshaw 1297). The "I am Black" Crenshaw valorizes is not yet available to Zane, who, in order to save his brother, cannot openly identify as black . He is not seeking to act as a white man, but rather to act as a black man who is not noticed. As he says after noting that "American Negroes are a mulatto people" due to a history of slavery and rape, "Since white America refuses to see its past, they can't really see me too well, either" (Johnson 18). The larger goal of Zane's work, and of the graphic novel itself, is to force Americans to reckon more honestly with the country's racial past.

The differences between Zane's "going Incognegro" and more familiar forms of racial passing should not be underestimated. "Becoming white" is less subversive than "becoming Incognegro": "Under the operative racial hierarchy, passing is the ultimate assimilationist move – the submergence of a subordinate cultural identity in favor of dominant identity, assumed to achieve better societal fit within prevailing norms" (Harris 1765). Zane is not passing on a

permanent basis in order to protect himself and get along more easily in a white-dominated world; rather, he is essentially acting as a spy in order to help blow up the "operative racial hierarchy" from within. As Zane himself says at the end of his transformation (which, ironically, hardly makes him look different from one panel to the next), his act is "Assimilation as **revolution**" rather than the actual assimilation Harris describes (Johnson 18). He does not pass as white for his own benefit and safety; in fact, his subversive, racially-charged activities put him in much greater danger than he would be in if he were attempting to simply pass quietly. As his friend Mildred tells him early on, "Joking aside, Zane, what you do is a great service to our **people**. You're not just passing for white to get a table at the Waldorf-Astoria" (Johnson 12). In *Incognegro*, passing on a permanent basis for self-serving reasons would simply be a concession to the logic of white supremacy; passing-as-spying, the way Zane does it, can work towards the upheaval of the prevailing racial order.

A coy intertextual allusion early on in *Incognegro* hints at the difference between itself and other passing narratives. While talking to his friends Carl and Mildred and fretting about the significance of his own career, Zane says, "There is a movement happening right here in Harlem, a **Renaissance**. I'm a writer. How could I not want to be a part of that? George Schulyer, the columnist from the *Messenger*, even he's got a **novel** coming out" (Johnson 13). The novel Zane is referring to is Schuyler's 1931 *Black No More*, a science-fiction satire in which a machine enables African Americans to literally become white (and, eventually, paler than "natural" white people). In this novel, Schuyler projected a vision into the (then) near future to expose the absurdity of "the color line" by imagining a scenario in which paranoid white people, by the end of the novel, darken their own skins so as not to be confused with former African Americans turned white:

To a society that had been taught to venerate whiteness for over three hundred years, this announcement was rather staggering. What was the world coming to, if the blacks were whiter than the whites? Many people in the upper class began to look askance at their very pale complexions. If it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of the possession of Negro blood, of having once been a member of a pariah class, then surely it were well not to be so white! (Schuyler 177)

In contrast with Schuyler, Johnson projects backwards into the past in order to subvert the racial hierarchy from within, albeit in a way tinged with the sad knowledge that that hierarchy was still essentially operative more than seventy years after Schuyler wrote his novel. With this quick allusion, Johnson both pays homage to Schuyler and highlights the way in which his fictional project is a sort of inverse of Schuyler's.

On the page after Zane's Incognegro transformation, he lays out the general analysis of race that enables his performance. Zane begins by informing us that there is "one thing most of **us** know that most white folks don't. That race doesn't really exist. Culture? Ethnicity? Sure. Class too. But **race** is just a bunch of **rules** meant to keep us on the bottom. Race is a **strategy**. The rest is just people **acting**. Playing roles" (Johnson 19).[29] Zane comments on the way that, in a white supremacist society, whiteness is unconsciously seen as a sort of natural, invisible constant: "That's what white folks never get. They don't think they have **accents**. They don't think they eat **ethnic** foods. Their music is **classical**. They think they're just **normal**. That they are the **universal**, and that everyone else is an odd **deviation** from form. That's what makes them so easy to **infilitrate**" (Johnson 19). Johnson here cleverly channels the theoretical insights

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[29] Compare Zane's metaphor of race as role-playing with the narrator of Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* when he encounters a white woman: "I knew the instant I recognized her that she was going to perform then – we both would perform … As soon as she saw me she went into her frightened act and began shrinking away. I started off giving her a sneer so she'd know I knew it was phoney. She knew it anyway; but she kept putting it on me." (27).

of critical race theory into Zane's experience-based analysis. Zane's version of whiteness, in which whiteness cannot really be defined as *being* any particular thing other than *not* being black, echoes the legal theory of whiteness described by Cheryl Harris: "The right to exclude was the central principle … of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not white.' The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness" (1736) . Of course, part of Zane's point, obvious from the words he emphasizes, is that white people do in fact have accents, eat ethnic foods, and listen to music that comes from a particular cultural tradition; it is just that they forget that those accents, foods, and music are not inherently more valid or less contingent than any others. It is easy for Zane to pass in part due to his light skin, but also because he actually has a keener and more nuanced understanding of "white" culture than do most of the white people he encounters in the novel.

Part of Zane's performance as a white Southerner involves mastery of white cultural codes – sometimes literally. When Zane and Carl first get off the train in Tupelo, they see a young black man being harassed by some white men at the station. Zane smooth-talks the young man out of trouble by pretending to be a Klansman himself and giving the young man a chance to get on the train. As part of his performance, Zane claims to be a "kloreroe" in the Klan and casually asks one of the white harassers "*AYAK?*," an abbreviation that a caption informs us means "Are you a Klansman?," to which the harasser responds "*AKIA*," or "A Klansman I am."[30] Zane then takes over the situation, throwing the young man's bag onto the train and allowing him to escape under the cover of supposedly chasing him away, leading Carl to whisper to him

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[30] While "AYAK" and "AKIA" were (and presumably still are) real acronyms used by the Ku Klux Klan, it is still interesting to note that this same coded exchange also appears at the end of "Knights of the Open Palm."

that "Zane, you are officially the **craziest** nigger south of the Mason-Dixon" (Johnson 25). As

Zane demonstrates in this scene, one of the ways in which Southern racists sought to shore up

their own sense of whiteness as a positive identity was through the establishment of literal codes

and specialized terminology thought to be exclusive to themselves. Ironically, this reliance on

codes makes it easier for Zane to fool them into thinking he is white, since he has learned the

codes and terms through observation or reading. The anxiety that caused Southern racists to feel

the need to establish artificial ways of identifying themselves as whites makes it easier for Zane

to manipulate them.

An even more elaborate and comical example of how easily whiteness can be performed

arises a few pages later, when Zane goes to find Carl after having spoken with his brother

Alonzo in jail and learning about the murder. Zane finds Carl entertaining a group of white

townsfolk outside a general store, pretending to be a stereotypical Englishman. Carl's

impersonation of an Englishman includes such over-the-top expressions as "Blimey!," "as you

Americans call it," "ol' chaps," and "Tally-ho!" (Johnson 36). When Zane chastises him for his

failure to keep a low profile and tells him that his bad accent sounds like a rip-off of the Eddie

Cantor radio show, Carl replies, "I know, they love that show here. They don't know a damn

thing about England. One of the older fellows offered me three mules to make him a **knight**"

(Johnson 36). After filling Zane in on the background information about the murder he's learned

during his Englishman charade, Carl, with a self-satisfied grin, notes how popular he has become

due to his pretending to be wealthy: "I told them I was in town to buy some land to add to my

American holdings, and these jokers ate it up. They don't see a Negro in front of them, all they

see is green" (Johnson 37) . Although Carl's charade does not last forever, it exposes one of the

ways in which conceptions of race are bound up with cultural and economic prejudices – the

townsfolk he is fooling assume that, because he speaks a certain way and appears to be wealthy, he cannot possibly be black. If Carl were to act and speak in a stereotypically black fashion for them, they would of course see that he was African American right away; but since he knows how to manipulate their linked class and racial prejudices, he is able to pose as a white Englishman for a while.

The racial themes of *Incognegro* become even more complicated with the introduction of the character Michaela Mathers, the white woman who had supposedly been murdered by her lover Alonzo. When Zane first investigates his brother's moonshine still, a mysterious figure shoots at him, hitting him in the hand and forcing him to flee into the cave where the still is. After Zane throws an impromptu Molotov cocktail at his assailant, causing her coat to catch fire, she is revealed to be Michaela Mathers. After Zane mentions that he is Alonzo's brother, Michaela responds, "What a surprise. Pinchy's brother, huh? You sure don't **look** like a **nigger**" (Johnson 45). The novel then cuts away for two pages to depict the arrival in town of Huey, the main villain, but upon returning to Zane and Michaela the reader encounters a splash page depicting Michaela pouring moonshine over Zane's hand-wound in front of a campfire at night. In reaction to Zane's yelling in pain, Michaela tells him, "Goddamn it, stop acting like a little **pickaninny**. Hold still!" (Johnson 48). It is significant that, even though Michaela is effectively the one white ally Zane and Alonzo have in the entire town, she still cannot help but refer to Zane as a "nigger" and a "pickaninny" immediately upon meeting him. In the cultural milieu of the 1930s rural South, even a "white ally" such as Michaela is still going to use racist language and have prejudiced ideas about black people; the culture of racism is far too deeply ingrained for even well-intentioned individuals to escape it. She is confused by his appearance at first because he does not "look like a nigger"; she, like the rest of the townsfolk, instantly classifies

people into visual categories and then expects them to conform to her pre-existing expectations of those categories. When scolding him for shouting in pain, she cannot simply tell him not to act like a child, but has to tell him not to act like "a little pickaninny" specifically. This archaic racist term for a black child reinforces the sense of difference Michaela feels compelled to establish between herself and Zane. She both does and does not want him to fit into the racial other category she has: it would be cognitively easier for her to understand him as simply another "nigger," but at the same time she would prefer him not to act like a "pickaninny." In just a few sentences, she both pushes him into an easy category and tries to pull him out of it.

The nature of Michaela's confusion about Zane becomes clearer when she asks him about his relationship to Alonzo. Since she has trouble believing that the light-skinned Zane is related to the darker-skinned Alonzo, she asks him, "How the hell is you two **brothers**? You look the same in the face and the build, and you move the same, talk it too, but besides that you ain't **nothing** alike. You sure you don't have different **daddies**?" (Johnson 50). The irony of Michaela's question seems to be lost on her: aside from faces, bodies, movements, and speech, how many ways are there to describe people? She says that "besides" all those factors there is nothing in common between Zane and Alonzo, but there really is not anything else she could mean besides skin color. Even though skin color is apparently the only discernible difference between Zane and Alonzo, it is enough for her to declare that the two are "nothing alike." In her mental categorization of other people, skin color is apparently the most important factor, enough by itself to place two otherwise identical men into two completely separate categories. This sort of rigid impulse to separate people based on a single factor illustrates why Zane has been forcibly alienated from his brother and even from his own skin.

Michaela asks Zane if he is sure of the identity of his both of his parents, reasoning that "Lotsa niggers got white fathers. Lots of high yaller niggras got their massa for their pappy. Most, I suspect" (Johnson 50). When Zane responds by saying that he and Alonzo are twins, Michaela is at least humble enough to recognize the limits of her preconception: "Damn. Shut **me** up, didn't you?" (Johnson 50). The fact of Zane and Alonzo's twin-ship is the only piece of evidence strong enough to make her realize that an apparently black man and an apparently white one could in fact have the same parentage.

The discussion of race as a strategy and white assumptions of universality from the beginning of the narrative resurfaces about halfway through, when Zane asks Josiah Ryder, the black man whose son he had rescued from racist harassment at the train station earlier, for a ride to the town of Shuttle's Pass, where the Jefferson-White family lives. During the cart ride over to Shuttle's Pass, Josiah casually reveals that he has known Zane was black all along, much to Zane's surprise. When Zane asks, "Have I become that **obvious**? Is my kink showing?," Josiah replies that he (unlike Michaela) recognized the resemblance between Zane and his brother in spite of their different skin tones: "You look just like the man! You **lucky** folks around here are so color struck or they would see it first thing too" (Johnson 64). Zane is visibly reassured by this response, affirming that "White folks see what they want to see. That's what makes them so easy to fool with this passing thing" (Johnson 64). Josiah, however, warns him of the flipside of that statement: "White folks do see what they want to see. And that's what makes them so damn **dangerous**. If you going to help Pinchy, or even help yourself, you best not forget that" (Johnson 64). Zane assumes that white people will want to see him as white and therefore treat him as such; Josiah, however, is aware that those same white people could just as easily decide they want to see Zane as black and instantly turn on him. This danger Josiah warns of is then realized

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almost immediately for Zane and Josiah, when they are knocked unconscious and kidnapped by members of the Jefferson-White clan. The same danger also immediately strikes Carl back in Tupelo, when Huey, the KKK leader Zane had narrowly escaped at the beginning of the narrative, sees through Carl's Englishman act and realizes he is African American. Huey hints that he has figured Carl out when the group is looking at photographs of lynched African Americans. When one of the other men points out that one of the lynched bodies appears white, Huey affirms that the murdered man was in fact black: "Don't you worry. If there's one thing I knows it's niggers, and I know a nigger when I see one. No matter how **pale** his skin might be" (Johnson 75) . Ironically, although Huey is correct that Carl is lying about his identity, he still misrecognizes him, thinking Carl is Zane: "And I promised my friends that I would introduce them to the famous **Incognegro**," he says menacingly as he holds Carl up to his would-be lynch mob (Johnson 78). Huey's insistence that he can accurately identify African Americans "no matter how pale" their skin is reveals simultaneously an awareness of the artificiality of the category of race – if a man's skin is pale, what exactly makes him black? – and a perverse indifference to that same artificiality. It does not matter to Huey that the category is an arbitrary and constructed one; he will still kill people for being in the wrong category.

After Huey captures Carl, he delivers a villainous monologue that reveals the true motivations for his racism: greed and unjustified paranoia. Cheryl Harris describes the way whiteness has historically functioned as a sort of possession in and of itself: "Nevertheless, whiteness retains its value as a 'consolation prize': it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy – the position to which Blacks have been consigned" (1758-1759). Thus race has served a pacifying function for lower-class whites who might otherwise question the

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economic order of things. As Harris remarks, "The wages of whiteness are available to all whites regardless of class position, even to those whites who are without power, money, or influence. Whiteness, the characteristic that distinguishes them from Blacks, serves as compensation even to those who lack material wealth" (1759). Huey reveals that his hostility towards African Americans comes in part from a suspicion that they "want what's **ours**," and explains what he means thus:

> You want our money, our education, our homes, our land. You even want our **women**, too. Don't waste time denying it. Your leaders, **Washington**, **Dubois**, that's basically what they're saying. It's understandable. We got the best stuff. Who **wouldn't** want all that we have? But I'm not going to let you take what's **mine**. I don't care if it's something I stole, I'd be a fool if I let you have it. That's just common sense. (Johnson 91)

For Huey, race is not so much about what the Other is as what the Other might take from the self. He does not even seem to necessarily believe there is anything essentially different or worse about black people per se; the only thing that seems to make black people black in his view is that they have been denied the privileges of whiteness. The white self then must defend its privileges and properties at all costs, no matter how unjustifiable or hypocritical his position is. Huey even seems to admit to this hypocrisy ("I don't care if it's something I stole"), but cannot let go of his hatred of those he knows he has harmed.

As *Incognegro* draws to a close, several of its plotlines are resolved in tragic fashion. Zane and Alonzo are unable to prevent Carl from being lynched, and Michaela is murdered by the sheriff. Zane and Alonzo do escape back to safety in Harlem, and in the graphic novel's

closing moments, Zane and, by extension, Johnson and Pleece deliver their final critique of the racism and racial essentialism that has helped to produce the alienation of the hard-boiled male.

Near the end of *Incognegro*, we see Zane choose a particular photograph to run as his author photo for his "Incognegro" column in newspapers, although we do not see the photograph itself at first. The final scene suddenly takes us back to the KKK leader Huey, arriving in the town of Fayetteville, Missouri and promising, "I'm going to take care of **your** nigger problem, **too.** That's how I **do** things" (Johnson 132). Huey is smug and triumphant coming off Carl's lynching, confident that he is about to find similar success in Fayetteville. The tables are turned, however, when a newspaper boy calls Huey a "nigger" and Huey looks at the newspaper to discover why: under the headline "Incognegro: Negro Race Spy's Identity Revealed!" is a picture of Huey himself (Johnson 133 – 134). As an angry mob gathers menacingly around Huey in a huge two-page splash panel that deliberately echoes the opening page of the graphic novel as well as the image on page 104 presaging Carl's lynching, Huey weakly protests, "Hi, y'all. Uh, there seems to be a case of **mistaken identity**" (Johnson 135). The fact that Huey, the KKK leader, is now the one about to be lynched reveals the crack in the racial hierarchy that will, hopefully, eventually erase the boundary between whiteness and blackness: in a system based on violent racial subjugation, whoever is black and therefore to be subjugated ultimately depends on whoever people decide is black. There is no true, objective criteria or quality to justify the violence of racism, and therefore ultimately no objective criteria for justifying racial identity itself. By turning the logic of the system against itself, Zane reveals its arbitrariness and absurdity. Getting Huey lynched is a form of personal revenge for Zane, but it is also a critique of the violent, paranoid, and irrational culture of American racism.

Given that *Incognegro* is a period piece set in the 1930s, and indeed given that racism is still a powerful force in America into the present, Johnson cannot realistically have Zane topple the institution of racism overnight. Nevertheless, by having Zane expose the essential lie of racism, Johnson points out the flaw in the system that, if exploited, can eventually lead to its dismantling and therefore alleviate the racial causes of the hard-boiled alienation that plagues American culture to this day.

Regarding the trope of the hard-boiled male in general, recall the earlier critical point about the role whiteness plays in the archetype. As Abbott argues, readers encounter "a persistent, crippling dread from within these white male protagonists over the precariousness of their whiteness, and what it would mean for its construction to be revealed" (*Street* 94); the ending of *Incognegro* shows both how this problem can be deconstructed and how it can be pursued to a catastrophic end. On the one hand, Zane, having effectively played the part of a hard-boiled white male, is able to leave that role behind when he and Alonzo return to Harlem. Giving his brother a tour of the city, Zane explains the expanded opportunities of their new environment, telling Alonzo that it is "the age of the **new Negro**" and that he can "**create** any identity that you want" (Johnson 129). When Alonzo reacts incredulously, Zane assures him that "That's the **best** thing: identity is **open-ended**. Why have just **one?**" (Johnson 129). Unlike the traditional hard-boiled male, Zane understands that he is not locked into just one way of being in the world. As discussed above, part of Breu's definition of the hard-boiled male is his "shell-like exterior"; one of the main characteristics of shells is that, once fully formed, they do not really change or grow. A shell is simple, hard, inflexible, and unchangeable; for the classic hard-boiled male, whiteness is a key part of that shell. The fixity of the hard-boiled male's whiteness gives him definition, but also keeps him stuck in place, alone and unable to connect to others. With a

fluid understanding of identity, Zane is able to liberate himself from that trap of racial identity essentialism. Despite the fact that he still has to deal with a racist world, Zane is able to enjoy a type of freedom in his relationships with others that has traditionally eluded the white hard-boiled male. His work as a journalist allows him to articulate the truth in a similar manner to the hard-boiled detective's way of solving mysteries; but unlike the detective, Zane as a journalist can use that truth to bring people together through his publications. His work serves a broader community and fulfills a larger social mission in a way that the hard-boiled detective's work cannot. By properly understanding the fluidity and contingency of his own identity, Zane is able to adopt but also ultimately to discard the hard-boiled persona that traditionally defines the tradition's male protagonists, placing him within the continuum of post-*noir* protagonists.

"Jerry Understood Everything…": Revising Hard-Boiled Heterosexuality in *The Song Is You*

Where Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece successfully deconstruct the racial aspect of the hard-boiled male identity in *Incognegro*, Megan Abbott does something similar with the presumed heterosexuality of the hard-boiled male in her 2007 novel *The Song Is You*. Abbott is both a scholar and a creative author; before she began writing novels, she earned a Ph.D. in English from New York University. Her first published book was not a novel but a 2002 critical study entitled *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*. In many ways, the four novels that she wrote after publishing that initial study – *Die a Little*, *The Song Is You*, *Queenpin*, and *Bury Me Deep* – are all revisionist hard-boiled crime stories that continue the intellectual project begun in her critical work. Her fiction is, in part, criticism pursued by other means. Here, I want to examine the way she uses a subplot in her novel *The Song Is You* to question and undermine the assumption of normative heterosexuality present in

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virtually all classic hard-boiled/*noir* texts. The suggestive queer subtext in *The Song Is You* does not represent the only time Abbott has grafted subtle psychosexual themes onto a traditional *noir* framework; I have argued in an earlier article[31] for the reading of an incestuous undercurrent in the plot of her first novel, *Die a Little*. The queer dimension of *The Song Is You* is a further step in Abbott's artistic/critical interrogation of the *noir* tradition.

Generally speaking, we tend to assume that the male heroes (or anti-heroes) of classic hard-boiled/*noir* narratives are heterosexual. Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade is as straight as the tool he is named after, even if he refuses to play the sap for *femme fatale* Brigid O'Shaughnessy; in fact, in *The Maltese Falcon*, being gay is equated with effeminate villainy in the character of Joel Cairo. Raymond Chandler's detective Phillip Marlowe always seems to go home alone, but at the very least he's never taking any men with him. James M. Cain's protagonists in *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are so overwhelmed by their desire for women that they allow it to drive them to murder. If there is one thing we know for sure about the hard-boiled male, it is that he is not interested in other men.

On the other hand, the hard-boiled male has never fully conformed to a traditional heterosexual gender role, either. The hard-boiled male never has a wife, rarely has a stable girlfriend, and what encounters he does have with women almost invariably turn sour and disastrous. The traditional social imperatives to form a couple, procreate, and raise children are simply of no interest to the hard-boiled male, who tends instead to be appear interested only in work (as in the case of Hammett's character the Continental Op) or is manifestly uncomfortable with the prospect of a relationship. At worst, the hard-boiled male is incapable of separating his sexual feelings from an impulse to violence. Dorothy B. Hughes's 1947 classic novel *In a Lonely*

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[31] See Lota, Kenneth. "Cool Girls and Bad Girls: Reinventing the *Femme Fatale* in Contemporary Fiction." *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 33.1 (Spring 2016): 150 – 170.

Place provides an exemplary case study of the hard-boiled male as sexually aberrant outcast. Its antihero, former WWII fighter pilot Dix Steele, is a serial killer, prowling the streets of Los Angeles and preying on young women. Consider the narrator's description of Dix early on in the narrative: "He'd go out alone. The lone wolf. There was a savage delight in being a lone wolf. It wasn't happiness. It was the reverse of the coin, as hate was the reverse of love. Only a thin press of metal between the sides of a coin. He was a lone wolf; he didn't have to account to anyone nor did he intend to" (Hughes 21 – 22). Although Dix's pathological tendencies push him to a further extreme than most hard-boiled characters, his "lone wolf" persona is in many ways a logical extension of the archetype. It is no coincidence that when *In a Lonely Place* was adapted (very loosely) into a film by Nicolas Ray in 1950, Dix was played by Humphrey Bogart, the same iconic actor who had already portrayed so many hard-boiled heroes. Both versions of Hughes's narrative hint at non-normative sexual identities lurking just beneath the surface of the hard-boiled male persona, but ultimately stop short of a full interrogation of hard-boiled sexuality.

By contrast, Abbott's novel *The Song Is You* raises question about the hard-boiled male's sexual identity from a contemporary point of view. Although such is never explicitly stated in the novel, I believe there is sufficient evidence to read Gil Hopkins,[32] the novel's protagonist, as someone who is suppressing his same-sex attractions, to the point that he scarcely even recognizes them as such. Gil is in many ways a typical hard-boiled male protagonist – he lives in Hollywood in 1951, drinks too much, and lives alone, and his decision to work as an amateur detective to investigate the 1949 disappearance of the actress Jean Spangler[33] drives the novel's

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[32] The novel refers to the protagonist as both "Gil" and "Hop" throughout; I will quote from the novel accurately, but will simply refer to him as "Gil" myself for the sake of consistency.

[33] Inspired by a real-life unsolved disappearance. Jean Spangler was a dancer and actress whose disappearance remains unsolved. An article on the front page of the October 13, 1949 *San Bernardino Sun* reports that actor Kirk Douglas was questioned regarding her disappearance, after a note addressed to a "Kirk" was found in her purse, which was discovered in Griffith Park ("Actor Quizzed on Missing Girl").

central plot. He speaks in the sort of cynical one-liners that would make Bogart proud. He even

chases women: his sexual interest in numerous women is repeatedly affirmed and is suggested as

one of the reasons for his separation from his estranged wife, Midge. If *The Song Is You* had

been released in 1951 and adapted into a movie the next year with the queer dimensions of the

narrative removed, Gil likely would have been played by an actor like Richard Widmark.[34] He is

not as weathered as Humphrey Bogart, nor as square-jawed as Charlton Heston,[35] nor as cynical

as Robert Mitchum.[36] He does not suggest overt queerness in the way Peter Lorre might, but

neither does he seem to preclude it in the way Bogart or Henry Fonda would. On the surface, he

is a conventional 1950s heterosexual American man. However, it is in the subplot involving his

wife and his old friend Jerry that the cracks in Gil's façade begin to show, at least for the 21st-

century reader. The gradually revealed story of Gil, Midge, and Jerry's shared past and present

suggests that Gil is acting on deep-seated impulses he is unconscious or at best half-conscious of.

By rendering an otherwise fairly typical hard-boiled male protagonist as a deeply closeted and

un-self-aware bisexual, Abbott undermines the fantasy of self-control and normative sexuality

that hard-boiled/*noir* fiction and film have traditionally reinforced.

Gil Hopkins as a character continues a project Abbott had begun in her criticism.

Abbott's critical work highlights cracks in the straight-masculinity image of hard-boiled fiction:

as she puts it, her argument demonstrates that "far from generic and stable, masculinity in these

novels is a fraught and tentative thing, and not merely as a result of the femme fatale's betrayal"

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[34] An actor known for playing nervous, twitchy, shady leading men in films such as *Night and the City* (1950, dir. Jules Dassin) and *Pickup on South Street* (1953, dir. Samuel Fuller).

[35] An iconic actor and later president of the National Rifle Association, known for playing straight-laced protagonists in films such as *Touch of Evil* (1958, dir. Orson Welles) and *Ben-Hur* (1959, dir. William Wyler).

[36] A leading man whose persona conveyed a world-weary cynicism and dissolution in films such as *Out of the Past* (1947, dir. Jacques Tourneur) and *Crossfire* (1947, dir. Edward Dmytryk) or outright villainy in films such as *The Night of the Hunter* (1955, dir. Charles Laughton) and *Cape Fear* (1962, dir. J. Lee Thompson).

and that "the protagonists' reaction to the femme fatale derives from an already threatened and threatening configuration of masculinity" (Abbott *Street* 8). For Abbott, the hard-boiled protagonists of Chandler's and Cain's novels are not old-fashioned, two-dimensional, confident tough guys – rather, the hard-boiled male "is a dissembling figure constantly on the verge of nervous collapse or even hysteria, a figure that often finds himself the victim of claustration and sequestration not because of his (actual or mistaken) criminal guilt, but because of his questionable behavior, his deviance from gender norms or expectations" (Abbott *Street* 8). Abbott devotes an entire chapter to the tension caused by what she calls "the anxious relation of the hardboiled male to his own body, the sense that his body (and, potentially, its desires) can or will betray him" (*Street* 72). Abbott notes that there was some awareness of the potential sexual subversion of hard-boiled fiction as early as 1949, when Gershon Legman published a pamphlet entitled *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (*Street* 73). Legman's book, which took part in a more generalized McCarthy-era paranoid hysteria about subversive messages in popular culture, reads homosexuality into comic books and pulp fiction and worries about the effect this supposed homosexuality might have on impressionable young (male) readers. Abbott paraphrases Legman's concerns thus:

> What if young boys begin to identify with these weak pulp heroes? Will they never take up their appropriate patriarchal role? What will happen to the family? Here, we detect once again the anxiety that surrounds the figure of the marginal white man in post-World War II America: loners like Philip Marlowe, unmarried and childless drifters like Frank Chambers… how can one be sure of them? Who are these men who are not fathers, not husbands, not domestic patriarchs, and not company men? (*Street* 74)

For Legman and other similar critics at the time, homosexuality was not simply an inherent trait of some people but a sinister lifestyle that could be spread through secret indoctrination, like communism. A writer does not even have to provide overt depictions of homosexuals or homosexual activity in order to achieve his goal of furthering homosexual propaganda: simply failing to depict normative heterosexuality in a way satisfactory to Legman was enough to raise the charge. Rather than finding positive evidence of a homosexual agenda in hard-boiled fiction, Abbott interprets Legman as reading homosexuality into these texts through what is not there:

> Legman, among others, expresses a dread of 'catching something' from these novels: catching homosexuality, a role out of the Oedipal relations, a role not socially prescribed and therefore deeply dangerous. Presumably, heterosexual sex affirms a host of ideals: normalcy, health, masculinity, Westernness, Americanness. The hardboiled hero's non-involvement in conventional romances, the marriage convention, fatherhood all become dubious. (Abbott *Street* 76-77)

Unsurprisingly, Legman's charges offended Chandler, who was himself no champion of homosexuality; Chandler may have explicitly affirmed Philip Marlowe's heterosexuality in *The Long Goodbye* as a reaction to Legman (Abbott *Street* 78). Abbott, writing from a 21st-century critical perspective, obviously lacks Legman's paranoid hostility to homosexuality; but she argues that he was more right about hard-boiled fiction's potential gender subversiveness than most readers at the time or since have understood. In fact, in Abbott's understanding, the subversion of hard-boiled fiction goes even deeper than Legman alleged; for Abbott, "the detective frequently embodies a white male fear of fugitive desires, of experiencing desires that are unsanctioned. These desires are not only sexual but also desires for less rigid gender roles, for less rigid definitions of what it means to be a man" (*Street* 80-81). This "fear of fugitive

desires" can lead to overcompensation in the performance of both racialized and gendered roles, yielding the toxic white masculinity so often on display in classic *noir* fiction and film. Rather than accept the possibility of fluidity in racial, gender, or sexual identity, the hard-boiled male acts out in increasingly frantic and violent ways. Thus, despite the hard-boiled male's status as one of America's main (white) masculine archetypes alongside the cowboy and the soldier, he has always carried within himself the seed of his own subversion.

This seed has begun to sprout in Abbott's novel *The Song Is You* in the just-barely-suppressed desires of her protagonist Gil Hopkins. To briefly summarize the novel's plot: Gil Hopkins is a puff-piece-writing publicity man in 1951 Hollywood who, two years after the disappearance of actress Jean Spangler, decides to pursue an amateur investigation of the case himself. He is motivated by guilt: he had seen Jean earlier on the night of her disappearance but had failed to give his evidence to the police. Along the way, he discovers a dark, violent sexual underworld in Hollywood. Although he fears that Jean may have been raped and murdered by a Martin & Lewis-esque[37] pair of celebrities, he ultimately learns that she survived their assault and escaped town to live under a new identity. The novel is of a piece with Abbott's other works *Die a Little* and *Queenpin* in that it combines a very traditional *noir* surface – the plot, characters, and dialogue all seem taken straight from 1950s fiction and film – with a contemporary, self-consciously critical exploration of themes relating to gender, sexuality, and patriarchy. One of the novel's major thematic threads deals with the pervasive misogyny of the *noir* universe – hatred of and violence towards women is everywhere in the novel, including within our protagonist – but I will not be primarily focusing on that issue in this reading. The novel's exploration of violence and misogyny, which manifests most clearly in the mystery

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[37] Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, the singer and actor known for their comedic stage, radio, film, and television performances together from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s.

plotline centering on Jean Spangler, puts it in a continuum with earlier *noir* works such as

Hughes's 1947 novel *In a Lonely Place*, Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*, and James

Ellroy's 1987 novel *The Black Dahlia*. The major issue in *The Song Is You* that I am exploring

here is the queer subtext surrounding its protagonist. The misogyny and the queer elements of the

text are intertwined; the protagonist's unhealthy relationship to women, especially his wife,

seems to stem both from a hatred of women and from an inability to articulate and understand his

own desires and drives. Nevertheless, for the sake of manageability, I am primarily highlighting

the novel's queer dimension, although of course the issues of internalized misogyny and

homophobia are not entirely inextricable from each other.

Although Gil spends the majority of the novel pursuing his amateur investigation of the

disappearance of Jean Spangler, he periodically seeks out his old friend and war-buddy Jerry

Schuyler as a source of advice and consolation. Much of Gil's behavior in the novel can be

attributed to a suppressed, unacknowledged queer attraction to Jerry, so let me present a few of

the most overt surface-level clues that have led me to read a queer subtext in the novel. There is

often a flirtatious undertone to Gil and Jerry's conversations: during an early meeting between

the two, Jerry winks at Gil, which causes Gil to suppress an urge to touch Jerry (42). Gil then

addresses Jerry as "handsome," asking him, "How's my wife, handsome?" (42); he later calls

Jerry "sweetheart" (87). When Jerry sees Gil three times in two days, Jerry is taken aback

because Gil "usually plays hard to get" and jokes that "People'll start to talk," a saying that

usually refers to rumors of a sexual affair (172). At one point, after it has been clearly established

that Gil and Jerry are using the word "meet" as a euphemism for sex, Jerry asks Gil if he "*met*"

another man, implying that Jerry knows Gil finds other men sexually attractive – an implication

that Gil does not deny (42). For an ostensibly straight man, Gil is unusually aware of Jerry's

physical presence, including his "dark hooded eyes" and "firm, solid hand" (86, 235). At one

point, as Gil goes to Jerry's house in a frenzy, the narrator notes that "It was something about

him wanting to see Jerry, like he always did" (57); why does he "always" want to see another

man? Near the novel's end, Gil, thinking of how only Jerry could comfort him, thinks, "Jerry

knew him. He knew him. There were things Jerry…Jerry understood everything. Jerry, he…"[38]

trailing off into an apparently un-thinkable thought about how deeply and intimately Jerry

understands him (235). When Gil learns late in the novel that one woman has likely had a lesbian

relationship with another, he intuitively tells that woman "You love her" even though he "didn't

know where it came from or what he meant by it" (229). I go into greater depth about these and

other related elements of the novel below, but these types of hints – the "joking" flirting between

Gil and Jerry, Jerry's unambiguous insinuation that Gil finds men attractive, Gil's attention to

Jerry's physicality, the way Gil habitually turns to thoughts of Jerry for comfort, Gil's instinctive

and sympathetic recognition of another queer relationship in a time when such relationships were

not commonly acknowledged – should collectively make clear why a queer reading of the novel

is possible and appropriate.

At both the beginning and end of the novel, the narrative gestures obliquely to the notion

that Gil has secrets he is concealing from the rest of the world. In his first conversation in the

novel, Gil speaks with Jean and her friend Iolene, a "colored girl…who sang in the movie" they

were both working on (*Song* 12). As Gil flirts with Jean, Iolene reminds Jean that she has

"enough trouble with fellows number one, two, and three," to which Gil responds that he does

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[38] For clarity, I will note here that *The Song Is You* uses a heterodiegetic narrator who is able to dip into and out of the thoughts of various characters, most often Gil himself. Many of the quotations I will reference make use of free indirect discourse – language that is not quite as internal to the characters as stream-of-consciousness or direct narration would be, but is more reflective of their inner states than the sort of strictly surface-level narration that, for example, Hammett uses in *The Maltese Falcon*.

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not "have to be number four" and would "settle for three and a half" (*Song* 12). When Iolene

points out that it is "a pity" that Gil is apparently only "half" a man, he replies, "'It's my secret

shame'" (*Song* 12). On a first reading, this exchange seems like lighthearted, meaningless banter;

in light of the novel as a whole, however, the joke that Gil is somehow only "half a man" and

bears a "secret shame" resonates darkly with the possibility of his being queer. A passage near

the end of the novel similarly alludes to, but does not name, Gil's secret. As he is pondering

everything he has been through and reflecting on the people he has encountered, the narrator

(focalizing through Gil's thoughts) says, "And there was Midge. Midge and the half-truth that

always lingered, twisting and turning in the hollow between them" (*Song* 231). Secret shames,

half-truths, hollows – clearly something is missing from Gil's public version of himself.

Something is unaccounted for. I assert here and below that Gil's real "secret shame" is a

queerness he cannot name or reckon with.

When Jerry is first introduced into the novel, it seems possible that Gil merely sees him

as a good friend. The first time Jerry is mentioned, we get a brief history of their friendship: "At

least four nights a week, he knocked back a few with Jerry Schuyler, his closest friend, with

whom he worked side by side through three years of churning out copy for *Yank* and *Stars and

Stripes*. Over scotch, sometimes a martini, they'd swap stories from the front, just like they'd

done during the war" (Abbott *Song* 27). While it is within the conventional bounds of male

friendship for the novel's 1950s setting to have a drinking buddy, "at least four nights a week"

immediately seems excessive. Apparently, more than half of Gil's nightlife is devoted to Jerry,

implying he spends more time with Jerry than with his wife. We are then told that, for Gil, "Jerry

was the only person in his new life who knew him before he came to Los Angeles. Just possibly,

Jerry was the only person who even knew where he was from, or that he was from anyplace at

all" (Abbott *Song* 27-28). Although the notion that Jerry was the only person who knew that Gil "was from anyplace at all" makes it seem at the very least that the two share a very close friendship, this first mention of Jerry is brushed off when Gil "remembered he probably couldn't see Jerry after all. Jerry was getting pretty hard to see these days, with the new lady in his life" (*Song* 28). On first reading, it seems that the "new lady" is simply a new girlfriend Jerry has started seeing; only later in the novel do we learn that the "new lady" is, in a strange twist, Gil's own wife.

When Jerry finally does appear, he and Gil begin talking about Jean Spangler, whose disappearance both know of from their journalism work. Gil mentions the night he met Jean, leading Jerry to ask him, "Were you the poppa?" (*Song* 41). Gil replies "I said I met her" and follows with "Didn't say I *met* her," emphasizing the "met" in a way that implies that the word is being used as euphemism for sex (*Song* 41). Jerry tells Gil, "Knowing you, you can see where I'd get confused," before asking about Gil's current interest in Jean (*Song* 41). For a moment, this exchange seems simply to reinforce Gil's sexual interest in women. However, the issue is complicated just a few lines later, when Gil says of a male reporter, "Sure, I think I met him," Jerry interrupts him by asking "But didn't *meet* him, eh?" with the same euphemistic emphasis on "meet," and Gil coyly replies "Gentlemen never tell, Jerry. You know that" (*Song* 41-42). While a casual reading might pass over this exchange without much notice, the repetition of "meet" as a suggestive word applied to a *male* character suddenly raises the possibility of sexual contact between Gil and another man. Rather than reacting with either incomprehension or anger, as would be expected from a more stereotypical heterosexual tough guy, Gil instead turns strangely ironic and demure. He does not deny the possibility that he *would* have sexual contact with another man; he only denies that he would openly admit to such contact, and jokingly

ascribes such a refusal to a quaint polite society maxim. Tellingly, Gil immediately has to resist an urge to touch Jerry: "Jerry winked at him and Hop felt, suddenly and simultaneous with the first flush of the gin, the reassuring warmth of his oldest friend, dearest pal, cracking a sad-eyed smile. He resisted the urge to shove him, press his first encouragingly into his friend's arm" (Abbott *Song* 42). The next words out of Jerry's mouth are "So how's my wife, handsome?," to which Jerry replies, "Hell on wheels, Hop … You oughta know … After all, she learned it all from you" (*Song* 42). Innuendo, calling Jerry "handsome," practically blushing like a schoolgirl and having to resist touching Jerry – clearly there is some dimension to this friendship that remains to be explained. In her criticism, Abbott argues that "the seeming apex of tough masculinity" that is the hard-boiled male "might at the same time embody gender disintegration or a pleasurably tangled network of sexuality and homosociality, of eroticism and intimacy that is not constituted through male/female at all" (*Street* 88). Thus, for critics like Legman, there was a hidden threat to the patriarchal order embodied by these characters, and a threat to the patriarchal order is a threat to every type of order: "If these gender binaries are disabled, who is to say how secure any of them are, be they gay/straight, black/white, Eastern/Western, capitalist/communist, American/Soviet?" (*Street* 88). In the relationship between Gil and Jerry, we can see Abbott-as-novelist toying with the tensions that Abbott-as-critic had earlier identified.

We begin to learn the exact nature of that mysterious backstory a little later in the novel. When Gil is conversing with his fellow reporter Frannie Adair, he tells her part of the story of his and Midge's separation: "'you know what Midge said to me? The last thing before she left me. She said, "What, did you think you could keep throwing us together again and again, talking hot about me to Jerry and Jerry to me, practically shoving us both under the covers, and we wouldn't

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end up like this?" And yet, Frannie, here's the funny part,' he said. 'I was surprised'" (*Song* 63).

This story is the first hint that Gil may have subconsciously sabotaged his own relationship with his wife as a covert way of gaining intimacy with Jerry. It is one thing for an ostensibly heterosexual man to "talk hot" about his wife to a friend, particularly if the man is boasting about his own sexual prowess or how attractive his wife is; but why would he "talk hot" about his friend to his wife? Why would he essentially advertise the sexual attractiveness of another man to his wife unless he was himself affected by that attractiveness? The way he talks to *both* of them about each other suggests he experiences an attraction to both. While Gil himself still seems unaware of this possibility, something about the way he tells the story strikes Frannie as odd, as the heterodiegetic narrator registers: "She gave him a long look, reacting to something in his voice. Something funny. Then, gently, she said, 'Jerry doesn't seem the type to steal a fella's girl'" (*Song* 63). The "something funny" Frannie hears in Gil's voice would be the way he unconsciously reveals his attraction to Jerry in talking about him. The fact that she then speaks "gently" to him suggests that she is more cognizant of Gil's feelings than he himself is and is being sensitive towards him. When Gil defends Jerry by saying that he is "a stand-up guy" who would "give me the shirt off his back," Frannie quips back, " 'So you gave him the wife off yours in return?'" (*Song* 63). Frannie's observation that there is "something funny" in Gil's voice as he tells the story begins to point us to the larger truth that will be continually hinted at but never explicitly stated in the novel – that the situation between Midge and Jerry happened as it did not because Gil wanted to get rid of Midge, but because he himself wanted to be with Jerry.

We eventually learn more of the specifics of how Gil pushed Midge and Jerry together, at which point the strangeness of the situation becomes significantly more obvious. As he is reflecting on the failure of his marriage, Gil recalls how Midge felt about the situation:

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It galled her that after two or more years of Hop pressing her and Jerry in corners together, inviting him over for her pot roast, then leaving them alone together before coffee – while he went off on some job scooping up a starlet from an opium den in Chinatown – having Jerry pick her up at nightclubs when she was too smashed to drive home, making her take his old pal shopping for new suits at Bullock's, asking him to take his place on her birthday, buy her a steak Diane at Perino's so he could drive to Caliente and bail a director out of jail. Could he really be surprised? Or, now that he thought about it, was he only surprised at the twinge of anger, frustration, the thin strand of regret (no, not that) he felt now that the transaction was complete? (*Song* 84)

While the strange three-person nature of the relationship had been mentioned earlier on, it is only when we learn such surprising details as Gil's having Jerry substitute for him on his wife's birthday that the true extent of the situation becomes clear. Jerry has taken Gil's place in everything from chores (driving her when she is drunk) to mundane social interactions (dinner) to special, personal occasions (her birthday). Gil has clearly crossed the line from casually having a friend around to essentially replacing himself in his marital relationship with another man. If it were simply the case that Gil did not love Midge and did not want to be around her, he could have left her alone on all these occasions. If he had been genuinely clueless about the likely result of his actions (i.e., Jerry and Midge becoming a couple), he likely would have been very angry with Jerry – and yet we see throughout the novel that he continues to be friendly with and even dependent on Jerry. The close third-person narration admits and then immediately retracts the possibility of "regret" for his behavior; so, if Gil is not feeling regret over the loss of his wife to his best friend, what is he feeling? As with so much about this novel, we are not given

a clear answer to this question, but it seems likely that Gil's true feeling is not regret, but a shame of himself so deep that he cannot even admit to himself that which he is ashamed about.

The narrative suggests that Gil is both attracted to and jealous of how conventionally and securely masculine Jerry is. Jerry and Midge's affair is not described in particularly lurid or sordid terms; rather, Jerry's motivations are portrayed in pointedly stereotyped images drawn from bucolic 1950s ideals about the heteronormative nuclear family, as the heterodiegetic narrator describes it:

> Turns out, the more time Jerry spent in Hop's house, with Hop's wife (no blank face there, a face all too alive with anger, despair, desperation), the more he realized he wanted a house, kids tugging at his pant legs, a dog running down the driveway, a lawn to mow, and most of all, a lovely, loving wife – a wife with so many sad stories of her own that she'd be waiting eagerly, gratefully on the front porch when he came home from the gloom of the city beat. A wife so glad to see him that he might cry. A wife like Midge. (*Song* 85)

While most of the imagery in this passage is stock 1950s domesticity, the description of Midge as a wife "with so many sad stories" undercuts the placid clichés. Jerry's desires are conventional on the surface, but are in fact enabled by a misogynistic reliance on Midge's sadness and subservience. It is implied that Midge is so sad because of the dysfunction in her relationship with Gil, but at this point in the novel the specifics of that dysfunction are still nebulous. Jerry seems to be the type of character Gershon Legman wanted fiction to have so that impressionable young readers might emulate him, but Abbott suggests the oppression that enables that patriarchal role to flourish. By embodying a typically 1950s norm of heterosexual masculinity, Jerry implicitly highlights by contrast Gil's lack of these qualities.

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Immediately after this description of Jerry's conventional style of manliness, we learn that Gil's perceived shortcomings have had very painful, dire consequences already. The story of Midge's failed suicide attempt, which is not alluded to until it is introduced with the disturbingly casual sentence "It had been a halfhearted attempt at best," reveal just how devastating the dysfunction of their marriage has been (*Song* 85) . The differences between Gil's and Jerry's reactions are striking: where Gil feels "guilt-ridden enough to go on a twelve-hour bender," Jerry "spent every second of visiting hours all three days glued to her bedside, invoking alternately soft and firm warnings to Midge, insisting she promise that she'd never, ever do anything like that again" (*Song* 86). Gil understands but cannot openly acknowledge his own guilt in Midge's situation, a fact that also explains why it has taken so long for the matter of the suicide to even be raised in the novel, as well as the off-handed manner in which it is discussed. The essential strangeness of the whole affair is captured in a single sentence about Midge's time in the hospital: "Hop watched from the doorway as Midge focused on Jerry's dark hooded eyes, listening to every word, nodding and nodding, and slowly, slowly losing all interest in Hop – even in making him sorry, which had been her most favorite thing, the only thing she enjoyed, for so long" (*Song* 86). Gil's distant spectatorship, passively watching what is very obviously a tragic romance bloom between his wife and friend, makes more sense if we work with the idea that Gil is repressing his own desire for a romance with Jerry and projecting himself into Midge's position. The mention of Jerry's "dark hooded eyes" provides a subtle indication of Gil's greater attention to Jerry's body than to Midge's. The mention of Midge's interest in "making him sorry" as "her most favorite thing" reveals Gil's limited understanding of Midge's perspective: he knows she is not happy with him, but cannot explain to himself why she is upset. In his perception, her relationship to him consists entirely of inducing guilt. The next sentence

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implies that such a guilt-based relationship was inevitable for Gil: "Later, Hop would be sorry without her even trying – sorry for Jerry when, ten months later, she moved out of their house and into his bachelor pad, consummating what was, when he thought about it, an eventuality long in the cards, a romance begun even before they'd met" (*Song* 86). Why would this situation have been "an eventuality long in the cards"; why would Jerry and Midge's romance have begun "even before they'd met"? Clearly, the common factor here, the thing that made the situation inevitable, is Gil himself, and something about his behavior he cannot consciously account for.

Gil's line of thought on this subject is suddenly interrupted by Jerry himself, who has noticed Gil sitting in his car outside Jerry's house, and asks Gil, "You're too embarrassed to show your face so you stake me out like a cheating wife?" (*Song* 86). Gil shrugs the comparison off, but as the heterodiegetic narrator notes, he is "playing it jokey, wishing it were" (*Song* 86). In the ensuing conversation, Gil says that the scratches on Jerry's face, incurred in the throes of passion with Midge, are "the price you pay for those spectacular breasts"; in response, Jerry "looked down at his own chest" and replies "They're okay, I guess" (*Song* 87). At the end of the conversation, Gil refers to Jerry as "sweetheart" (*Song* 87). The comparison to a cheating wife, a joke about Jerry himself having breasts, calling Jerry sweetheart – although this entire conversation takes place in a sarcastic tough-guy tone, there is also some nervous joking around borders of gender and sexuality going on here. There is something about their relationship that falls outside the bounds of strict heteronormative male friendship, but they can only acknowledge it sideways and through jokes in order for Gil to maintain plausible deniability. As the narrator informs us, Gil wishes these jokes were merely jokes, but knows that there is more to them that he cannot openly acknowledge.

Further evidence of Gil's discomfort with traditional heterosexual masculinity arises when Midge confronts him at his apartment slightly later in the novel. Gil is "struck by the sight of her standing in their home" and reflects on their history together: "It had been barely a month but truthfully it was much, much longer. Had they ever really lived here together, like a married couple, reading the newspaper and eating toast and jelly, doing what married couples do, like…What do married couples do?" (*Song* 97). Despite having gone through years of marriage with Midge, Gil is only able to imagine a simplified cartoon version of marriage that consists of routine morning activities. One of the obvious unstated answers to his question "What do married couples do?" is, of course, have sex; we know Gil and Midge did indeed have sex, but we have increasingly powerful reasons to doubt that his heart was in it. More than just the issue of sex, of course, Gil's failure to fulfill or even imagine the expected roles of a husband reveals an elision at the heart of his sexual identity. Midge seems to intuit this issue when Gil says to her, "So things are pretty cozy with you and Jerry"; she replies, "Funny how it can be with a real man"; and Gil responds, "I can't imagine" (*Song* 100). Indeed, Gil cannot imagine, in more ways than one: he cannot imagine what it is like to be "a real man," since, by the social standards of his time, he as a repressed queer person is not one; and he cannot imagine what it is like to be *with* "a real man" like Jerry, however much he might like to. Recall his earlier joke with Iolene that he is only "half a man" – the repeated motif of Gil's somehow not being a "full" or "real" man implies that he does not fulfill conventional sexual or gendered roles. Even putting aside the evidence for Gil's attraction to another man, his failure to be "a real man" in the eyes of others marks him as queer in terms of gender role as well as sexual orientation.

The subplot concerning Midge and Jerry is set aside for much of the middle of *The Song Is You*, but resurfaces towards the novel's final third. As he reaches a particularly low point in

his investigation of Jean Spangler's disappearance, Gil goes to see Jerry for advice. The first mention of Jerry in this section of the novel casts him in a nearly explicitly romantic light: "Jerry's gray sedan was there, though, and before he could stop himself, he'd pulled over. Seeing his friend now, the one solid, fixed thing in his life – that might help him pull it together, get him through the last stretch" (*Song* 171). Few people would consider someone who arguably stole their spouse to be a good friend, let alone "the one solid, fixed thing" in their lives. Under normal circumstances, as nobly as Jerry may have behaved, anyone would consider his and Midge's relationship to be a betrayal of Gil; Gil's unyielding reliance on Jerry suggests that Midge must never have been as important to him as Jerry was. Jerry, again, seems partially aware of the oddness of the situation. When asking Gil about how worn out he looks, Jerry once again jokingly and ever-so-glancingly acknowledges the quasi-romantic nature of their relationship: "'You usually play hard to get. Now I see you, what, three times in two days? People'll start to talk,' he teased, but there was concern in his eyes and it made Hop worry about himself" (*Song* 172). Once again, Jerry and Gil's relationship is described in terms – "hard to get," "people will talk" – usually reserved for clandestine romances. Jerry can always brush off the things he says as just sarcasm, but the larger pattern has implications. When Jerry asks Gil why he did something to Midge (exactly what is unstated for the moment, though we later learn there was a physical fight between them that possibly caused Midge to miscarry), Gil's overwhelming and conflicting emotions lead him to silence: "There were a lot of things Hop wanted to say, things that were gathering in him, knocking around, tangling his nerves, rising up under his skin, beneath his eyes. But he couldn't do anything with them. He wasn't sure why. Instead, he just shook his head" (*Song* 174). After this exceedingly awkward pause, Jerry salvages the conversation, saying, "She tells me she was never mad a minute in her life until she met you," to

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which Hop replies with "I'm just lucky, I guess" and then "See you later, sweetheart" (*Song* 174). So what exactly are the "things" roiling around inside Gil, nearly overwhelming him and yet remaining unspoken? The imagery emphasizes the physicality of Gil's reaction – the feelings are not merely in his "head" or "heart," as feelings are often said to be, but rather in his "nerves" and under his "skin" and "eyes." This conversation with Jerry affects Gil in a bodily way, suggesting physical impulses and desires that he must work to repress. Rather than confront the significance of his reaction, however, Gil once again retreats into the ostensibly ironic "sweetheart" and abandons the issue. Jerry seems to understand the unspoken dimension of this conversation and responds in kind: "'Gil…' Jerry's eyes were heavy. His mouth was slightly open as if he were going to say more. This was a classic Jerry gesture. Hop knew it meant Jerry was saying everything all at once" (*Song* 174). Gil and Jerry share an intimacy that goes beyond language; Jerry can say "everything" without saying anything. This type of intimacy is something conspicuously lacking from Gil's relationships with women, in which he constantly uses language as an ironic distancing device to shield himself. This type of intimacy between men is practically unheard-of in the *noir* canon as well; most *noir* men tend to have at best functional professional relationships with each other, and at worst to make deadly enemies of each other.

Towards the end of the novel, as he is drawing near the solution to the mystery, Gil grows frustrated thinking about all the people in his life whom he cannot quite connect with as he wants to. After trying not to think about Frannie and Midge, his thoughts turn to Jerry, in strangely idealizing terms: "He didn't even want to think about Jerry … After all the women Jerry had been with, all the things he'd seen on the job, how did he get off so noble, so uncontaminated and upright? Hop knew damn well why. It was the difference between them, the

thing Jerry had that he himself didn't have, never knew to want. He couldn't name it, but it lay there between them like an old promise" (*Song* 209). What is "the difference," the "thing" Gil didn't have and couldn't name? The novel offers no explicit answer, but the difference seems to be Jerry's secure, stable heterosexual identity. Jerry is, as we have been told, a "real man" whereas Gil is by implication not, is indeed only "half" a man. The invocation of "an old promise" between two war buddies suggests that they formed a uniquely close bond during their service together, perhaps a homoerotic bond; and yet it is a promise that is not going to be fulfilled. Jerry seems to be aware of Gil's suppressed queer desires – indeed, he often seems to understand them more clearly than Gil himself does – and accepts them without reciprocating. Gil longs for the calm understanding and acceptance he thinks Jerry could offer him, fantasizing about some alone time with Jerry at one point: "Maybe if Jerry were here, he thought. We could go fishing down there, rent one of those creaky rowboats, lean back and let it bobble. Then he could straighten out his thoughts.[39] Remind himself of what's what. Stop letting these women… Oh, fuck it all, fuck it all" (*Song* 210, ellipsis original). It is significant that Gil's mind trails off on the word "women" – as much as Gil does have an interest in all the women characters around him, his fantasy of quiet solitude and peace hinges on Jerry. Being around women seems ultimately to only drive him to confusion and frustration, as implied in his thinking "fuck it all" when they intrude on his fantasies of life with Jerry. For as fraught as his relationships with the various women in the novel have been, only his relationship with Jerry seems capable of fulfilling Gil's deepest emotional needs.

The final mention of Jerry in the novel leaves Gil's feelings towards him unresolved, but seems to hint that Gil is coming closer to self-awareness. Four years after solving the central

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[39] Thoughts that apparently are not "straight."

mystery of Jean Spangler's disappearance, Gil is still at loose ends in his personal life, ruminating over his failed marriage. He thinks back to the day two years earlier when Jerry and Midge moved out of town, a day he had meant to visit them but had failed to do so. He thinks about how he had meant to hug Midge one last time and how he had meant to say goodbye to Jerry: "Meant to shake Jerry's hand, his firm, solid hand that he'd seen holding tight to his ramshackle camera during the war, seen rat-a-tat-tat-ing at typewriters, covered with ink, curled around highball glasses, wherever. Jerry, he was it" (*Song* 235). The final "it" is a pronoun without a referent; to Gil, Jerry is not any specific thing, but everything. All the queer desires that Gil cannot name are contained in that "it." We also get an apparently unmotivated instance of Gil's thoughts lingering over Jerry's body – just as he had previously noticed Jerry's "dark eyes" in the hospital with Midge, Gil is now thing about Jerry's "firm, solid hand." Gil distracts himself in a way by thinking about all the different situations in which he has seen that hand – at war, at work, at the bar – but the choice of detail is telling. Gil's thoughts then turn to Midge and how deeply shamed by her he feels: "*Even she, who knows the worst of me, still can't see what I see just by looking in the mirror*" (*Song* 236). What is it that Gil sees when he looks in the mirror that disgusts him so? He sees the type of man who would have the thoughts he expresses to himself in the next paragraph of the novel: "And Jerry, well, Jerry. He knew he'd see Jerry again. That was in the cards. Jerry knew him. He knew him. There were things Jerry…Jerry understood everything. Jerry, he…" (*Song* 236). After the ellipsis, Gil suddenly thinks of Frannie, and Jerry is never mentioned again. The repetition that Jerry "knew him" recalls the earlier euphemistic use of "meet," as well as the idea of "knowing in the Biblical sense" – i.e., having sex. It is ambiguous whether this moment implies that Jerry and Gil have had an actual physical relationship or simply that Jerry understands Gil in a way no other person does, but either way

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there is evidence of a powerful queer dimension to their relationship that goes beyond the bounds of heterosexual male friendship. The thought of Jerry reduces Gil's internal monologue to incoherence – he is only able to repeat his name a few times and reassure himself that Jerry knows and understands him. Beyond that point, Gil can imagine no further future for their story together.

This entire subplot about Gil's murky, confused sexuality might at first seem disconnected from the more traditional *noir* murder mystery that drives the novel's central plot and takes up the bulk of its length. There is no explicit connection made between Gil's troubled relationships and his need to find out what happened to Jean Spangler. However, as the novel draws near its end, a thematic connection or parallel that links these seemingly disparate elements of *The Song Is You* emerges. By the end of the novel, Gil has learned that Jean Spangler did not die at all, but survived a grisly rape and torture at the hands of a pair of male celebrities and escaped to the town of Merry Lake to live quietly under a false identity. Jean in her new life is pretending that her name is "Iolene," a name she has taken from her friend who, unbeknownst to her, was murdered at the beginning of the novel (but after Jean's own disappearance). Since Jean does not know Iolene is dead, she gives Gil some files with potentially compromising information that she had stolen as a sort of insurance policy in order to give them to Iolene. Explaining why she wants Iolene to have the files, Jean tells Gil, "You see, I left her holding the bag and she…she was as close to me as anyone ever was. Closer" (*Song* 229). Gil's subconsciously motivated reaction is revealing: "So close you took her name, Hop thought. Before he could stop himself, he said, 'You love her.' He didn't know where it came from or what he meant by it" (*Song* 229). In this small moment, which Gil himself does not apparently understand, Gil intuitively understands Jean's love for Iolene because he has subconsciously

compared it to his own love for Jerry. Although Gil cannot quite name his love for Jerry, he does understand when he sees a parallel, similarly forbidden love between two women. Both types of desire are outside the mental framework his society has given him, but a dim, inchoate understanding is beginning to dawn in Gil. In a minute way, Gil's investigation into Jean's life has inched him closer to an understanding of his own.

The very final moment of the novel reaffirms this link between the mystery of Jean Spangler and Gil's own personal mystery. Four years after his discovery of Jean, Gil is sitting in his new home, as alone and alienated as ever, in a way that recalls the perpetual loneliness of virtually every classic hard-boiled male character ever. But unlike Philip Marlowe, Gil cannot easily handle his solitude: "He'd thought he wanted to be alone, but the quiet, the tomb-like quiet of the place made him feel suddenly panicky. Why did he always forget this about himself? When had he ever wanted to be alone?" (*Song* 241). The hard-boiled male in classic *noir* never openly admits, even to himself, that he is troubled by his loneliness – Philip Marlowe, in the endings of both his first novel (*The Big Sleep*) and his last (*The Long Goodbye*), tells the reader that he never saw the other characters in the story again. Gil, however, at least knows he needs human contact, even if he does not clearly understand how or why. The third-to-last paragraph of the novel, written in Gil's internal monologue, reveals his growing awareness of the empty space in his life: "*There was something lost. There was something lost. He could look in the mirror a thousand times and he would never see it again. He'd snuffed it out. Had he known he'd never get it back… Had he known it would be gone forever…*" (*Song* 242, italics in-text). To the last, Abbott refuses to explicitly name the thing missing from Gil's life and mind; although, as I have demonstrated, there is significant evidence throughout the novel to read Gil as a closeted queer person, Gil himself still cannot explicitly understand what is going on within him. The

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"something lost" is in part his marriage with Midge and his friendship with Jerry, but it is also his romantic desire for Jerry. Knowing that he cannot recover his relationship with Jerry, in the novel's final paragraph Gil looks at a symbolically fraught postcard he had obtained years earlier from Jean: "He pulled it out. It was thin as a cobweb now, this postcard. It had become delicate with time. Postcards, after all, aren't meant to last. They're less than a letter. They're a fleeting thing. A whisper in the ear reminding you, 'Merry Lake's Waiting for You'" (*Song* 242). The postcard, which we had learned earlier was originally meant for Iolene from Jean, carries a lot of symbolic weight: it is a memento of the relationship between Iolene and Jean (and therefore, by analogy, the one between Gil and Jerry), and it also reminds Jerry of Jean's new life and his unconscious desire to start his own life over. Given that *The Song Is You* is a period novel with its narrative ending in the mid-1950s, Abbott cannot realistically have Gil come out of the closet. The alienation and loneliness he feels remain the same. However, there is at least now a reminder of how Gil could eventually come to an authentic and liberating understanding of himself. Through writing this novel, Abbott has taken the submerged queer dimensions of hard-boiled/*noir* fiction she identified in her critical work, brought them closer to the surface of the text (without quite revealing them), and hinted at a cure to the alienation that plagues these hard-boiled male protagonists.

Ultimately, both *Incognegro* and *The Song Is You* are historical fictions and, as such, cannot realistically offer easy or totally satisfactory solutions to the problems they raise. Zane Pinchback cannot single-handedly "defeat" racism any more than Gil Hopkins can simply overcome the internalized homophobia that has prevented him from truly understanding himself and his relationships to others. What both texts do is to expose the crack or flaw in the system that already existed in the periods depicted: America's racial hierarchy was based on a lie in the

1930s as much as it is today, and Gil's denials of his sexual identity do not work any better than "gay conversion therapy" does today. By revisiting earlier historical moments of these phenomena through the lens of *noir*/hard-boiled alienation, Johnson and Pleece and Abbott reveal how intertwined these issues of race and sexuality always were with the mainstream popularity of the *noir* sensibility. As historical fictions, these two works cannot quite allow their protagonists the recuperation of literal or metaphorical families and the sense of meaningful re-integration into a community that the other texts I examine in this study do for their protagonists. Zane's friend is still dead, and Harlem remains the only safe place for him to live. Gil remains alone, wistfully thinking about the Merry Lake he cannot yet reach. Nevertheless, both texts offer their 21st-century readers a sense of hope, however tenuous, that we can move past the racism and homophobia that ruined Zane's and Gil's lives. For a post-postmodern revision of a tradition that so often ended with its protagonists dead, in jail, or completely alone, that thin thread of hope will have to do. The post-*noir* dimension of these texts, the suggestion that a better future is possible, is not available to the characters within the fictions but does manifest in the 21st-century reader's overall experience of the narrative.

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CHAPTER III: SORRY, WRONG IP ADDRESS: THE INTERNET IN THE POST-*NOIR* NOVEL

Telephones might not be the first thing most people think of when they think of *noir*. But paying close attention to the role of communications technology in *noir* narratives of the 1940s and 1950s reveals a striking pattern of anxiety revolving around telephones and other forms of then-contemporary communications technology.[40] It is generally accepted that classic *noir* narratives are symptomatic of a persistent mid-twentieth-century sense of alienation: of the self from others and from society as a whole. While many different sociological factors – such as the traumas experienced by returning veterans from World War II, the lingering effects of the Great Depression, male anxieties about the changing economic and social status of women, and so on – have persuasively been advanced as underlying causes of this *noir* alienation, the role of communications technology in this phenomenon has generally been under-examined. While I do not propose a comprehensive analysis of the role of communications technology in classic *noir* in this chapter, I do want to explore the way that this particular concern has evolved into the contemporary moment as the post-postmodern writers reinventing *noir* have updated this strand of techno-phobia for the age of the Internet. For the contemporary *noir*, the Internet serves an analogous function to that of the telephone in classic *noir*. In creating *noir* narratives that engage prominently with the role of the Internet in contemporary life, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) attempt to resolve a decades-old problem of technological alienation that has only gotten worse since the time of classic *noir*. In his most

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[40] I should mention that I owe this basic insight to Professor Kenneth Hillis, from whom I took a class on *film noir* at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill during the fall 2014 semester.

recent novel, Pynchon explores the possibilities that remain for experiences of family and authenticity in an increasingly virtual and interconnected world. Flynn's novel explores the damaging ramifications of a social-media mindset and asks how we can escape it.

Don't Answer That Phone!

With its possibilities of anonymous communication and its invasive presence in the home, the telephone and other communications devices become major sites of anxiety in classic *noir*. As a relatively new, widespread technology that, in a certain sense, allows strangers into one's own domestic space, telephones became a symbol for a broader distrust of urban modernity. Nowhere is this fear of telephones clearer than in the 1948 Anatole Litvak film *Sorry, Wrong Number*, adapted by Lucille Fletcher from her own radio play. The film's opening credit sequence plays out over an image of a telephone casting a large, murderous-looking shadow with the sounds of dialing and a busy signal heard over the music. *Sorry, Wrong Number* stars Barbara Stanwyck as Leona Stevenson, a fragile, bedridden woman who overhears two people plotting a murder via a crossed phone-line. She then spends the entire film on the phone with other characters, many of whom are distracted in some way and indifferent to her plight, as she attempts to find her husband (Burt Lancaster); in the process, she comes to realize that the murder she overheard being plotted is her own. At the end of the film, after the hitman has murdered Leona, he answers her ringing phone and says the final line that gives the film its title: "Sorry, wrong number."

One of the posters for *Sorry, Wrong Number* promises "Tangled Wires…Whispering of Murder! Tangled Lives…Fighting to Escape!" The association of wires and lives in this poster suggests an anxiety about the equivalence of mechanical wires and human lives, and the way both are "tangled up" in the modern city. The written text superimposed over the opening of the

film tells us that "In the tangled networks of a great city, the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives…It is the servant of our common needs – the confidante of our inmost secrets…life and happiness wait upon its ring…and horror…and loneliness… and *death!!!*" The written text scrolls above images of telephone operators at work. After this prologue, the camera tracks through an anonymous room onto the image of a phone hanging off the hook. This opening message, as J.P. Telotte argues, "models a crisscrossing of possibilities and purposes – a play of secrecy and disclosure, isolation and relation, death and life – that afflicts the film's characters and suggests the typical threatened and threatening environment of the *film noir*" (74). Each person is reduced to an anonymous, seemingly random number; there is a levelling effect to being listed in the phonebook, but it is not a liberatory one. The telephone allows one's friends, family, and associates to contact one, but it also allows any random stranger a threatening level of access. Before the murderer physically enters the house at the end of *Sorry, Wrong Number*, he has already metaphorically entered it through the telephone. The dream of instant communication with anyone becomes threatening when we realize that the person on the other end might mean us ill.

The image of the telephone wire also becomes dangerously charged in the 1945 Edgar G. Ulmer *film noir Detour*. Early in the film, when Al Roberts (Tom Neal) calls his girlfriend Sue Harvey (Claudia Drake) from across the country, we see footage of telephone operators and telephone wires as seen from a moving vehicle underlaid with an anxious-sounding score. Al and Sue's awkward, one-sided conversation, which proves fateful when it prompts Al into the hitchhiking road-trip that dominates the rest of the film, underscores the unnaturalness of telephone conversation: Al speaks in an overly hurried, pushy manner, and the one shot we see of Sue has her staring blankly and not saying anything. There is the implication that this

technology hampers genuine communication between them as much as it enables it; something is lost when the two characters cannot speak face to face.

The climax of *Detour* also hinges on a telephone in an especially dark way. Al and Vera (Ann Savage), the *femme fatale* he has met on the road and with whom he has conspired in a scam, get into an argument that results in her threatening to call the police and turn him in for the murder of one of the men Al had hitchhiked with earlier in the film.[41] Vera takes the phone and runs into another room to call the police, but she passes out drunk on the bed with the phone-cord around her neck. Al pulls on the phone wire from the other side of the door, trying to break it, but instead unintentionally strangles Vera to death with the wire. Where the telephone in *Sorry, Wrong Number* allowed the murderer into its protagonist's home, in *Detour* the telephone itself becomes a murder weapon.[42] Vera was already using it as a weapon in a metaphorical sense with her threat to call the police; Al's actions simply turn it into a literal one as well.

Interestingly, the *film noir Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), directed by Robert Aldrich and adapted from the hard-boiled novel of the same name by Mickey Spillane, contains what is likely the first-ever cinematic depiction of an answering machine. The detective Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) screens his calls, allowing the large and expensive-looking answering machine built into his wall to answer each call. Hammer listens to the call as it is recorded by the machine for a while before he decides whether or not to actually answer the phone himself. The first call we see him receive from his secretary/girlfriend is innocuous enough, but later he receives a threatening message from a mysterious voice that tells him, "Good evening, Mr. Hammer. You probably will wonder who this is, but it does not matter. What does matter is that your work has

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[41] The man had seemed to die of natural causes, but Al had failed to report the death and instead taken the man's money and car.

[42] A telephone also becomes a murder weapon in Samuel Fuller's 1964 *film noir The Naked Kiss*.

been interrupted, your car wrecked. Your life has been ruffled." On one hand, Hammer's

detached manner and refusal to answer the phone himself indicate his alienation from and

distrust of others; he would rather allow a machine to speak on his behalf than engage in even the

cursory social contact of a phone call. On the other hand, the fact that the villains of the film use

his answering machine to leave him threatening messages indicates that Hammer is right to be so

wary of others. The anonymous communication allowed by a telephone call and by Hammer's

answering machine enables a type of remote menace previously impossible.

In Billy Wilder's 1944 *noir* classic *Double Indemnity*, it is not a telephone but a

Dictaphone that becomes a suspicious intermediary in human communications. The film,

adapted by Wilder and Raymond Chandler from James M. Cain's novel, adds a framing narrative

absent in the original text, as the antihero insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray),

slowly bleeding out from the gunshot wound he has received from his lover and murderous co-

conspirator Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), goes to his office and records his confession

for his friend and coworker Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). The narrative of Neff's

confession comprises the majority of the film's content in the form of flashbacks. It is significant

that Neff records his confession into a machine rather than telling it to Keyes in person; the

impersonality of such a confession allows Neff to avoid the shame of having to directly tell

Keyes what he has done, as well as to avoid answering any questions he does not want to answer.

Even in Walter's dying moments, a mechanical device has taken the place of face-to-face

communication.

The above are only some of the most prominent examples of this under-discussed but

important theme recurring across the *noir* canon. One could trace this recurring paranoia about

communications technology to other major American films such as Alfred Hitchcock's 1954

Dial M for Murder and Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 *The Conversation* that, while not often

associated with the most canonical *noirs*, arguably have a great deal in common with the

tradition.[43] In the dark, alienating world of *noir* narrative, the omnipresence of telephones and

other means of aural communications becomes an inescapable means by which the self is

inevitably estranged from others; in classic *noir*, even as we try to communicate, we only grow

more alone. It is not difficult to see how this problem so acutely symptomatized by classic *noir*

films has become even more pronounced in contemporary life with the proliferation of the

Internet into nearly every waking moment of many Americans' lives. Artificial, mediated

communication is now infinitely more abundant than it was in the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore,

contemporary novelists seeking to write past contemporary alienation through *noir* face a steep

uphill battle when dealing with this particular aspect of the tradition.

The Internet and the Post-Postmodern Family in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

"Oh I blame the fuckin Internet. No question." (Pynchon 437)

Bleeding Edge, the most recent (as of the time of this writing) and possibly final novel

from Thomas Pynchon, is forthright both in its appropriation of the hard-boiled detective/*noir*

tradition and in its intense thematic concern with the role of the Internet in contemporary life. Its

protagonist Maxine Tarnow, in her capacity as a certified fraud examiner investigating a murder

and possible conspiracy, is both a modern-day female version of the classic hard-boiled detective

and an intriguing revision of Pynchon's own protagonist Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49*

nearly fifty years earlier. In following her progression throughout the novel both in terms of her

investigation and, more importantly, in terms of her family life, we come to an appreciation of

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[43] Indeed, one could plausibly argue that the fear of communications technology manifested in even more extreme
forms in later horror films such as *When A Stranger Calls* (1979) and *Scream* (1996); just think of how chilling the
sentence "The call is coming from inside the house" in urban legend is.

Pynchon's contemporary perspective on the *noir*-ish role of the Internet in American life in the early 21st century.

Any attempt to comprehensively summarize the plot of a 477-page novel will be difficult, but a brief rehearsal of *Bleeding Edge*'s basic story is necessary to explore Pynchon's intervention into discourses about the Internet and contemporary alienation. Like *Inherent Vice* (2009),[44] *Bleeding Edge* represents a more explicit engagement with the hard-boiled detective genre that has underlaid much of Pynchon's fiction, an engagement that critic Joseph Darlington believes "upsets the traditions of the detective genre in order to excavate and then disrupt historical narratives still lingering within the present" (245). The novel's story spans a year in the life of Maxine Tarnow, a New York City-based ex-certified fraud examiner working as a sort of private detective, beginning in early 2001. Maxine is, as Michael Chabon notes in his review, "hard-boiled" in "the grand tradition" because "[s]he carries a gun, cracks relentlessly wise, courts danger, pokes her nose where it doesn't belong, refuses to be dissuaded from the pursuit of answers by threats of violence, and has had her license lifted (by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners) for cutting occasional corners and refusing to follow standard procedure" (Chabon "Crying").[45] An investigation into possible fraudulent activity at the website hashslingrz soon segues into an investigation of the murder of technology entrepreneur Lester Traipse, a case that itself is possibly part of a government conspiracy centering on the September 11th attacks, which occur a little over halfway through the novel. Along the way, Maxine becomes involved

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[44] *Inherent Vice*, a shaggy-dog mystery story set in 1970s California, follows perpetually-stoned private detective "Doc" Sportello in his shambolic investigation of an old flame's disappearance. Rife with conspiracy-theory elements and nostalgia, the novel clearly represents Pynchon's spin on Raymond Chandler's Marlowe novels. Paul Thomas Anderson's 2014 film adaptation of *Inherent Vice* underlined its neo-*noir* dimension through a knowing cinematic resemblance to Robert Altman's 1973 *The Long Goodbye* and the Coen brothers' 1998 *The Big Lebowski*.

[45] At one point, Maxine asks herself, "Does Nora Charles ever have to put up with this sort of thing?" in a reference to one of the protagonists of Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* (Pynchon 311).

both sexually and as a possible adversary with an FBI agent named Nicolas Windust (who is himself murdered later on in the novel). She also occasionally takes detours into an Internet-based virtual-reality world named DeepArcher. Of course there are many other characters and subplots, but the elements above are the basic essentials of *Bleeding Edge*'s narrative.

The Internet plays much the same role in the novel for its contemporary (i.e. mid-2010s) reader as the telephone did for consumers of the *noir* narratives of the 1940s and 50s.[46] In both cases, the characters have to interact with a communications technology that has been around long enough to become commonplace, but not for so long that the contemporary reader/viewer cannot remember a time before it. Indeed, part of the effect of tying the novel's narrative so strongly to September 11, 2001 – a date that everyone old enough to read the novel at the time of its publication would remember vividly – is to remind us of how relatively recent the ubiquity of the Internet in daily life is and to defamiliarize its never-ending presence. It was only twelve years before the novel's publication that the World Trade Center still stood, and constant Internet connection was not yet a reality for many Americans. By reminding us of just how new the Internet is, the novel encourages the reader to take a step back and regard Internet use as the contingent historical phenomenon it actually is, not the natural and inevitable daily ritual it has come to seem in the smartphone era. Much as in the earlier *noir* narratives, this new technology offers not only the hope of connection but also the threat of invasion and destruction of privacy. The technology gives us the chance to record and (in a significant innovation compared to the telephones and Dictaphones discussed above) create our own versions of reality, but it does not

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[46] It is worth noting that Pynchon jokingly acknowledges his debt not only to hard-boiled fiction but also to *film noir*, in a gag about a film Maxine's husband and sons watch on TV: "Otis, Ziggy, and Fiona settle in front of Homer Simpson, playing an accountant of all things, in a film noir, or possibly jaune, called '*D.O.H.*.'" (Pynchon 316). "*D.O.H.*" is of course both a reference to the 1950 *film noir D.O.A.* and to Homer Simpson's catch phrase "D'oh!"

encounter us to ask what the cost of such artificiality might be. To borrow the phrasing of *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the Internet in contemporary life truly is "the unseen link between a million lives… the servant of our common needs – the confidante of our inmost secrets," and indeed "life and happiness wait upon its ring[47]…and horror…and loneliness… and death!" Or, as the narrator says during Maxine's first excursion into the virtual reality of DeepArcher: "She's lost. There is no map. It isn't like being lost in any of the romantic tourist destinations back in meatspace. Serendipities here are unlikely to be in the cards, only a feeling she recognizes from dreams, a sense of something not necessarily pleasant just about to happen" (Pynchon 77). The pun in the name "DeepArcher" – "Departure" – suggests that this Internet world represents a leaving behind of reality, and even connotes death itself (as in "dearly departed"). Even though Maxine cannot immediately pinpoint why, she knows that this Internet-created space harbors dark things in her future.

Pynchon historicizes the Internet by having characters discuss the deep roots of its history in the years and decades before 2001 and by giving them almost prophetic notions of what would be the Internet's future after 2001. One of the most striking moments of such historical contextualization comes when Maxine attends a party thrown by tech-billionaire and chief suspect-in-the-murder-of-Lester-Traipse Gabriel Ice, a "Geeks' Cotillion" held, rather ominously, on "the eighth of September, 2001" (Pynchon 295). The party encapsulates many of the novel's themes about the Internet, irony, and the rapid changes in contemporary life. Upon Maxine's arrival at the party, the narrator remarks that "One cannot help noticing a certain emphasis tonight on instant nostalgia. Nineties irony, a little past its sell-by date, is in full bloom

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[47] Or dial-up connection sound, in the 2001 of *Bleeding Edge*.

again down here" (Pynchon 301).[48] The narrator's commentary on the party captures much of the complexity of the Internet's role in American life:

> The theme of the gathering, officially '1999,' has a darker subtext of Denial. It soon becomes clear that everybody's pretending for tonight that they're still in the pre-crash fantasy years, dancing in the shadow of last year's dreaded Y2K, now safely history, but according to this consensual delusion not quite upon them yet, with all here remaining freeze-framed back at the Cinderella moment of midnight of the millennium when in the next nanosecond the world's computers will fail to increment the year correctly and bring down the Apocalypse. What passes for nostalgia in a time of widespread Attention Deficit Disorder. People have pulled their pre-millennial T-shirts back out of the archival plastic they've been idling in – Y2K IS NEAR, ARMAGEDDON EVE, Y2K COMPLIANT LOVE MACHINE, I SURVIVED…Determined, as Prince can be heard repeatedly urging, to party like it's 1999. (Pynchon 302)

To begin with, the "instant nostalgia" of a party being 1999-themed in the year 2001 captures something about the way the Internet's constant recording and re-presenting of reality can render such a recent time a subject for nostalgia. Without the influence of the Internet, it takes longer for a specific period of time to become sufficiently distant to be a subject of nostalgia; it makes sense to have an 80s party in the 2010s, but would have been strange in 1991. However, in the context of the novel's themes of the Internet's disruption of American life, however, the 1999 party in 2001 begins to make more sense. The Y2K panic marked January 1, 2000 as the day that

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[48] The reference to "nineties irony" being "a little past its sell-by date" is another little metatextual acknowledgment from Pynchon that postmodern irony, at least of a certain type, is already dated.

the Internet would either collapse or survive; when it survived, the world realized that the Internet was here to stay. Pynchon's partygoers nostalgically recreate the moment just before the Y2K crisis was supposed to happen because they can now feel safe in their knowledge that Y2K would turn out to be nothing, but there is also a darker subtext to their nostalgia. There is a relief that the computers survived Y2K, but there is also a curiosity about what it would have been like if things had gone the other way. These characters, although they might not consciously realize it, are revisiting the moment when it seemed like the Internet might vanish – "freeze-framed back at the Cinderella moment of midnight of the millennium" – out of a partial wish that it had vanished. They fantasize about technological Armageddon out of a repressed desire for it. Pynchon then implicitly links the party to the terrorist attacks that the reader knows are only two and a half days in the future for the characters (indeed, in the next chapter): "Later those who were here will remember mostly how vertical it all was. The stairwells, the elevators, the atria, the shadows that seem to plunge from overhead in repeated assaults on the gatherings and ungatherings beneath" (303). The emphasis on height, verticality, and architecture connects the party and its instant reification of the recent past to the September 11th attacks and more specifically to the image of Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, famously the tallest buildings in the world until they were destroyed. The attacks turn out to be a real version of the previously false Armageddon the partygoers thought they had avoided.

One way of defining Pynchon's Internet is as a means of knowing the world. As David Cowart argues of *Bleeding Edge*, "The author, one discovers, tracks something bigger than the paranoia he famously identifies as postmodernity's signature pathology. Rather, he undertakes to dramatize epistemic evolution, the subtle ways in which the conditions of knowing complicate what is ostensibly known" (Cowart). David Haeselin intriguingly if somewhat narrowly argues

that "this novel is not just about media technology or even the Internet more specifically; it is about the effect of the search engine. The ways in which Pynchon's novel historicizes the evolution of the search engine directly account for the new ways his characters experience paranoia" (Haeselin 1). Internet knowledge becoames a particular type of knowledge in this detective story, one that Pynchon contrasts unfavorably with family life as a mode of knowledge. In *Bleeding Edge*, the Internet appears to offer the gift of unlimited knowledge, but what it really offers is actually a sort of endless hall of funhouse mirrors.

Beyond the short-term history of the transition from 1999 to 2001, Pynchon excavates a much deeper history of the Internet through the character of Ernie, Maxine's father. When Maxine argues to him that "Nobody is in control of the Internet" late in the novel, Ernie chastises her:

> "You serious? Believe that while you still can, Sunshine. You know where it all comes from, this online paradise of yours? It started back during the Cold War, when the think tanks were full of geniuses plotting nuclear scenarios. Attaché cases and horn-rims, every appearance of scholarly sanity, going in to work every day to imagine all the ways the world was going to end. Your Internet, back then the Defense Department called it DARPAnet, the real original purpose was to assure survival of U.S. command and control after a nuclear exchange with the Soviets." (Pynchon 419)[49]

While Ernie gives a more-or-less historically accurate account of the Internet's origins as part of the military-industrial complex, he also ties the Internet to Pynchon's career-long themes of domination and control. The Internet in this accounting becomes one more way for the malign

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[49]It is worth noting that Doc Sportello has an encounter with ARPAnet in the 1970-set *Inherent Vice*.

powers behind the scenes, the "They" of *Gravity's Rainbow*, to manipulate and monitor the average American. According to Ernie, there is no salvaging the Internet from its origins:

> "Yep, and your Internet was their invention, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and don't think anything has changed, kid." (Pynchon 420)

When Maxine argues that the civilian version of the Internet is in fact freeing and empowering, Ernie counters that "Call it freedom, it's based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anyone should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you've got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable … What they dream about at the Pentagon, worldwide martial law" (Pynchon 420). Another minor character, tech geek Eric Outfield, focuses more on the industrial side of the Internet's military-industrial origin: "Look at it, every day more lusers than users, keyboards and screens turning into nothin but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage" (Pynchon 432).

Ernie's and Eric's descriptions of the Internet's invisible ubiquity seem, from the perspective of the novel's contemporary reader, prophetic. Ernie's description of the Internet as "a magical convenience that creeps…like a smell" through every facet of American life is a bit odd in the novel's 2001, when most homes with Internet access still used dial-up and directly wired Internet connections, which were comparatively clunky and slow; by the 2013 when the

novel was published, however, the omnipresence of wireless Internet modems and smartphones really does allow the Internet to move "like a smell," invisibly filling the space around it. This deliberate anachronism allows Pynchon to describe the contemporary reader's technological world as if from an outside perspective. Ernie is worried about the role the Internet plays in shopping habits, but during the winter of 2001-2002 when he would have been speaking, Amazon.com's[50] stock price was only $11 or $12 per share.[51] During the week *Bleeding Edge* was published in 2013, Amazon's stock price was $297 per share.[52] Ernie is concerned about the Internet's role in homework and education, but at the time in which Ernie is speaking, the Internet would have been good for little more than looking up the occasional fact. The complete domination of the Internet in daily life that Ernie foresees was very much in its infancy during the period when *Bleeding Edge* is set. The Internet was a much more dominant part of the average American's daily experience in 2013 than in 2001, and if the technology indeed still carries a "bitter-cold death wish for the planet," we have much more reason to be worried now than we did then. The playful anachronism of Ernie's seeming knowledge of the future is funny in context, but it also allows Pynchon to remind the reader of the very real stakes of the novel's examination of recent history. The pervasive technology Ernie predicts is not from a hypothetical science-fiction future; it is from our ordinary, everyday lives.

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[50] Interestingly, the notoriously media-shy Pynchon recorded the voice-over for an Amazon.com video promoting his novel *Inherent Vice* in 2009; aside from his brief cameo on *The Simpsons*, this deal with Amazon marked the only time Pynchon's actual voice has been heard publicly.

[51] Stock price information derived from https://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/AMZN/amazon/stock-price-history .

[52] At the time of this writing in 2019, Amazon stock is currently at $1793 per share.

At the beginning of chapter 30, just after the September 11th attacks occur in the novel,

Pynchon's narrator takes over in a more direct way than elsewhere in the novel.[53] In the wake of

the attacks, the narrator tells us that

> If you read nothing but the Newspaper of Record, you might believe that New
>
> York City, like the nation, united in sorrow and shock, has risen to the challenge
>
> of global jihadism, joining a righteous crusade Bush's people are now calling the
>
> War on Terror. If you go to other sources – the Internet, for example – you might
>
> get a different picture. Out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among
>
> the billions of self-resonant fantasies, dark possibilities are beginning to emerge.
>
> (Pynchon 327)

It is significant that the narrator here refers to the *New York Times* by the nickname "Newspaper

of Record"; the name reminds us of the *Times*'s standing as the arbiters of the official version of

reality Americans are supposed to accept. If it's in the *Times*, it must be true – or so the old

conventional wisdom would have it. However, the narrator subtly reminds us that this consensus

reality is in fact only one of increasingly many possible sources of (purported) knowledge; the

Times's stance is only something you "might believe" on the condition that you "read nothing"

else. Its narrative of reality is not necessarily destined for universal acceptance, especially since

its story is aligned with that of the Bush administration. The Internet's "vast undefined

anarchism" offers myriad possibilities for other definitions or narratives of post-9/11 reality, but

these other narratives are not necessarily liberating or healthy. Rather than giving us "the real

truth" of the matter, the Internet instead only offers "billions of self-resonant fantasies";

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[53] The narrator is heterodiegetic, but most of the time is limited to relating Maxine's point of view and generally does not address the reader directly as it does here.

essentially, people are using the Internet's searchability and malleability to construct whatever

narratives they please. Instead of access to further layers of reality through the accumulation of

information, the Internet merely gives us the chance to pick and choose whatever bits of

narrative will fit whatever we want to believe in the first place. As the narrator tells us later in the

novel, "[t]he Internet has erupted into a Mardi Gras for paranoids and trolls, a pandemonium of

commentary there may not be time in the projected age of the universe to read all the way

through, even with deletions for violating protocol, plus home videos and audio tracks"

(Pynchon 388-389). Again we see one of those problems that, while bad enough in the novel's

2001 setting, had ballooned exponentially by its 2013 release. If every thing on the Internet has

to be sifted through in order to get at the truth, there simply will never be enough time to do so.

There are other ways in which the Internet in Pynchon's world offers as much chance for

regression as for progress. When Maxine is talking to tech geek Eric Outfield, he shows her a

virus program he has created to secretly undermine Gabriel Ice:

> the Internet as it turns out exhibits a strange affinity for the dynamics of curses,
>
> especially when written in the more ancient languages predating HTML. Through
>
> the uncountable cross-motives of the cyberworld, the fates of unreflective click-
>
> happy users are altered for the worse – systems crash, data are lost, bank accounts
>
> are looted, all of which being computer-related you might expect, but then there
>
> are also the realworld inconveniences, such as zits, unfaithful spouses, intractable
>
> cases of Running Toilet, providing the metaphysically inclined further evidence
>
> that the Internet is only a small part of a much vaster integrated continuum.
>
> (Pynchon 345)

This linkage of the Internet to "curses" suggests that the Internet in many ways is not the fundamentally "new" thing we usually take it to be. Traditionally, a curse is a way to bring someone else bad luck or suffering solely through the invocation of language – for instance, say the right words in the right order, and your target will have ten years of bad luck. The Internet literalizes this ability and makes it possible to negatively affect others' lives through the use of language alone – put the right code in the right order, and you can *actually* cause your target to have bad luck. The narrator's linking Internet-based curses to such non-digital problems as "zits" and "Running Toilet" is a typically Pynchonesque flight of fancy, but it is only one step beyond the reality being described. As part of a "much vaster integrated continuum," the Internet is not just the thing we see on our computer screens. Much as the telephone network in *Sorry, Wrong Number* can bring "horror," "loneliness," and "death" into a formerly secure domestic space, or as the answering machine in *Kiss Me Deadly* allows for anonymous and remote threats of violence, the Internet in *Bleeding Edge* becomes the source of remote and anonymous malevolence. And just as the telephone in classic *noir* really stands in for a whole host of fears and anxieties about urban modernity, *Bleeding Edge*'s Internet serves as metonymy for greater worries about postmodernity and post-postmodernity.

Ultimately, the Internet becomes a classically *noir* threat in *Bleeding Edge* not simply because of its possibilities for the invasion of privacy, consumer manipulation, or remote violence (although all those things are certainly important problems). The true reason the Internet is such a worry in this novel is that, for all its apparent gifts of freedom and knowledge and connection with the world, it really only ends up becoming a way back into the self. It turns its users inward while giving them the illusion of turning outward. If *noir* fiction and film have often been at pains to demonstrate the dangers of this sort of solipsism, then it is entirely fitting

that Pynchon should engage with the traditions of the genre in order to demonstrate the insidious and subtle dangers posed by the Internet. The Internet seems to offer unlimited knowledge of the outside world, but ends up only reinforcing a hopeless addiction to the self.

In *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon, in a post-postmodern move, offers an alternative to the incipiently dystopic and paranoid world he illuminates in this novel, namely a full engagement with family life.[54] Whereas the Internet ostensibly shows you the world but really only leads you endlessly back to yourself, the family in *Bleeding Edge* takes you out of yourself by forcing you to focus on the other around you, which is made clear from the opening sentences of the novel.[55] Before the reader learns anything about Maxine Tarnow, her work as an investigator, the novel's engagement with 9/11, *noir,* or the Internet, we know that Maxine is a mother: "It's the first day of spring 2001, and Maxine Tarnow, though some have her in their system as Loeffler, is walking her boys to school. Yes maybe they're past the age where they need an escort, maybe Maxine doesn't want to let go just yet, it's only a couple blocks, it's on her way to work, she enjoys it, so?" (Pynchon 1). Although the fact that "some have her in their system" does foreshadow the novel's themes of the impersonalizing effects of information technology, the main focus of these sentences is simply on Maxine's protective attachment to her sons. The way Pynchon's narrator delves seamlessly into Maxine's thoughts via indirect discourse as she

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[54] To imagine what a postmodernist perspective on the Internet would look like, consider Charlie Brooker's TV series *Black Mirror*, and particularly the episode "Fifteen Million Merits." In that episode of the dystopian, technology-focused anthology series, daily life has become one endless cycle of meaningless, computer-driven simulation and stimulation. The protagonist's attempt to rebel against the system and break out of its confines is rewarded only with a slightly more privileged position within the system itself; as the final image of the protagonist looking at a virtual landscape on a large screen implies, there is no outside in this universe.

[55] In emphasizing family, Pynchon addresses a concern raised by Sanford Pinsker about Pynchon's and others' earlier postmodernist fiction: "Postmodernist experimentation failed not only because its dazzling surfaces were hollow at the core, but also because its settings had no discernible address, its characters' bones no flesh, and its families no force. If literature is once again to become a humanistic enterprise, it needs to imagine fully human beings, and I would argue that that requires fully human families" (Pinsker 514).

defends her love for her boys against an imagined critic ("so?") showcases a remarkable sympathy for her. What we learn about Maxine in her first two sentences is that (1) she has changed her last name recently and (2) she is a protective mother who enjoys being with her children. Maxine's subjectivity is immediately constituted in terms of her relationships to her ex-husband and, more importantly, to her sons. Maxine's meaningful family relationships immediately set her apart both as a hard-boiled/noir protagonist.

Of course, Maxine's family does not live in a technology-free bubble. In one of those many odd digressions that make up the bulk of Pynchon's fiction, we learn that Maxine's ex-husband Horst has been on a road-trip around the country with their sons Ziggy and Otis. The boys' simple reaction to seeing their mother when they get back – "'Hey Mom. Missed you'" – and her response – "'Oh, guys.' She kneels on the floor and holds the boys till everybody gets too embarrassed" – embody a simple, straightforward love (289). This moment of sincere, direct human connection is especially significant in light of what the reader then learns about the road trip, which had both physical and digital dimensions:

> They went looking for arcade games, in derelict shopping plazas, in riverside pool halls, in college-town hangouts, in ice-cream parlors tucked into midblock micromalls. Horst couldn't help noticing how the places had, most of them, grown more ragged since his time, floors less swept, air-conditioning not as intense, smoke thicker than in the Midwestern summers of long ago. They played ancient machines from faraway California said to be custom-programmed by Nolan Bushnell himself. They played Arkanoid in Ames and Zaxxon in Sioux City. They played Road Blasters and Galaga and Galaga 88, Tempest and Rampage and Robotron 2084, which Horst believes to be the greatest arcade

game of all time. Mostly, wherever they could find it, they seemed to be playing

Time Crisis 2. (Pynchon 290)

There is a complicated mixture of authentic experience and digital fantasy in this anecdote. On the one hand, Horst and the boys are travelling together as a family; on the other, the destinations of the trip are arcade games. There is a particular significance to their playing *Time Crisis 2*, a cooperative game that allows for two players to work together simultaneously, but also (and in a way very unusual for an arcade game at the time) features two separate screens, one for each player. Thus, *Time Crisis 2* ostensibly brings players together while also separating them in a unique way. The fact that the physical environments of these arcade games have been allowed to deteriorate, as Horst notices, suggests a world increasingly neglectful of the physical in favor of the digital.[56] In travelling around the country in order to get lost in the digital spaces created by these games, Ziggy and Otis are shown to be halfway down the road to digitally-induced alienation and solipsism, but only halfway. There is still a physical togetherness to their video game adventures, a physicality that will become increasingly rare in the future as online gaming experiences such as *World of Warcraft* allow players to interact remotely. For the time being, Horst and the boys can still share this experience together.

Tracing Ziggy and Otis's immersion in digital universes leads to a complex, poignant scene near the end of the novel. Maxine, during one of her excursions into the digitally created worlds of DeepArcher, finds Ziggy and Otis there in an idyllic, pre-9/11 version of New York City they have themselves created. Maxine, whose actions at this point in the novel have taken her to very dark places in both the physical and online worlds, watches Ziggy and Otis in their artificial city (called "Zigotisopolis"):

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[56] We can think now of the increasing numbers of failures of malls and other "brick-and-mortar" establishments in competition with digital shopping.

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They have different priorities here, the cityscapes of Maxine's DeepArcher are

obscurely broken places of indifference and abuse and unremoved dog shit, and

she doesn't want to track any more of that than she can help into their more

merciful city, with its antiquated dyes, its acid green shrubbery and indigo

pavements and overdesigned traffic flows. Ziggy has his arm over his brother's

shoulder, and Otis is looking up at him with unhesitating adoration. They are

ambling around in this not-yet-corrupted screenscape, at home in it already,

unconcerned for their safety, salvation, destiny… (Pynchon 429)

Here, the idea of one's experience of the Internet as a reflection of oneself becomes clearer.

Maxine sees corruption, evil, and rot in her version of DeepArcher because her (in many ways

typically *noir*) experiences of the world lead her to expect those things. Between the murders of

Lester Traipse and Nicolas Windust, her own sordid affair with Windust, the conspiracies and

counter-conspiracies she has investigated, and above all the September 11th attacks themselves,

Maxine's perception of the world has become deeply jaded, cynical, and alienated. Because the

Internet's ostensible offer of an infinitely accessible world is really only a mirror for the self,

Maxine sees DeepArcher as a dark and hopeless place. Ziggy and Otis, however, are still

innocent children, and so the Internet/DeepArcher reflects something different back at them.

Their "more merciful city" is shaped by their more limited and sheltered experience of the world.

Their relationship to each other is characterized by a simple and sincere love embodied in their

digitally-recreated physical proximity – a love that is remarkable for how utterly rare it in the

noir canon. In this moment Maxine is able to experience the world through her children's

perspective, one that takes her out of the novel's *noir* universe for a few minutes.

However, the ellipsis with which Pynchon ends the above-quoted paragraph is significant because it implies that this moment of innocence and purity is temporary and precarious and might hide unseen dangers of its own. In the next paragraph, Maxine worries about the possible ramifications of the boys spending too much time in their online fantasy world:

> Don't mind me, guys, I'll just lurk here on the visitors' page. She makes a note to bring it up, carefully, gently, when they're all back in meatspace, soy-extenderspace, whatever it is anymore. Because in fact this strange thing has begun to happen. Increasingly she's finding it harder to tell 'real' NYC from translations like Zigotisopolis…as if she keeps getting caught in a vortex taking her farther each time into the virtual world. Certainly unforeseen in the original business plan, there arises now a possibility that DeepArcher is about to overflow out into the perilous gulf between screen and face. (Pynchon 429)

Although it is not literally the case that a simulated city can easily be mistaken for a real one certainly not with 2001 technology,[57] Pynchon's narrator nevertheless makes an important point here. The Internet does not literally have to simulate the world in full, convincing detail in order to distort one's sense of reality. As the Internet becomes more and more a constant part of American daily life, "a vortex taking her farther each time into the virtual world," the lines between what the Internet tells us and what we actually know to be real or true become increasingly blurred.[58] The wordplay of "meatspace" – a common term used to denote the physical world of organic human bodies rather than the digital world of text and images – and

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[57] To see what "realistic" graphics looked like in late 2001, do a Google Image search of the original *Halo: Combat Evolved* and consider how blocky and simplistic the graphics now appear.

[58] An especially important point to remember in the post-2016, "post-truth" world of actual fake news, fake fake news, Pizzagate conspiracies, and so on.

"soy-extenderspace" suggests that the real physical life we used to take for granted has begun to be modified and adulterated by the Internet. The "perilous gulf between screen and face" is ordinarily an invisible space, something the technology user takes for granted. By reminding us of the exact physical nature of the situation so many Americans spend so much of their time in, Pynchon defamiliarizes what has become an extremely habituated act. While Maxine is obviously moved by the wide-eyed innocence of Zigotisopolis, she also recognizes the dangers it potentially poses to her sons.

In a typically oblique gesture, Pynchon provides grand thematic statements about both the Internet and the importance of family life as a type of knowledge to a minor character, Chazz Larday, late in the novel. Chazz is a fiber salesman, a profession that puts him where the Internet and physical reality intersect. Chazz warns about the material contingency of the Internet:

> "Real and make-believe's all I ever meant, my artificial sweetener, I'm just a logistics- and infrastructure-type fella. Fiber's real, you pull it through conduit, you hang it, you bury and splice it. It weighs somethin. Your husband's rich, maybe even smart, but he's like all you people, livin in this dream, up in the clouds, floatin in the bubble, think 'at's real, think again. It's only gonna be there long as the power's on. What happens when the grid goes dark? Generator fuel runs out and they shoot down the satellites, bomb the operation centers, and you're all back down on planet Earth again. All that jabberin about nothin, all 'at shit music, all 'em links, down, down and gone." (Pynchon 465)

Chazz's monologue accomplishes several purposes for the novel. It reminds the reader that, although the Internet seems to exist in a sort of ether beyond the physical realm, it does in fact have a basis in material reality and large-scale industrial production of goods like fiber, fuel, and

satellites. The fiber of the Internet – the physical coils of wire that were laid into the ground all over the country during the late 20th and 21st centuries – is now essential to the business of everyday life. Its continued existence depends on a large number of contingent factors, and it could all come crashing down should material circumstances change.[59] The monologue also extends and reinforces the critique of Ernie's historical contextualization of the Internet earlier in the novel. Chazz's reference to Internet users being "up in the clouds" seems especially prophetic given the much-hyped rise of Internet-based "cloud computing" in the years after the novel's setting. The loss of the Internet would send us "back down on planet Earth," but, of course, where else, in a literal sense, could we have possibly been? Chazz's phrasing illuminates the way Internet use disconnects us from the world around us. The virtual world created in the novel by DeepArcher is merely an intensified metaphor for what the Internet does already; the Internet as we currently know it might not *look* like an elaborate secondary world, but it might as well: "All that jabberin about nothin, all 'at shit music, all 'em links" – arguably apt descriptions for Facebook, Youtube, and Reddit.

Pynchon's alternative to "all that jabberin about nothin" can be seen in the exchanged between Chazz and Tallis when when Chazz advises Tallis to repair her relationship with her mother, radical leftist academic March Kelleher: "Your mama is the most important person in your life. The only one who can get the potatoes mashed exactly the way you need 'em to be. Only one who understood when you started hangin with people she couldn't stand. Lied about your age down to the multiplex so's you could go watch 'em teen slasher movies together. She'll be gone soon enough, appreciate her while you can" (Pynchon 466). Chazz's description of the importance of motherly love, one of the most un-ironically sentimental moments anywhere in

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[59] Incidentally, a very plausible and chilling portrait of a future where civilization has begun to falter because of the partial collapse of the Internet can be found in Irish author David Mitchell's 2014 novel *The Bone Clocks*.

Pynchon's fiction, condenses much of the novel's interest in familial bonds. This moment underscores the difference between knowing a person as only a parent can and knowing about a person, which the Internet facilitates. The Internet lets you know about others – names, pictures, contact information, whatever arbitrary information they choose to share or whatever is written about them by other people – but only the intimate bonds of family life allow you to actually know another person. Nobody can learn from a person's Internet presence exactly how to mash potatoes for them, or any of the million other mundane details a parent knows about a child that would never be publicly available. The knowledge uniquely granted by family life is not just a matter of practical details, but also one of sympathy: thus, a mother is the "only one who understood" her teenager's particular rebellious phase. Even the mildly naughty complicity of lying about a child's age "so you could go watch 'em teen slasher movies together" depends on the mother's singular understanding of her child. All of these ultimately simple, mundane actions and thoughts add up to a more profound and meaningful type of knowledge of another person than anything that the Internet can offer.

The ending of *Bleeding Edge* provides a powerful resolution of the novel's thematic contrast of the Internet and family life, even if many of the mysteries of the plot are left unsolved. Maxine returns to her apartment to take her sons to school, in a direct echo of the novel's opening page:

> The boys have been waiting for her, and of course that's when she flashes back to not so long ago down in DeepArcher, down in their virtual hometown of Zigotisopolis, both of them standing just like this, folded in just this precarious light, ready to step out into their peaceable city, still safe from the spiders and

bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of

the indexed world. (Pynchon 476)

Maxine remembers her earlier encounter with her sons in their artificial online version of New

York, the moment when she saw that "Ziggy has his arm over his brother's shoulder, and Otis is

looking up at him with unhesitating adoration" (429). The fact that the boys are now apparently

standing in the same pose indicates that, for them, their online experience still reflects their real-

world experience. Both versions of their experience of the world have room for intimacy and

family connection. However, this connection is fragile – hence the "precarious light" they stand

in. The world they are going out towards is "*their* peaceable city," not "the peaceable city"; only

the version of it that exists in the boys' heads is still idyllic and kind. The city as it objectively

exists is, as the rest of the novel has demonstrated, anything but peaceable. However, the novel is

not quite over with this image of Ziggy and Otis safe in their temporary childhood world.

In the very final lines of the novel, Ziggy and Otis show that they are ready to go to

school on their own. When Maxine apologizes for being late, Otis tells her, in a humorous role-

reversal, "'Go to your room … you are, like, so grounded'" (Pynchon 476). Her other son also

indicates unexpected maturity: "Ziggy surprising her with an unsolicited air kiss, 'See you later

at pickup, OK?'" (Pynchon 476). After Ziggy responds to Maxine's offer to take them to school

by saying, "It's all right, Mom. We're good," the novel arrives at its final paragraph: "'I know

you are, Zig, that's the trouble.' But she waits in the doorway as they go down the hall. Neither

looks back. She can watch them into the elevator at least" (Pynchon 477). At first glance, this

ending might seem bizarrely sentimental and out of place, even trite. However, this ending is in

fact crucial to Pynchon's overall themes contrasting the impersonality of Internet knowledge

with the authenticity of family life.

It might seem tempting to read a broad, "the children are the future" message into the novel's ending, as some critics, like Michael P. Maguire, already have: "In his rejection of both the techno-utopian faith in the Internet as an instrument of liberation and the possibilities of withdrawal in an age of pervasive surveillance, Pynchon instead turns to the next generation, finding perhaps the only hope for society's future in the children themselves" (96). Ziggy and Otis are not sufficiently developed as characters, however, to truly stand in for future generations per se. There is nothing magical about people under the age of 21 and no reason to expect that the children will automatically know how to take care of the world already ruined by adults. Maguire argues that "the novel's emphasis on family reflects a concern for the youth and future generations who have become heir to environmental crises, economic disparity, and immense structures of power and control"; but all of those issues already affect nearly everyone, not just children (101).

Rather than reading a paean to the youth of America in general into this ending, I find a more specific endorsement of family relationships as such. If Ziggy and Otis were more roundly developed, given strong personalities to distinguish them from each other, or perhaps even given their own chapters to develop their perspectives, the sort of broader reading Maguire gives would be more convincing. However, Ziggy and Otis are only ever seen in the novel through Maxine's perspective and are a bit difficult to tell apart, facts that suggest their importance to Pynchon is not so much in their own lives as it is in their relationship to her and to each other. It is not just that children en masse are special; it is Maxine's relationship with her own children in particular that anchors her and provides a refuge from the increasingly virtual and confusing world of the rest of the novel.

David Haeselin, in his intriguing but rather single-minded reading of *Bleeding Edge* as an allegory of the search engine, reads the ending as a capitulation to the inevitable triumph of the modern Internet over human life: "Maxine admits that she has lost control over her boys' life not by facing the reality of terrorism, but by accepting the power of corporate information retrieval. The search engine offers a worried mother a version of solace in the face of an uncontrollable world" (9). In my reading, however, Maxine's acceptance of loss of control over Ziggy and Otis at the end of the novel is not at all a surrender to the Internet, but rather a recognition of the core realities of family that exist independent of the Internet. When she watches them into the elevator, she is watching their physical bodies, not the Internet projections of them she had seen earlier. She will pursue empirical knowledge of/data about them to a certain extent by keeping an eye on them as long as she can, but she will also accept that such data will be cut off when the elevator doors shut. She does not need to know every little thing about them, the way Internet-driven data accumulation would want her to, because she knows them. She is secure enough in her motherly knowledge, which has nothing to do with the Internet, to accept this final moment of the novel.

Thus, the "network" of family in *Bleeding Edge*, a limited network in which other people fully know you without having to know everything about you, becomes the direct opposite of the novel's conception of the threatening network of the Internet and classic *noir*'s construction of the telephone network. The connections that Maxine shares with her sons, as well as the connections that the sons share with each other and with their father, bind them all to their lives on Earth rather than providing a "DeepArcher" from it. In *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the telephone is "the unseen link between a million lives" and brings with it "horror," "loneliness," and "death." In *Bleeding Edge*, the Internet becomes the unseen link between billions of lives, and

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brings with it trivial knowledge, paranoia, narcissism, and "a bitter-cold death wish for the planet." Family, however, is a network that links just a few people and brings with it trips to school, group dinners, and love. Although the smaller network is not entirely safe from risk, it survives and remains a safe haven for Maxine and Ziggy and Otis. Even though *Bleeding Edge* shares and indeed amplifies classic *noir*'s anxieties about the threatening potential of modern communications technology, it ultimately offers an alternative and a tenuous happy ending that classic *noir* never would have been able to come by honestly.

Social Media and Self-Performance in *Gone Girl*

Gillian Flynn's hit thriller *Gone Girl* offers a more accessible yet no less fascinating critique of the Internet age. Although most of the critical responses to *Gone Girl* have centered on the issue of gender,[60] there is another layer to the novel's trenchant social criticism. Behind the novel's thriller machinations, secret affairs, and violence, there is a critique of the way social media has contaminated so much of contemporary American social life. Where *Bleeding Edge* offers a wide-ranging, even unwieldy historical critique of the rapidly evolving role of the Internet in American life, *Gone Girl* gives as an up-to-the-minute (relative to its publication), extreme case study of the destructive effects of Internet-driven social media on one marriage. Amy's false diary, the one the reader encounters throughout the first half of the novel, is essentially one long social media performance. Although physically written down, Amy's diary is completely and utterly informed by the principles of self-performance that have evolved in the age of pervasive social media.

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[60] Including my own, admittedly; in a previous article, I have explored the novel's reinvention of the *noir* trope of the *femme fatale*. See Lota, Kenneth. "Cool Girls and Bad Girls: Reinventing the Femme Fatale in Contemporary Fiction." *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 33.1 (Spring 2016): 150 – 170.

Although they were published within approximately one year of each other, *Bleeding Edge* and *Gone Girl* together manage to portray either end of a roughly decade-long period marked by massive technological innovation. In the 2001-2002 setting of *Bleeding Edge*'s narrative, the Internet era is just dawning; everyone is only taking their first steps into the "Departure" that an Internet-suffused life represents. By the 2012 setting of *Gone Girl*, high-speed Internet, smartphones, and social media have utterly permeated the world of the characters, invisibly rewriting the rules of social interaction and performance. The character Amy has adapted so thoroughly to the milieu of social media that she is able to manipulate others by playing on those rules. Amy writes her fake diary in a way that caters to expectations cultivated by the world of social media, and in so doing reveals the warped effect that the Internet has had even on social relationships that are not mediated by technology. Her diary "goes viral" in a way that shows how the social sphere at large has been refashioned by the social network. Through the plot of the novel, Flynn both demonstrates the dangers enabled by social media's effect on our cultural discourse and ultimately suggests the existence of a possibility for a renewed family life (however twisted) lying on the other side of those dangers.

The events of *Gone Girl* begin with the mysterious disappearance of Amy Elliott Dunne, a successful and widely-admired upper-middle-class woman who is mildly famous due to the fact that her parents had loosely based a series of bestselling children's books, the *Amazing Amy* series, on her life. The evidence is stacked against her husband Nick Dunne, a formerly successful but now unemployed magazine writer, whose marriage to Amy had taken a sour turn but who denies any guilt in his wife's disappearance. Throughout the first half of the novel, the chapters alternate between Nick's contemporary telling of events beginning on the day of Amy's disappearance and what appear to be Amy's diary entries from the years and months leading up

to her vanishing. Halfway through the novel, in a major twist, it is revealed that Amy staged her own disappearance and purposefully manufactured evidence to implicate Nick in her suspected murder as a way of getting revenge on him for his general neglect of her and their marriage and for his affair with a much younger former student named Andie. Amy, suddenly narrating to the reader from the present-tense of the story, reveals that the diary entries were written under a false persona in order to fool the police into believing in a non-existent version of her. The remainder of the novel follows Nick's attempts to clear his name, as well as Amy's reversals of fortune that ultimately lead her to return home, after murdering her high-school boyfriend Desi Collings and framing him for the events she had originally meant to pin on Nick. Although Nick initially plans to escape the marriage and tell the world the truth of what's happened, Amy has managed to become pregnant,[61] forcing him to stay with her indefinitely both for the child and for the sake of appearances.

Beyond the technological dimensions I highlight, *Gone Girl* playfully adopts a number of narrative tropes from the *noir* fiction and film canon. The central focus on a romantic relationship that eventually leads to a murder recalls James M. Cain novels such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, while the re-appearance of a woman everyone assumed had been murdered echoes Vera Caspary's novel *Laura*. Nick's experience as a suspect of a crime he did not commit is similar to that of Henry Fonda's protagonist in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*. Amy's eventual reveal as a manipulative *femme fatale* puts her in the same league as too many *noir* characters to name. The novel even acknowledges its place in the genre in the occasional semi-metafictional moment – when Amy is robbed after her disappearance, she angrily reflects, "I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir" (Flynn

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[61] Via artificial insemination, though she has managed to deceive everyone into thinking the pregnancy was the result of sex between her and Nick after her return.

319). If neo-*noir* self-consciously recycles themes and styles from classic *noir*, *Gone Girl* as post-*noir* is even more hyper-self-aware than neo-*noir*.

Although some critics might dismiss *Gone Girl* as primarily a commercial thriller due to its immense popular success, accessible prose style, and evident adherence to certain genre conventions, it is in fact a highly intelligent and sophisticated novel with a great deal of urgent social commentary. Flynn's depiction of Amy's simultaneous embrace and subversion of the tropes and expected fate of the *femme fatale* and the famous, widely-discussed "Cool Girl" monologue, in particular have made both the novel and David Fincher's 2014 film adaptation touchstones in debates about contemporary *noir* and contemporary American gender roles. Emily Johansen offers a persuasive reading of the novel's setting in Carthage, Missouri and its emphasis on abandoned buildings as evidence of its status as a "neoliberal Gothic" novel. Johansen's reading both places *Gone Girl* in a long literary genealogy going back to *Jane Eyre* and the Gothic novels of the 18th century and makes a compelling case for the novel's portrayal of how the contemporary economic order corrupts social life: "it is not the typically gothic tropes in these novels (the abandoned houses, the quasi-supernatural threats) that seem most grotesque, but the way the demands of neoliberal entrepreneurial subject-formation cannot help but create either monsters or a sense of entropic decline, despite a rhetoric of continuous evolutionary improvement" (31). While I broadly agree with Johansen's reading, I focus more narrowly on the role of the Internet and social media in the novel's trenchant critique of contemporary American life. Reading Amy's diary as an extended social-media performance allows for more concrete insight into the social forces that have warped and distorted her and, in turn, the readers of *Gone Girl*. Indeed Amy's entire life in the novel has been one long performance, one whose dedication to external appearances ultimately leaves her with nothing genuine inside of herself.

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The novel's concern with exteriors and social performance is evident from its first sentences. The opening narration from Nick reveals that his relationship with Amy is defined by physical, external factors: "When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had what the Victorians would call a finely shaped head. You could imagine the skull quite easily" (Flynn 3). In the next paragraph, Nick says that "I'd know her head anywhere" (Flynn 3). On a first read, when the reader is unsure of whether Nick will turn out to be guilty of Amy's murder or not, this passage reads ominously, with a possible subtext of violence, the reference to her skull being especially off-putting. Re-reading the passage, it becomes evident that Nick is not in fact thinking of Amy's head because he has done any violence to it, but because her physical appearance is synonymous with herself in his mind. I do not mean to imply simply that Nick is shallow and unduly focused on physical attractiveness; rather, I emphasize that Nick is focused on Amy's head because that external level of appearance is as much access as he has to her. He can only see her external performance, which, as readers later learn, is all anyone can see of Amy. It is no coincidence that the most popular social networking site in the world is called Facebook; social media by nature can only capture the external self and performances thereof, as captured by photographs, links, "likes," and always-performative posts. Deborah Chambers, summarizing the arguments of SoundCloud creators Alexander Ljung and Eric Wahlforss, notes that "a person is performing a certain *face* of their identity on a website. The nature of the 'face' being performed differs considerably according to the intended audience" (Chambers 70, emphasis original). The "face" in Facebook is not coincidental; no one would or could use a site

called "Soulbook" or "True-self-book." As the face is the main party of the body used to perform sociality in real life, it also metaphorically becomes the part we perform online.[62]

Nick's opening chapter also makes clear the more literal dimensions of the novel's technological critique. Describing Amy's dissatisfaction with having moved to Missouri, Nick apostrophizes to her, "Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy. The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet" (Flynn 4). Speaking of how the Internet has affected his work, Nick tells us that "This was back when the Internet was still some exotic pet kept in the corner of the publishing world – throw some kibble at it, watch it dance on its little leash, oh quite cute, it definitely won't kill us in the night" (Flynn 4). Nick recognizes that rapid technological change bodes ill for people of his creative disposition: "Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, people whose brains don't work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through" (Flynn 5). Of course, the Internet is indirectly responsible for Nick and Amy's financial situation insofar as it led to the relative obsolescence of the print magazines Nick used to work for, but its insidious role in the world of the novel goes even deeper than its economic disruption. Even after the Internet has rewritten the economic rules in such a way as to obviate Nick's old job, its demand for constant social performance will also ultimately trap him in a marriage he desperately wants to escape.

Where Nick sees his type as "through" in the age of the Internet, Amy turns out to be perfectly adapted to the new social imperatives. From the first lines of her narration, we see a

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[62] In East Asian societies, "face" as a concept is metonymic with reputation and responsibility to one's family. Many Asian and Asian-American texts deal with this concept in one way or another. In an Asian-American context, consider Alice Wu's 2004 romantic comedy *Saving Face*. For a clear demonstration of how "face" factors into East Asian social relations, consider Yasujiro Ozu's films such as *Late Spring* (1949) and *Early Summer* (1951), and particularly the actress Setsuko Hara's performances within those films. She conveys the tension between maintaining a public "face" and dealing with private emotions beautifully.

canny appropriation and re-deployment of the emotionally performative language of social media posts: "Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan smile as I write this. I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: *I met a boy!*" (Flynn 10). Who actually says "tra and la" or any variation thereof? Why, in particular, would anyone write such a phrase in a diary? "Tra and la" has no semantic content, no concrete meaning to convey; as a phrase, it only serves to perform happiness for one's listener. It is the sort of thing people only say in Facebook/Twitter/Instagram posts announcing a wedding date or a pregnancy. The rest of Amy's language in this paragraph is telling in its focus on physical imagery: rather than writing simply "I am very happy," she says that she has a "big adopted-orphan smile" and looks like a "Technicolor comic" of a girl with a ponytail. She does not only want to tell us that she is happy; she wants us to see an image of what her happiness looks like. Her opening paragraph of narration is the written equivalent of a selfie: a staged, carefully manicured image of the self meant to convey to an audience how uniquely happy the creator of the image is, what a charmed life she leads. She then goes on to note, "But I did. This is a technical, empirical truth. I met a boy, a great, gorgeous dude, a funny, cool-ass guy. Let me set the scene, because it deserves setting for posterity (no, please, I'm not that far gone, posterity! feh)" (Flynn 10). In this moment Amy (and Flynn) cannily point out the mixture of truth and fiction that permeates so many social media posts. Amy's description of her meeting Nick as "a technical, empirical truth" gets to the core of the difficulties social media presents. People do not generally tell outright lies about themselves on social media[63] - most Facebook status updates, Instagram selfies, Tweets, Snapchat posts, and so on are generally based in objective reality. The person making the post

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[63] The current President of the United States at the time of writing being an important exception.

usually really did do or see some version of what they claim. The fiction comes with the carefully manicured presentation of the facts, the way certain details are chosen to create a particular impression of the poster while other less flattering details are ignored. Nobody in the world of *Gone Girl* would dispute that Amy did in fact meet Nick when she said she did; on that count, she is telling the truth. The way she writes about her reaction to this event, however, is pure performance. Amy even resorts to theatrical language with her instruction to "Let me set the scene," a sentence she uses multiple times throughout the first half of the novel. Social media allows us to constantly "set the scene" of what we do and do not tell to other people, how we tell it, and why; Amy is merely presenting to us a more advanced form of such artifice.

Amy's actual profession further deepens her connection to social media. She tells us that she is a writer, though admittedly not one of the grumpy novelists Nick so admires: "Now, I like a writer party, I like writers, I am the child of writers, I am a writer. I still love scribbling that word – WRITER – anytime a form, questionnaire, document asks for my occupation. Fine, I write personality quizzes, I don't write about the Great Issues of the Day, but I think it's fair to say I am a writer" (Flynn 10). After describing her job, Amy then immediately presents the reader with a faux quiz question about what to do in the situation she found herself in, i.e. being a quiz writer asked about her profession at a party full of professional writers. She presents three options and gives the correct answer ("C, totally C"). Amy will present the reader more than a half-dozen more such quizzes over the course of the novel, including near the end, after she has dropped the diary pretense. These quizzes are important to an understanding of the novel's critique of social media for several reasons. On a simple literal level, these sorts of personality quizzes are heavily associated with social media. Amy says that she writes them for "women's rags," but there is no doubt that her quizzes would have appeared in online versions. People

routinely take and post their results from such personality quizzes on social media, especially

those promulgated by the company Buzzfeed, which have become consistently more absurd over

time.[64] As a writer of personality quizzes, Amy would be what is known as a "content creator"

on social media.

The resonances of her quizzes go deeper than simply this literal economic association.

The quizzes, simply by nature of their highly artificial and conventionalized form, suggest that

every social interaction already has a commodified and mediated character for Amy. There is, in

Amy's experience, no relationship or encounter that cannot be reduced to this relatively trivial,

consumerist genre. The three well-defined options she always presents as answers correspond to

her intense awareness of the artificiality and performativity of the social roles she plays. Her

responses in any given situation are not natural or instinctual; her behavior is never determined

by any sort of essential personality. Rather, her behavior is always informed by the expectations

of others. Even after she has murdered her stalker, kidnapper, and ex-boyfriend Desi Collings

and returned home, Amy considers her next steps in the form of a quiz:

> You are Amazing Amy, and you've survived a brutal kidnapping involving
>
> repeated assaults. You've killed your captor, and you've made it back to a
>
> husband you've discovered was cheating. You:
>
> a) Put yourself first and demand some time alone to collect yourself.
>
> b) Hold it together just a little longer so you can help the police.
>
> c) Decide which interview to give first – you might as well get something out of
>
>   the ordeal, like a book deal.
>
> Answer: B. Amazing Amy always puts others first. (Flynn 375)

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[64] At the time of writing, Buzzfeed had just posted on Facebook a quiz entitled "What Kind of Dog Would You
Be?" The author of the current study is, apparently, a border collie.

This final quiz is especially revealing. Answers (a) and (b) both sound like plausible, normal responses to the situation, but the fact that Amy even includes option (c) is indicative of her sociopathy. She chooses answer (b), not because it is her natural inclination, but because she knows it is what others expect from the public persona she has built up as Amazing Amy (as she explicitly acknowledges). The important part of these quizzes for Amy (and of such online quizzes in real life) is not to choose the "true" or honest answer, but to get a result that one wants to present to others.

Indeed, the Amazing Amy persona, far from being solely a plot device to explain the intense media scrutiny the case receives in the world of the novel, is crucial to understanding Amy's relationship to social media and to social performance in general. One could argue that, due to the existence of the *Amazing Amy* books, Amy has had a type of social media presence all her life, long before anyone else did. Furthermore, it was a social media presence she did not herself control.

In an uncharacteristic moment of candor, Amy actually tells us her true feelings about the *Amazing Amy* books early in her diary. From a young age, Amazing Amy has essentially been a media mirror for Amy herself, but a distorted one that relentlessly performs success. Amy is aware from a young age of how her fictional counterpart is a rebuke to her every failure: "And yet I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book … When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game" (Flynn 26-27). Amy understands Amazing Amy's constant successes as her parents' way of publicly celebrating her for imaginary successes while privately shaming her for her real failures (or, rather, her moments of ordinariness). Social media profiles often

work as a way for people to present the most successful, most attractive, happiest versions of themselves imaginable; Amy's parents, in controlling her media narrative, give her no choice but to feel shame in the gap between her public and private selves. Communications scholar Pavica Sheldon delineates the relationship between social media use and self-image:

> The appeal of social networking sites is the capacity to present ourselves in an indefinite number of ways. This is the reason many have argued that narcissists prefer online communities consisting of *shallow relationships*, as they have complete control over their self-presentation. Social media offers a 'non-ymous' (the opposite of anonymous) online setting that provides an ideal environment for the expression of the 'hoped-for possible self,' or rather a socially desirable identity that an individual wants to establish. (Sheldon 38, emphasis original)

Sheldon's description of a social media profile as the public account of the "hoped-for possible self" perfectly captures what Amy's parents create in *Amazing Amy*; not an honest rendition of who their daughter in fact is, but an aspirational narrative of who they want her to be. Whereas most people at least have the autonomy to decide on their own version of their "hoped-for possible selves," Amy has one thrust upon her.

Even though Amy clearly resents the way her parents have shaped so much of the narrative of her life without her input, she nevertheless continues to play the part into adulthood. Rather than refusing the game of constant social performance that social media puts us into, Amy subverts the system by playing it to its furthest logical conclusion. As Nick accurately points out, "her obsessions tended to be fueled by competition: She needed to dazzle men and jealous-ify women: *Of course Amy can cook French cuisine and speak fluent Spanish and garden and knit and run marathons and day-trade stocks and fly a plane and look like a runway model doing it.*

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She needed to be Amazing Amy, all the time" (Flynn 45). She has internalized the logic of performing a successful public persona so thoroughly that, even as she complains about her parents' actions in writing the books, her falsified diary really becomes just the latest entry in the *Amazing Amy* series.

Flynn satirizes specific social media tropes by having Amy imitate and exploit the world of social media in other ways besides her constant emphasis on success and her sarcastic quizzes. Everyone on Facebook is familiar with the particular subgenre of the faux-private acknowledgment and celebration of a loved one in a public forum, what Deborah Chambers describes as "semi-public messages of mutual acknowledgment, status confirmation and relationship affirmation" (62). The faux-private post has a different rhetorical construction and effect than other genres of more straightforward public social media posts.[65] On birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and so on, people will write messages ostensibly aimed at celebrating and affirming love for their parent or child or spouse or significant other: "Happy Father's Day to the man who made me who I am today!" or "Happy anniversary to my beautiful, funny, strong, loving wife!" These messages are written with the knowledge that dozens or even hundreds of other people will see them aside from the ostensible addressee. Thus, these messages are not truly the private statements of love and affection that they are supposed to appear as; rather, they are self-conscious public performances of such emotions. They not only say, "I love you!"; they also say, "Hey, everyone, look how much I love this person!" This type of rhetorical move is only possible in the social environment cultivated by outlets like Facebook and Instagram.

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[65] Other common genres of social media post include (but are not limited to) declarations of one's own achievements (e.g., "I graduated today!"); political posts (e.g., "I support Medicare for all"); questions (e.g., "Can anyone recommend a good book to read on my next airplane trip?"); original jokes; memes; and links to other types of content the poster appreciates.

As part of her plan to frame Nick, Amy writes several ostensibly sincere examples of this recent genre. Once we know the truth about Amy's intentions and motivations, those messages reveal themselves as vicious parodies of the genre. For example, consider the first written note Nick finds:

> My Darling Husband,
>
> I figured this was the perfect place – these hallowed halls of learning! – to tell you I think you are a brilliant man. I don't tell you enough, but I am amazed by your mind: the weird statistics and anecdotes, the strange facts, the disturbing ability to quote from any movie, the quick wit, the beautiful way you have of wording things. After years together, I think a couple can forget how wonderful they find each other. I remember when we first met, how dazzled I was by you, and so I want to take a moment to tell you I still am and it's one of my favorite things about you: You are BRILLIANT. (Flynn 75)

Amy's note is a masterpiece of sardonic imitation; it seemingly affirms her love for and awe of her husband, but in fact is only part of a scheme driven by her utter contempt for him. The language is consistently hyperbolic and falsely pious – "My Darling Husband," "hallowed halls of learning," "amazed," "dazzled," "You are BRILLIANT." People tend to use hyperbolic, exaggerated language (including the typographic element of all capital letters to emphasize a particular word) when declaring their love for someone on social media; Amy simply pushes that tendency a bit further. Once we know her true opinion of Nick, the sarcasm of the note becomes clear. A similar ironic hyperbole is found in another one of Amy's notes later in the scavenger hunt: "You need to know you are a good man, you are a sweet man, you are kind … So I am here to say now: You are WARM. You are my sun" (Flynn 135). The repetitive structure – "you are"

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constantly reiterated – satirizes the simple-minded devotion of this genre of social media post. After decades of postmodernism, it is difficult to say something as hyperbolic as "you are my sun" without at least a little irony – and Amy knows that Nick will know that the writing is too saccharine to reflect her true feelings. Amy is adopting this overly naïve persona not because she expects Nick to believe it, but because she expects her real intended audience – the police and, later, everyone who reads about the diary through the news media – to believe it. In telling her husband how much she loves and admires him in these notes, Amy is doing a more sinister version of what everyone who makes public displays of affection on social media is doing – not really communicating love but portraying herself as someone overwhelmed by it. The point is not to tell Nick anything but to convince everyone else that she is an especially devoted wife and thus a proper object of sympathy.

Eventually Amy admits to the reader that her entire narrative for the first half of the book has been one long performance, the diary a sham meant to implicate Nick in her supposed murder. Throughout the second half of the novel, Amy is no longer narrating through writing in her diary; rather, she is speaking directly to an addressee who does not diegetically exist in the world of the novel. She is speaking directly to the novel's ideal reader, whom she effectively makes an accomplice after the fact in her deception.[66] This combination of major plot twist and change in narratological mode allows Flynn to reset the terms on which the reader understands and relates to Amy. Upon the revelation of this twist, Amy discusses the elements of performance that she has been using in the first half of the novel. After explaining her belief that Nick fell in love not with Amy herself, but with the persona she had adopted, Amy explains why

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[66] One could argue that, if the diary is akin to a social media profile, Amy's narration in the second half of the novel becomes more like a blog – a different genre of online self-expression that is less artificially performative and more concerned with honest self-revelation.

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she had such a persona in the first place: "I can't help it, it's what I've always done: The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's au courant? I think most people do this, they just don't admit it, or else they settle on one persona because they're too lazy or stupid to pull off a switch" (Flynn 222). Amy's description of changing personalities like outfits might initially sound like just more evidence of her sociopathic tendencies, but she has a point: in the social media age, it has become easier and more prevalent than ever before for people to adopt personas at will. Deborah Chambers notes that "Social network site management can … be viewed as a form of impression management that involves an explicit construction of the social self," and that users of social media sites "actively participate in forms of impression management that were once the preserve of celebrities, politicians and others in the public eye" (63). The novel's focus on both traditional media and social media are part of what enable its larger cultural commentary.

Amy's narrative performance in the first half of the novel not only mirrors the way people use social media in everyday contemporary life, it also draws out the latent pathologies that social media already encourages in us. According to Pavica Sheldon,

> [w]hen it comes to Facebook status updates, researchers argue that they are a perfect way to manage impressions of their self, as individuals can carefully select what to write for their status. Narcissism was the most important predictor of the frequency of status updates. Higher degrees of narcissism led to deeper self-disclosures, which Winter et al. interpreted as a strategy to increase attention of recipients' 'liking' of the sender. (39)

With their systems of "rewards" and constant cajoling for more "content" in the form of updates, social media sites encourage a certain type of narcissism in their users. Self-promotion, which in

the past has traditionally been a means to acquiring material or professional success, becomes its own reward in the age of "likes" and retweets. In describing the difference between herself and "Diary Amy," Amy reveals both her mastery of the contemporary social media game of self-promotion and her contempt for it: "I hope you liked Diary Amy. She was meant to be likable. Meant for someone like you to like her. She's *easy* to like. I've never understood why that's considered a compliment – that just anyone could like you. No matter" (Flynn 237). Amy understands better than anyone how to get "likes," but does not for the most part see the use of them. She weaponizes others' need to be liked against them, as well: "The Public must turn against Nick. It's as much a part of his punishment as prison, for darling Nicky – who spends so much time worrying about people liking him – to know he is universally hated" (Flynn 245). Amy also explicitly mocks social media and the practice of "liking" a few pages later when talking about Andie's social media posts, recreating both the posts themselves and the reactions to them:

> Saw Mr. Hunky today.
> (Oh, do tell!)
> (When do we get to meet this stud?)
> (Bridget likes this!)
> A kiss from a dreamy guy makes everything better.
> (Too true!)
> (When do we get to meet Dreamy?!)
> (Bridget likes this!) (Flynn 249)

Facebook first introduced the "like" button in 2009, three years before the events of *Gone Girl*, so "liking" had already been well established as part of social media culture. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said at the time of the launch that "We didn't want to just build a Dislike button because we don't want to turn Facebook into a forum where people are voting up or down on people's posts. That doesn't seem like the kind of community we want to create" (Speed). If "disliking" is not an option, then everyone on Facebook is pushed into a race to become ever

more "likable." Diary Amy simply pushes this race to the top of the likability mountain to its extreme logical conclusion, building a sustained narrative meant only to increase the audience's "liking" of the narrator and to push them towards disliking her narrative's antagonist, Nick. If Facebook did have a "dislike" button, Amy would see Nick drown in dislikes.

The power of social media scrutiny is so pervasive in these characters' lives that Nick ultimately survives Amy's trap, not by proving his innocence, but by learning to play the "liking" game as well as she does. A turning point in Amy's formerly murderous attitude towards Nick comes, not coincidentally, when he becomes the star of a viral video in which he begs forgiveness for having failed her as a husband and declares that he will love her forever. His performance in the video starts to win over Amy herself as well as the general online public, as Amy notes: "Online, the video is already spiral-viraling away, and the reaction is surprisingly positive. Cautiously optimistic: *Maybe this guy didn't kill his wife after all*. That is, word for word, the most common refrain. Because once Nick lets his guard down and shows some emotion, it's all there. No one could watch that video and believe he was putting up an act" (Flynn 304). Amy herself is as swayed by Nick's act in the video as the police are by her written performance. Of course, Nick's video is every bit as calculated to charm as Amy's diary, as he reveals at the beginning of his next chapter: "Good morning! I sat in bed with my laptop by my side, enjoying the online reviews of my impromptu interview … Last night I cast the first line to lure my wife back in" (Flynn 309). Nick knows his performance had its intended effect on the online masses: "If the reviews were any indication, I made the right call, because the reviews were good. They were very good" (Flynn 309). Flynn's hyper-awareness of the pervasive influence of social media's never-ending popularity contest helps make *Gone Girl* such a uniquely and urgently contemporary mystery. For Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Sam Spade,

and Philip Marlowe, getting to the truth through rational deduction or dogged investigation was the only thing that mattered; public perception and popularity simply were not an issue. In Flynn's time, however, the court of public opinion matters at least as much as any actual legal system. In *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the protagonist was worried about one anonymous voice intruding into her home through the telephone; now, hundreds or thousands of anonymous voices can intrude into everyone's homes through the Internet. The threat that communications technology presented in classic *noir* – embodied by the "tangled networks" of *Sorry, Wrong Number* – has increased exponentially in the 21st century, making the need to manage it all the more urgent.

Although Amy returns to Nick because he proves that he is also an adept player of the social media/popularity game, she still feels the need to retain the upper hand. She parlays her version of events into a lucrative media narrative, as she crows near the end of the novel:

> I have a book deal: I am officially in control of our story. It feels wonderfully symbolic. Isn't that what every marriage is, anyway? Just a lengthy game of he-said, she-said? Well, she is saying, and the world will listen, and Nick will have to smile and agree. I will write him the way I want him to be: romantic and thoughtful and very very repentant – about the credit cards and the purchases and the woodshed. If I can't get him to say it out loud, he'll say it in my book. Then he'll come on tour with me and smile and smile. (Flynn 406)

Although Amy has been speaking to us as her genuine self throughout the second half of the novel, she will revert straight back to her Diary Amy persona for the official narrative she will sell to the rest of her world. She understands the power of a pleasing social performance to shape the narrative of her life and will harness it to trap Nick just as she initially did with the diary

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entries. The final spring in Amy's trap is that she has managed to secretly impregnate herself with Nick's sperm, locking him into the conventional narrative of the nuclear family. The revelation of the pregnancy convinces Nick, against all reason, to stay with Amy. Nick himself accepts that he will be playing a role in a story, even if he knows the version Amy is selling is a false one. Rather than escaping or refusing the media game thrust upon him, he intends to play it at the highest level he can: "Yes, I am finally a match for Amy … I'm rising to my wife's level of madness … Now at last I'm the hero. I am the one to root for in the never-ending war story of our marriage. It's a story I can live with. Hell, at this point, I can't imagine my story without Amy. She is my forever antagonist. We are one long frightening climax" (Flynn 413). Nick has been completely trapped into a never-ending performance of domestic bliss, but decides to embrace the role.

Ultimately, *Gone Girl* arrives at as compelling a conclusion about family and the Internet as *Bleeding Edge* does. Where *Bleeding Edge* posits family as both a safe haven from the dangerous outer world controlled by the Internet and as something that must be protected from dissolution, *Gone Girl*'s newly reconstituted family unit is a trap into which the Internet has cornered the characters. However, *Gone Girl* is not an anti-family novel where *Bleeding Edge* is clearly pro-family. Rather, *Gone Girl* is a cautionary tale, one that takes the dangers posed by the never-ending game of social media performance to an extreme conclusion as an example of what not to do. Rather than becoming obsessed with showing everyone else how perfect and enviable our lives are, we should be more concerned with living authentically good lives. In a twisted way, the new nuclear family that Nick and Amy will build together with their child does offer them a future of connection and intimacy analogous to the sense of belonging Maxine builds in

Bleeding Edge. This family will undoubtedly be warped by all that has transpired in the novel,

but it will be a family nonetheless.

From the conclusions of *Bleeding Edge* and *Gone Girl*, we can see how both Pynchon

and Flynn have simultaneously updated a classic *noir* anxiety for the contemporary moment, and

how they have offered a post-postmodern solution to that problem. The Internet is every bit as

dangerous and anxiety-producing to Pynchon's characters as the telephone was to the characters

of classic *noir*. In the world of Flynn's *Gone Girl*, the culture of social media has become such a

part of the DNA of everyday life that it can bleed trans-medially into the much older genre of the

diary entry. As a thoroughgoing creature of the Internet who has internalized its principles of

self-performance, Amy can turn an old-fashioned form into a viral hit designed to get her

husband the death sentence. Christine Gledhill writes that "in film noir there is a proliferation of

points of view and a struggle within the text for one viewpoint to gain hegemony" and that the

genre encourages "heroines whose means of struggle is precisely the manipulation of the image

which centuries of female representations have provided" (30 – 31). Amy has used the

contemporary iteration of the technology *noir* is often paranoid about in order to promote her

own viewpoint through the manipulation of her image. Moreover, she manipulates people not

just through the technology itself, but from a sharp understanding of the mindset that technology

has engendered. Where the telephones of *Sorry, Wrong Number* formed a "tangled network" that

linked "a million lives" in a "great city," the Internet of *Bleeding Edge* and *Gone Girl* is an

infinitely more complex network that links billions of lives across the planet. Where the

telephone wire became a murder weapon in *Detour*, the Ethernet cable becomes inextricably

linked to 9/11 in *Bleeding Edge* and Wi-fi is the medium for Amy's murderous manipulations in

Gone Girl. Where the answering machine lets Mike Hammer keep himself at a distance from

others in *Kiss Me Deadly*, the desktop in *Bleeding Edge* and the smartphone in *Gone Girl*

become unreliable intermediaries in all social relationships. Nevertheless, both novels offer an

escape from the anxiety-producing technological worlds they portray. Maxine Tarnow finds

solace in simply attending to the parental duties in front of her, and Amy and Nick do find a kind

of stability in "the never-ending war story of our marriage," a story that Nick avers he "can live

with" (Flynn 413). In tackling the uniquely contemporary problem of alienation as it relates to

Internet use, both *Bleeding Edge* and *Gone Girl* offer post-*noir* solutions to an updated version of

a classic *noir* problem, and do so in ways that move beyond the cul-de-sacs of postmodernism.

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CHAPTER IV: SEARCHING FOR HOME: THE CITY IN THE POST-*NOIR* NOVEL

With very few exceptions, one of the defining features of *noir* narrative has always been its setting in the modern city. The "mean streets" down which the hard-boiled detective must go, in Chandler's famous formulation, nearly always belong to a city, not to a small town or the countryside. In Frank Krutnik's description, "[t]he *noir* city of Hollywood's thrillers of the 1940s and early 1950s is a shadow realm of crime and dislocation in which benighted individuals do battle with implacable threats and temptations" (89). The anxious, alienated relationship of the city-dweller to his[67] increasingly concrete-and-glass-filled, crowded, polluted, and unforgiving environment is a persistent theme across virtually all *noir* fiction and film, both classic and neo-, and helps to account for its persistent popularity with city-dwelling readers and filmgoers of the 20th and 21st centuries. In most classic *noir*, the anxiety, corruption, and vice represented by the city is a given, a condition so obviously inescapable that it is never directly challenged. In neo-*noir* texts such as *Chinatown*, *Blade Runner*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *Sin City*, the previously taken-for-granted reality of the city as an alienating, quasi-dystopic setting becomes a self-consciously emphasized thematic element. In the literature of the late 2000s, however, wholly imaginary cities serve as the settings of two *noir* detective novels which interrogate the relationship of the individual to urban space. Michael Chabon's 2007 *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* posits an alternative history of the world post-Holocaust, one in which European Jewish people have been relocated to the city of Sitka, Alaska instead of Israel; China Miéville's 2009 *The City & the City* imagines not one, but two fictional cities somewhere in Europe that share

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[67] In classic *noir*, the central character is nearly always male.

physical space but are strictly separated in the minds of their citizens by overlapping imaginary borders. Interestingly, although both works faithfully follow the conventions of the Chandlerian hard-boiled detective novel in terms of their character archetypes and mystery plots, their explorations of their imaginary settings qualified them both to win the Hugo Award for best science fiction or fantasy novel in their respective years. Furthermore, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* also won the science-fiction/fantasy-based Nebula Award, while *The City & the City* garnered a Nebula nomination.[68] This sort of genre mixing, while an increasingly common feature of much contemporary fiction, is especially important in understanding the particular contributions of these two novels to the *noir* tradition. By inventing imaginary cities with their own strange rules and customs, Chabon and Miéville create novel-length thought experiments that allow the reader to re-consider the question of how we relate to the places we live in and how we can achieve a healthier way of inhabiting them. Dirk Vanderbeke observes that fantastical cities "have a long pedigree" going back to Plato's Republic, and that such imaginary places "can be constructed merely as background, i.e. an imaginary location for the rather more important action, but also as a focus for the reader's attention, a central aspect of the actual message" (150). Chabon's and Miéville's fantastical *noir* cities are among the most significant recent innovations in this millennia-old tradition.

The way that these two novels re-conceptualize the trope of the *noir* city puts them on a continuum with the other works discussed in this project. Each of my four chapters has considered how contemporary literature envisions solutions to the alienation that traditionally defines *noir* protagonists. Characters who are perpetually ill at ease with themselves, with others,

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[68] Also nominated for the Nebula Award in the same year as *The City & the City* was Jeff Vandermeer's *Finch*, another sci-fi/*noir* hybrid set in a wholly imaginary city – in that case, the city of Ambergris, which in the novel is occupied by a hostile force of sentient, talking mushroom-people. It is a shame I only have room to examine two novels here.

and with society as a whole occupy the *noir* landscape. The classical *noir* period coincides with a period of post-Depression and then post-war upheaval in which individuals find themselves unsure of how to exist in the world in an authentic way. Authors of the contemporary, post-postmodern moment seek to develop solutions to this basic problem. The first half of "The Post-*Noir* Novel" explores the relationship of the self *to the self* as mediated through the mind and the body. In the first chapter, I show how *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Intuitionist* use the conventions of the *noir* mystery in order to bring their protagonists to the point where they are able to articulate authentic versions of themselves *to* themselves, so that they can begin the work of living in their worlds in a more fully integrated way. The second chapter demonstrates how overly-rigid understandings of race and sexuality have historically contributed to *noir* feelings of alienation, and how *Incognegro* and *The Song Is You* work to deconstruct the repressive logics on which such racism and homophobia had worked.

The latter half of "The Post-*Noir* Novel" moves beyond the question of the self's relationship to the self in order to consider the broader question of how the self relates to others. The third chapter, starting from an observation about the ways in which telephones and other forms of novel communications technology embodied a paranoia about modernity in classic *noir*, examined how *Bleeding Edge* and *Gone Girl* work through analogous fears of the Internet in the contemporary period. In this final chapter, the scope of my argument widens to deal with the question of how the individual relates to society as a whole, as reflected through the conception of the city. Given the starting point of how cities have traditionally been portrayed in *noir* – as hostile, inhuman, dangerous spaces – Chabon's and Miéville's novels prompt the reader to ask what can be done to salvage and transform the individual's relationship to the city. Both *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *The City & the City* use the settings of imaginary cities in order

to examine the rules and preconceptions that govern actual lives in cities and prompt readers to consider how those rules might be changed.

Dean MacCannell has compellingly argued in an essay on "homeless *noir*" that there is an enlightening parallel to be made between the fictional situation of the *noir* protagonist and the real-life predicament of contemporary homeless people: the perspectives of both offer us a way of imagining modern capitalist society from "the outside." The *noir* narrative offers us, if only for a little while, an imaginative identification with a totally alienated point of view:

> The *noir* hero and contemporary homeless people are in a 'through the looking glass' relation: originally and in the first place, he and they stood outside the capitalist social 'totality,' giving us our first glimpse of it as something not neutral, not fully inclusive; he schmoozes and shoves his way back into society, where he exposes its bias and corruption. But the homeless remain on the outside, not just outside some desired part of capitalist society: not outside the middle class yet in the working class, for example. They remain outside everything, outside class itself. (MacCannell 288)

Earlier *noir* narratives temporarily allow their protagonists to see things from the fully "outsider" perspective of the homeless, but for various reasons cannot allow them to remain there permanently. Once exposed to this relationship to society, the *noir* protagonist generally has one of two choices: either cynical re-integration into a society that he knows has little real chance of improvement (as in *The Maltese Falcon*, Chandler's Marlowe novels, *Gilda*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, the film version of *In a Lonely Place*, *The Big Heat*, *Pickup on South Street*, etc.); or, more commonly, a resigned acceptance of death or imprisonment (James M. Cain's novels, *Detour*, *Out of the Past*, *Gun Crazy*, *Night and the City*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Odds Against*

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Tomorrow, etc.). Thus, the ideological choice classic *noir* offers its readers and viewers is a constrained one: yes, modern society is hopelessly corrupt and unfair, but you either buy back in or you die. The innovation offered by Chabon's and Miéville's novels is that they offer a third choice: the protagonists of both novels find a way to get outside of the totality of their relative societies and to remain there without being destroyed. Chabon's Meyer Landsman and Miéville's Tyador Borlú both find ways to embrace a metaphorical version of the *noir* homelessness MacCannell describes; although they might not be literally physically homeless by the ends of their narratives, both characters have affirmatively chosen to give up everything they have been ideologically raised to see as "home." MacCannell argues of both *noir* protagonists and the homeless that

> [t]hey have no use for the proper boundary or the separations and hierarchies encoded in spatial arrangements. There are no internally imposed limits or boundaries around their space that correspond to the territorial markings of private ownership. And for this reason, they know that they can never ultimately hide their feelings in the interior of a personal or private 'subjectivity.' They must hide out in the open, fully exposed. (MacCannell 295)

By rejecting the corrupted "homes" offered by the fictional *noir* cities they live in (and especially the various boundaries that define these homes), the protagonists of these two novels offer the readers of their narratives a way to imaginatively rehabilitate their own real-life relationships to the spaces we inhabit. By the ends of these two novels, both protagonists are "hid[ing] out in the open," as MacCannell says; and yet for both of them, it is the first time they have really chosen where they want to be. These novels insist that the individual is not obligated to unquestioningly accept all the corrupt and isolating tendencies of the broader society: there are better alternatives

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than death or total exclusion. These narratives model the work of improving society while still participating in it. Both novels start with the classic *noir* trope of the alienated individual living in a dark and threatening urban space, but ultimately re-define the rules of that individual-city relationship in such a way as to enable a better future.

The Big/Dark/Mean/Sin Streets/Clock/City/Jungle: A Brief History of the *Noir* City

Noir's obsession with cities has long been one of its most recognizable characteristics. Los Angeles, San Francisco, and later New York figure as prime locations in the *noir* imagination. The travelling "*Noir* City Film Festival" is, at the time of this writing, in its 16th year. Even a list of the titles of a number of *noir* works reveals *noir*'s consistent urban focus: *The Naked City*, *Night and the City*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Kansas City Confidential*, *Scarlet Street*, *Port of New York*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Pickup on South Street*, *Alphaville*, *Chinatown*, *City of Glass*, *L.A. Confidential*, *The Big Nowhere*, *Dark City* (1950), *Dark City* (1998), *Motherless Brooklyn*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire*, and *Sin City*. As part of its thoroughgoing homage to the genre, Rockstar's video game *L.A. Noire* featured a painstakingly re-created digital version of much of 1947 Los Angeles. Beyond the works whose titles directly suggest an urban focus, virtually every significant *noir* narrative is readily associated with a major city. *The Maltese Falcon* famously takes place in San Francisco; all of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels and their film adaptations take place in Los Angeles;[69] Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels double as a fictionalized history of the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles; Quentin Tarantino's early films provide a portrait of 1990s Los Angeles as filtered through a *noir*-fueled imagination. One of the primary influences on *noir*'s visual style is the work of the painter Edward Hopper, whose urban-set paintings such as *Automat* (1927), *Office at Night* (1940), and

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[69] Indeed, Brian Olson and Bonnie Olson have written a book, *Tailing Philip Marlowe*, which offers readers guidance to a walking tour of Los Angeles based on Chandler's novels.

especially *Nighthawks* (1942) often look like colorized stills of classic *noir* films.[70] The *noir* city

has even provided a frame for imagining our future: the most memorable and lovingly created

element of Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner* is its dark, rain-drenched vision of 2019 Los

Angeles. If there is one thing that is overwhelmingly clear about *noir*, it is that *noir* is obsessed

with cities.

Indeed, *noir*'s monomaniacal focus on the space of the city has been one of its most

powerful and enduring legacies in the world's cultural imagination. As Nicholas Christopher

puts it,

> These films, which first reflected the urban landscape – physically and
>
> emotionally – eventually changed the way we looked at and felt about our cities,
>
> and in so doing, through their audience over the past fifty years and their
>
> considerable impact on the other arts and on popular styles, changed the cities
>
> themselves. However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator
>
> must always be the city. The two are inseparable. The great, sprawling American
>
> city, endlessly in flux, both spectacular and sordid, with all its amazing
>
> permutations of human and topographical growths, with its deeply textured
>
> nocturnal life that can be a seductive, almost otherworldly, labyrinth of dreams or
>
> a tawdry bazaar of lost souls: the city is the seedbed of noir. (Christopher 37)

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[70] Hopper's work continues to shape even contemporary *noir*-inflected works: a scene from episode 8 of David
Lynch's 2017 revival of *Twin Peaks* seems to directly reference *Office at Night*. As a museum label for the Edward
Hopper collection at the Chicago Institute of Art notes, Lynch has long been a Hopper enthusiast. For more on
Hopper's relationship to *noir*, see Tom Slater's "Fear of the City 1882 – 1967: Edward Hopper and the Discourse of
Anti-Urbanism."

If *noir* has indeed affected Americans' real-life relationships to the cities so many now live in, then returning to *noir* as a genre is a logical path for any author seeking to further change his or her readers' view of city life.

Significantly, the borders of the *noir* city extend beyond America; some of the most canonical classic *noir* films were shot and set in cities outside of the United States, but found in those locations the same conditions of alienation and paranoia that characterize so many American-set *noir* narratives. Carol Reed's 1949 *The Third Man* was famously shot amongst the bombed-out buildings of postwar Vienna, using the real-life rubble and ruin to create dramatic visual spectacle. The protagonist of Jules Dassin's 1950 *Night and the City* finds himself on the run across the seamy underbelly of London. Both *Border Incident* (1949, dir. Anthony Mann) and *Touch of Evil* (1958, dir. Orson Welles) take place largely on the border between the United States and Mexico. Non-US American directors have also drawn on the *noir* tradition in order to depict conditions of alienation and desperation in their native countries. Jean-Luc Godard employed a stark *noir* visual style to depict a dystopic future Paris in *Alphaville* (1967). In Japan, Akira Kurosawa famously adapted Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* into the 1961 samurai film *Yojimbo* and based his 1963 film *High and Low* on hard-boiled writer Ed McBain's novel *King's Ransom*. South Korean auteur Park Chan-Wook has become one of the most internationally acclaimed directors currently working on the strength of *noir* films like *Oldboy* (2003) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005). Haruki Murakami, who has translated Raymond Chandler's work into Japanese, has deployed elements of the *noir* tradition in his own novels, as suggested by his title *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Despite the tradition's substantial US heritage, the *noir* city is not limited just to Los Angeles and New York; it seems that any city in the world can become a *noir* city.

What exactly does a *noir* city look like? Vivian Sobchack provides an extremely useful answer in her essay on "the chronotope of *film noir*." Sobchack argues that the settings that help define *noir* as a whole are common, recognizable locations:

> These radical grounds and material premises figured concretely before us and to which we should pay heed are the cocktail lounge, the nightclub, the bar, the hotel room, the boardinghouse, the diner, the dance hall, the roadside café, the bus and train station, and the wayside motel. These are the recurrent and determinate premises of film noir and they emerge from common places in wartime and postwar American culture that, transported to the screen, gain hyperbolized presence and overdetermined meaning. (Sobchcack 130)

The utter commonness of these types of settings helps to explain how *noir* becomes such a widely legible narrative mode; anyone who has experienced the anonymity and indifference of a cheap motel room or diner can relate to the *noir* mood these places so often evoke when used in narratives. While Sobchack is writing about *film noir* of the classic period, the same trend recurs in neo-*noir* as well. Many of the most memorable scenes of neo-*noir* films occur in just such settings; one need only think of the outdoor meal counter where we first meet Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner*, the diner where *Pulp Fiction* both begins and ends, the motel room Leonard Shelby keeps waking up in in *Memento*, the motels where Anton Chigurh stalks Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men*, or the diner Winkie's in *Mulholland Drive*. These ordinary, anonymous spaces are key to *noir*'s resonance; and it will come as no surprise that many such settings figure in both *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *The City & the City*.

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But what does *noir*, as a tradition, actually have to say about the city and the individual's relationship to it? An answer suggests itself in the opening lines of one of the earliest hard-boiled novels, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*:

> I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better. (Hammett 3)

As Hammett's narrator, the Continental Op, will very thoroughly learn by the end of the novel, Personville is not called "Poisonville" idly: it is indeed a poisonous, violent place where organized crime reigns supreme, and where the only real political question is which criminals shall be in charge. The deliberate generic-ness of the name "Personville," and the implication that people themselves are poison, suggests that such violent and corrupt rule is not unique to Hammett's fictional city but applies to cities everywhere.

A powerful articulation of the individual's relationship to the *noir* city provides the central metaphor and title of the leftist author Kenneth Fearing's 1946 novel *The Big Clock*. The novel, a thriller that follows a corporate writer named George Stroud who is in danger of being incriminated in the murder of his boss's mistress, presents a profoundly cynical view of modern city life. After Stroud describes meeting a group of people who include "a sizable sprinkling of lunatics," "the obscure suicides of ten or twenty years from now," and "[p]otentially fabulous murderers" (Fearing 5), he gives the reader a big-picture description of his world:

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> In short, the big clock was running as usual, and it was time to go home. Sometimes the hands of the clock actually raced, and at other times they hardly moved at all. But that made no difference to the big clock. The hands could move backwards, and the time it told would be right just the same. It would still be running as usual, because all other watches have to be set by the big one, which is even more powerful than the calendar, and to which one automatically adjusts his entire life. Compared to this hook-up, the man with the adding machines was still counting on his fingers. (Fearing 5-6)

For Stroud, "the big clock" is every large, impersonal structure of power that dictates every waking moment of his and everyone else's lives. It is the corporation he works for, the city he lives in, and indeed the nature of modern city life generally. The individual can do nothing against this clock ("all other watches have to be set by the big one"), and at best can merely hope to escape its notice, as Stroud does at the end of the novel. Having evaded suspicion for a crime he did not commit, Stroud tells us in the closing pages that

> The big, silent, invisible clock was moving along as usual. But it had forgotten all about me. Tonight it was looking for someone else. Its arms and levers and steel springs were bound up and poised in search of some other person in the same blind, impersonal way it had been reaching for me on the night before. And it had missed me, somehow. That time. But I had no doubt it would get around to me again. Inevitably. Soon. (Fearing 174)

Much like Al Roberts in *Detour* or Bob Jones in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Stroud knows in that way unique to *noir* protagonists that he will inevitably be crushed by the impersonal grinding of the city's gears: it is merely a question of when. The metaphor of the clock, which ticks on

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endlessly without intention and with indifference to anything outside of itself, succinctly

embodies the sort of paranoia about social organization that Edward Dimendberg identifies in the

work of many modernists: "if for earlier modernists the factory and its system of mechanized

production were emblematic of the new social order, for many later modernists this

mechanization was now evident on the level of the entire society, now experienced as a

nightmare of spatial regimentation, consumer manipulation, and corporate economic control"

(14). Fearing's novel brings this "nightmare" of capitalist organization directly and explicitly

into the language of the *noir* thriller. For Fearing and other *noir* writers and filmmakers, every

city becomes a version of "the big clock." For readers of Chabon's and Miéville's novels, the

challenge becomes finding a way to live both within and outside of the big clock.

Leaving Home in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

"His nights are wasted, his life and career a city of mistakes, his city itself a bulb that is about to

go black." (Chabon 12)

A little less than a quarter of the way into Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's*

Union, the narrator provides a short background story about a minor character named Melekh

Gaystik, who we are told was a world champion chess player who lived in the novel's

fictionalized version of Sitka, Alaska. After Gaystik's victory, the managers of the Hotel Einstein

give their hotel ballroom as a gift to his chess club for their practice meetings. The renovation of

the ballroom, however, has unexpected effects:

> They sealed off the main doors of the ballroom so that you could enter only
>
> through the back, off an alley. They pulled up the fine ashwood parquetry and laid
>
> down a demented checkerboard of linoleum in shades of soot, bile, and surgical-
>
> scrub green. The modernist chandelier was replaced by banks of fluorescent tubes

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bolted to the high concrete ceiling. Two months later, the young world champion

wandered into the old coffee shop where Landsman's father had once made his

mark, sat down in a booth at the back, took out a Colt .38 Detective Special, and

shot himself in the mouth. There was a note in his pocket. It said only *I liked*

things better the way they were before. (Chabon 83)

This passage, seemingly a brief detour away from the novel's main murder-investigation plot, in

fact functions as a parable for one of the novel's main themes. As a major innovation in the city-

obsessed *noir* tradition, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* explores the relationship its characters

have to the city-space that surrounds them and defines their lives. The moral of this grim

backstory seems clear: a certain type of environment can have immensely destructive effects on

the people who inhabit it. The transformed ballroom, once a space of elegance, beauty, and

sociality, becomes isolated, ugly, anonymous, and alienating. Despite the ostensible honor given

to Gaystik for his victory, this depressing new environment drives him to suicide. The challenge

for Meyer Landsman, the protagonist of the novel, will be to succeed where Gaystik failed;

rather than allow himself to be completely defined and defeated by the place where he happens

to find himself, Landsman will have to transcend his existing relationship to his hometown and

find a new way to inhabit his world.

  The Yiddish Policemen's Union straddles at least two significant generic traditions: on the

one hand, it is a hard-boiled detective novel "which takes most of its aesthetic cues from the

novels of Raymond Chandler" (Witcombe 31); on the other, it is also an alternate-history novel

like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* or Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The

novel's genre-bending initially drew some hostility, especially from Jewish reviewers; but, as

Joost Krijnen notes: "while Chabon's detractors seem to consider this use of the tropes of

detective fiction as damaging to the principal Jewish interest of the novel, it is not just an added

bane or bonus to a supposedly purer Jewish history, but really an intrinsic part of the project"

(136). Though most of the extant criticism of the novel has tried to keep both of the novel's

genres in mind, there has been relatively little exploration of how the two generic traditions

inform one another and are in conversation within the novel. I wish to highlight the manner in

which the novel's alternate history unlocks new potential in its *noir* dimension. By creating a

fictional city through the alternate history framework, Chabon is able to both extend and

ultimately transcend the ideas of the city that have always been present in *noir* narratives. The

evolution of protagonist Meyer Landsman's relationship to the novel's fanciful version of Sitka

provides a new possibility for the *noir* hero to repair his own psychological relationship to his

environment.

 The Yiddish Policemen's Union takes place in an fictionalized version of Sitka, Alaska,

sixty years after an alternate history of World War II where in the world of the novel, only two

million Jewish people have died during the Holocaust; the other four million escaped when the

United States offered the city of Sitka, Alaska as the base for a temporary Jewish refuge state.[71]

The present-tense narrative of the novel, set sixty years after the establishment of Sitka, follows

Meyer Landsman, a police officer born and raised entirely in Sitka, as he investigates the murder

of an unknown young man,[72] a murder that took place in the very hotel where Landsman[73]

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[71] As many critics have noted, the novel's plan for a Jewish state in Alaska was based on a real plan that was proposed during the Roosevelt administration but ultimately discarded.

[72] Simply for the sake of clarity and brevity, I will here note that the murder victim, initially identified under the false name Emmanuel Lasker, is eventually revealed to be Mendel Shpilman, the son of a powerful rabbi in Sitka and a failed would-be "Tzaddik Ha-Dor," or potential Messiah figure.

[73] Landsman's last name is of course not a coincidence. Daniel Anderson says of geography and space in the novel that "The effects of their role in identity formation are implied in the protagonist's name, Landsman. The woe-begotten sleuth's very surname recalls how the complications of geography inscribe themselves upon the human subject" (90).

himself lives. Other issues besides the murder loom over Landsman's investigation: he is still struggling with his divorce from fellow detective Bina Gelbfish, who has recently been made his superior in the police force, and with their decision to abort their son Django, who may or may not have had a crippling congenital disease; he is nursing a drinking problem; and he, like everyone else in Sitka, is worried about the upcoming "Reversion," the official date when Sitka's status as its own territory will expire and the land will once again be under the jurisdiction of the United States. The anxiety of possible homelessness and statelessness that the Reversion provokes pervades the novel; as Sarah Casteel notes, "The generic choice of the detective novel and *film noir* supplies an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspense. The hard-boiled detective's sense of disillusionment and futility in the face of an irredeemably corrupt world resonates with the uncertainties that the Jews of Sitka are facing" (798). Alternately, as Daniel Anderson puts it, "Using much of the geography of the real Sitka, Alaska, Chabon imposes upon the setting an otherworldly urban landscape that conflates the gritty modernity of *film noir* with the European shtetl" (90). By expanding this grim hard-boiled/*noir* sensibility to the entirety of Sitka society, Chabon establishes the stakes of this novel-length thought-experiment in world-building.

From the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that Meyer Landsman is, despite his last name, a man without a true place in the world. He is both literally and metaphorically homeless from the novel's first page: rather than living in a house or apartment with Bina as he had been a few years prior, Landsman is permanently staying in a hotel. An early metaphor illustrates Landsman's feelings about his lodging: "Landsman has eight hours to go until his next shift. Eight rat hours, sucking at his bottle, in his glass tank lined with wood shavings" (Chabon 1-2). Rather than feeling comfortable or at home, Landsman feels like a rat, trapped in a tank for the observation of unsympathetic others, with only the comfort of "his bottle" of alcohol. Richard

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Dyer has noted that the *noir* hero often "is denied an environment of safety, coziness, or rootedness"; it is hard to think of a less cozy image than that of a rat in a tank. The hotel is named "the Zamenhof" after L.L. Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto,[74] a modern language designed to linguistically unite the world beyond national borders: "When the hotel was built fifty years ago, all of its directional signs, labels, notices, and warnings were printed on brass plates in Esperanto. Most of them are long gone, victims of neglect, vandalism, or the fire code" (Chabon 3). Much as the language of Esperanto did not have the uniting power its inventor hoped it might in real life, in the novel nothing about the hotel or about Sitka in general has lived up to the idealism involved in its founding. Naming and theming a hotel after Esperanto suggests high hopes that the hotel will serve an international clientele; instead, by the time the novel begins, the Hotel Zamenhof has become a low-rent last resort for poor and often drug-addicted residents of Sitka: "They are a twitchy, half-addled, rank, and cranky bunch of yids, the residents of the Hotel Zamenhof, but none of them seems any more disturbed than usual tonight" (Chabon 8). Instead of the aspirational, high-status destination its name suggests, the Zamenhof is a place of poverty and desperation. A physical description of the building itself emphasizes how grim and generic it is: "He gazes up at the faceless face of the Zamenhof, gray in the murky streetlight. A narrow pile of dirty white brick and slit windows, three or four blocks off the tawdriest stretch of Monastir Street, the place has all the allure of a dehumidifier. Its neon sign blinks on and off, tormenting the dreams of the losers across the street at the Blackpool" (Chabon 16). As fanciful in some ways as the mere idea of an Esperanto-themed hotel in an alternate-history Jewish settlement in Alaska might seem, this image links Landsman's not-quite-a-home to countless other grim, seedy, anonymous locales in *noir* history.

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[74] Polish linguist L.L. Zamenhof published a book laying out his plan for an artificial language in 1887. His goal was to foster world peace through the creation of a global linguistic community. Its influence remains limited.

The Zamenhof is not the only grim hotel to figure in the plot of the novel; while pursuing a lead involving a chess club, Landsman pays a visit to the even-more-desperate Hotel Einstein. The Einstein, it turns out, is in an especially ugly and anonymous part of town:

> The buildings in this part of the Untershtot went up in the early fifties, rapidly assembled shelter machines built by survivors, with a kind of noble ugliness. Now they have only the ugliness of age and vacancy. Empty storefronts, papered-over glass. … At 1906 the Hotel Einstein looks, as some wag remarked on its opening to the public, like a rat cage stored in a fish tank. It is a favorite venue for the suicides of Sitka. (Chabon 82)

The simile of the "rat cage stored in a fish tank" recalls the way Landsman himself had felt about his own hotel room, spending "rat hours" in his "tank." Chabon is not the first to compare the way inhabitants of the modern city relate to their surroundings to the way rats inhabit their cages: "trapped like a rat" is an old pulp cliché. But *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* does give new meaning to the phrase by linking it to the setting itself rather than to the characters' situation in the plot. The fact that the Einstein is a "favorite venue for the suicides of Sitka" reflects a negative link between physical surroundings and well-being; it implies that the building itself exudes a sort of indifferent, despair-inducing influence on the citizens of the city.

Of course, this classically *noir* sense of indifference and dislocation does not just apply to hotels, but afflicts the entire city of Sitka. When Landsman goes to check out the roof of the Zamenhof after the murder is initially discovered, Chabon provides the first glimpse of the larger city: "Night is an orange smear over Sitka, a compound of fog and the light of sodium-vapor streetlamps. It has the translucence of onions cooked in chicken fat …. Landsman can smell fish offal from the canneries, grease from the fry pits at Pearl of Manila, the spew of taxis, an

intoxicating bouquet of fresh hat from Grinspoon's Felting two blocks away" (Chabon 9). The queasy description of the smells and pollution of the city ("fish offal," "grease," "spew") immediately mark it as an unwelcoming and un-homely place. Even the quality of the light at night ("onions cooked in chicken fat") is made to seem off-putting. Rather than introducing the city as a vibrant community, which a more utopic alternate-history novel might have done, Chabon emphasizes the seedier side of his novel's Sitka.

The conflict between the utopian impulses that initially drove Sitka's development and the tendency to see it as a city like any other becomes a central theme throughout the novel. Chabon foreshadows this ideological tension early on in one of the novel's only explicitly anti-realist touches:

> Last February five hundred witnesses all up and down the District swore that in the shimmer of the aurora borealis, for two nights running, they observed the outlines of a human face, with beard and sidelocks. Violent arguments broke out over the identity of the bearded sage in the sky, whether or not the face was smiling (or merely suffering from a mild attack of gas), and the meaning of the weird manifestation. And just last week, amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in Aramaic, the imminent advent of Messiah. (Chabon 13)

The seemingly magical-realist appearances of an apparently Jewish face in the night sky and of a talking chicken are among the more puzzling elements of the novel, and not ones that I have seen any other critics remark upon. The apparition seems to be a litmus test for the residents of Sitka, one that measures how much meaning they attribute to the location they happen to be in, how

much of a sense of destiny they feel about Sitka itself. One school of interpretation would take these signs as confirmation of Sitka's divinely-appointed status as the destined homeland of Jewish peoples; another school would deny such a reading. Although Landsman spends the novel in pursuit of the murderer of Mendel Shpilman, in a sense this question of Sitka's special status is the real mystery his investigation unravels for the readers. The novel's larger question is not simply whether the imaginary Sitka is truly God's chosen home for Jewish people, but whether any city can rightfully claim such importance in the minds of its residents.

It is clear that whatever faith the citizens of Sitka might once have had in their city's chosen-ness has begun to deteriorate by the time the novel takes place. When Landsman greets his colleague Menashe Shpringer, he is asked a dispiriting question: "'Are you leaving town?' Shpringer says. It's not an uncommon greeting these days. A lot of people have left town in the past couple of years, fled the District for the short roster of places that will welcome them, or that have tired of hearing about pogroms secondhand and are hoping to throw one for themselves" (Chabon 19). As the Reversion deadline draws near, it seems the residents of Sitka have increasingly started to give up on the idea of the city as a place where they were meant to be. They do not have any delusions about the safety of other locations, as the narrator's remark about places "hoping to throw" pogroms suggests, but they have come to the conclusion that they are not necessarily worse off in those places than in Sitka.

Landsman encounters other reminders of his metaphorical homelessness throughout the novel. When he goes to breakfast at his cousin and partner Berko Shemets's apartment, even the spot where he parks his car becomes a microcosm of Landsman's precariousness: "Landsman parks the Super Sport in the spot behind the Dumpsters that he has come to view as his own, though he supposes a man should not come to cherish tender feelings toward a parking place.

Simply having a place to put his car that is twenty-four stories down from a standing invitation to breakfast should never pass, in a man's heart, for a homecoming" (Chabon 36). Going to Berko's apartment and eating breakfast with Berko and his wife and children is the closest thing Landsman has to a home and family, but he must remind himself that these visits cannot substitute for the more immediate family he has lost in Bina and Django. The pointedly ugly and desolate location of a parking spot behind Dumpsters is a reminder of how very not-at-home Landsman is. Although he is occasionally tempted to see this parking spot as "a homecoming," Landsman cannot allow himself to forget that, in fact, he has no home.

Landsman's need to remember that he has no home is contrasted with the attitude of the Verbovers, a sect of ultra-Orthodox Jews who live in relative seclusion on an island in the Sitka District. When Landsman's investigation leads him to the Verbovers' part of the district, he first encounters Zimbalist, a man who serves as the "boundary maven" for the Verbovers. It is here that we learn of the practice of drawing and maintaining "eruvim," spaces within imagined borders that hold special significance for the Verbovers:

> It has something to do with pretending that telephone poles are doorposts, and that the wires are lintels. You can tie off an area using poles and string and call it an eruv, then pretend on the Sabbath that this eruv you've drawn – in the case of Zimbalist and his crew, it's pretty much the whole District – is your house. That way you can get around the Sabbath ban on carrying in a public place, and walk to shul with a couple of Alka-Seltzers in your pocket, and it isn't a sin. Given enough string and enough poles, and with a little creative use of existing walls, fences, cliffs, and rivers, you could tie a circle around pretty much any place and call it an eruv. (Chabon 110)

This practice of literally drawing fragile boundaries to sanction certain types of activity draws a sharp focus to the issue of inhabiting space. The intentional conflation of public and private space through the drawing of an eruv highlights the different meanings given to both types of space. Zimbalist, we learn, draws great power from his eruv-drawing expertise:

> But somebody has to lay down those lines, survey the territory, maintain the strings and the poles, and guard the integrity of the make-believe walls and doors against weather, vandalism, bears, and the telephone company. That's where the boundary maven comes in. He has the whole strings-and-poles market cornered. […] When a question arises as to whether or not some particular stretch of sidewalk or lakefront or open field is contained within an eruv, Zimbalist, though not a rabbi, is the one to whom all the rabbis defer. On his maps and his crews and his spools of polypropylene baling twine depends the state of the souls of every pious Jew in the District. (Chabon 110 – 111)

Although eruvim are a real phenomenon in Jewish life,[75] the exaggerated extent of Zimbalist's eruv-drawing and the degree of power it grants him push the novel a little closer to the Jewish magical realism of something like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*.[76] Given that Zimbalist only plays a relatively minor role in the novel's central mystery plot, his significance as a character is more symbolic and thematic than literal.

If Landsman's homelessness represents the danger and precariousness of failing to identify with one's surroundings, the Verbovers, aided by Zimbalist, represent the opposite end

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[75] For a more in-depth discussion of eruvim, see Daniel Anderson's "Planet of the Jews: Eruvim, Geography, and Jewish Identity in Michael Chabon's The Yiddish Policemen's Union." *Shofar* 33.3 (2015): 86-109.

[76] The specifically Jewish magical realism Foer practices in *Everything Is Illuminated* combines elements of real Jewish religious beliefs and real historical experience (specifically, the Holocaust and the destruction of Eastern European shtetls by the Nazis) with extravagant and absurd situations and narration, all within the same narrative frame. Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* does similar work.

of the spectrum. Daniel Anderson argues that "[t]he eruv allows the Verbovers to distinguish themselves from outside communities by a violent imposition of their ideology upon Sitka's space … In short, eruvim signify multiple spaces occupying a single landscape" (95). Because of the way the eruv imposes religious ideology on physical space, "[t]he eruv therefore makes it possible for two individuals to exist in the same physical space while occupying entirely different ontological worlds"[77] (Anderson 96). In seeking to transform public space into private space for self-centered ideological reasons, the Verbovers cut themselves off from the possibility of a meaningful shared public life. If everything you see becomes merely an extension of your own house, then you are just as alienated from your surroundings as the more recognizably isolated Landsman. A healthy relationship to one's city requires one to be able to occupy public space as a member of the public; in effect, through the eruvim, the Verbovers never have to actually experience the world as other citizens do.

While the literally and figuratively homeless Landsman provides an extreme example of alienation from the space around him, the novel is careful to emphasize that the same problem of dislocation afflicts most of the residents of Sitka to greater or lesser degrees. No matter how hard the people of Sitka try, the city they live in can never actually be the city they want. An unresolved murder investigation leads Landsman to an abandoned "Big Macher" store on the outskirts of Sitka, a place where the suspect is rumored to be hiding. When Landsman goes to find the suspect, the narrator describes the edge of the city: "the wreck of a shopping center marks the end of the dream of Jewish Sitka. The push to fill every space from here to Yakovy with the Jews of the world gave out in this parking lot. There was no Permanent Status, no influx of new jewflesh from the bitter corners and dark alleys of Diaspora. The planned housing

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[77] A remarkably similar situation to what we will see in *The City & the City*, not-so-coincidentally.

developments remain lines on blue paper, encumbering some steel drawer" (Chabon 179). The area marks the limit of Sitka's ambitions, the place where the fantasy of the city runs up against the hard limits of what can actually be accomplished. That the utopian fantasy meets its end in a particular parking lot thoroughly de-romanticizes the impulse behind Sitka's expansion. The blueprints that were intended to lead to homes end up merely taking up space in some urban development office's cabinet. A similar note is struck slightly later in the novel, when Landsman is attending Shpilman's funeral. The narrator describes the place from which Landsman watches the funeral at a distance:

> He's parked in a cul-de-sac some developer laid out, paved, then saddled with the name of Tikvah Street, the Hebrew word denoting hope and connoting to the Yiddish ear on this grim afternoon at the end of time seventeen flavors of irony. The hoped-for houses were never built. Wooden stakes tied with orange flags and nylon cord map out a miniature Zion in the mud around the cul-de-sac, a ghostly eruv of failure. (Chabon 198)

That the Hebrew word for "hope" has come to connote "seventeen flavors of irony" to the contemporary Sitka listener indicates how far short the reality of the city has fallen in comparison to the ideas that originally inspired it. The absent houses reinforce the home-lessness that pervades the novel. Whereas Zimbalist's eruvim allow him and the Verbovers to pretend that their homes extend wherever they want, the "ghostly eruv of failure" of Tikvah Street is a transparently failed attempt to pretend that there are homes there at all. The fantasy of a city as perfect extension of a coherent community ends in such decidedly unglamorous locations as a parking lot and an unfinished cul-de-sac.

In contrast with the impressions left by these desolate, un-home-ly locations, Landsman occasionally catches glimpses of an alternate possibility of what being at home would mean. After he has been arrested outside of his own jurisdiction by the Tlingit officer Willie Dick, Landsman watches Dick looking at his beloved motorcycle and sees his own sense of dislocation reflected in Dick's gaze:

> Landsman recognizes the expression on Dick's face. It's the expression that goes with the feeling Landsman gets when he looks at his Chevelle Super Sport, or at the face of Bina Gelbfish. The face of a man who feels he was born into the wrong world. A mistake has been made; he is not where he belongs. Every so often he feels his heart catch, like a kite on a telephone wire, on something that seems to promise him a home in the world or a means of getting there. An American car manufactured in his far-off boyhood, say, or a motorcycle that once belonged to the future king of England, or the face of a woman worthier than himself of being loved. (Chabon 282)

Here Landsman seems instinctually drawn to a syncretic, *ad-hoc* version of home and belonging. Rather than a strict insistence on "home" being determined by geographic location or ethnic identity, Landsman's dream version of home is defined by choice and by love. Although Landsman is, as the narrative frequently reminds us, *not* an American citizen and certainly is not English, something about an American car and an English motorcycle speaks to his soul anyway. His love for Bina, of course, also offers him the possibility of a home. In contrast with the rigid, boundary-defined, exclusionary versions of home promulgated by Zimbalist and the Verbovers, Landsman's idea of home comes from attachment to the people and things he loves.

In order to emphasize the limitations of the official versions of home and belonging found in the novel, Chabon, somewhat surprisingly, uses a series of verbal allusions to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Specifically, Hamlet's claim that "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" is echoed at least three times in the course of the novel (Shakespeare 2.2.248-250). This line, spoken in conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, follows Hamlet's other famous line that "there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so" and that, therefore, Denmark is "a prison" to him despite his status as a prince (2.2.244-250). Renaissance drama in general is usually not a major touchstone for *noir* fiction (whether classic or revisionist), but Chabon incorporates these allusions in order to elucidate Sitka's hermetic "nutshell" quality.

The first of these allusions appears in reference to Landsman's ex-wife, Bina. When Landsman runs into Bina at the Polar-Shtern Kafeteria, he is struck by how much better she seems to be handling the fallout of their divorce than he is:[78]

> You have to look to Jews like Bina Gelbfish, Landsman thinks, to explain the wide range and persistence of the race. Jews who carry their homes in an old cowhide bag, on the back of a camel, in the bubble of air at the center of their brains. Jews who land on their feet, hit the ground running, ride out the vicissitudes, and make the best of what falls to hand, from Egypt to Babylon, from Minsk Gubernya to the District of Sitka. Methodical, organized, persistent, resourceful, prepared. Berko is right: Bina would flourish in any precinct house in the world. A mere redrawing of borders, a change in governments, those things

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[78] The *Hamlet* allusion does not appear in the quote I am introducing here, but I will include it slightly later.

can never faze a Jewess with a good supply of hand wipes in her bag. (Chabon

155)

Bina is more adaptive and functional than Landsman because she does not really live in the city

in the same way he does. Whereas Landsman does not easily accept his metaphorical

homelessness, Bina seems to always already be homeless. She understands and accepts the

impermanence and precariousness of any particular dwelling and is always ready to move on if

necessary. For her, home is a psychological state ("in the bubble of air at the center of their

brains") rather than a physical place, as it is for Landsman and for the Verbovers. The

description emphasizes her practicality and resourcefulness, but the real quality that separates

Bina is her understanding of the inevitability of change. Whereas the Verbovers build their

whole lives around an increasingly complex set of borders, Bina would be unaffected by a "mere

redrawing of borders." Bina knows that borders are arbitrary things controlled by other people,

and thus that she should not tie her sense of identity to them. Moreover, Bina's realism does not

diminish her desire to do good in the world; after she claims that she has "gotten over" wanting

to "redeem the world," Landsman thinks, "Bina never stopped wanting to redeem the world. She

just let the world she was trying to redeem get smaller and smaller until, at one point, it *could be*

bounded in the hat of a hopeless policeman" (Chabon 169, emphasis added). It is in this phrase

that Chabon echoes Hamlet's language, suggesting that, like Hamlet, Landsman is haunted by

"bad dreams" that upset his relationship to the world around him. Bina's mission of redemption

ends up targeting not the world itself, but only her husband's relationship to it.

A second, more explicit *Hamlet* allusion occurs later in the novel, when Landsman finds

the base of the secret Zionist operation which turns out to be, in a sense, the novel's true villain.

Landsman is puzzled by the base because no Sitka Jew he can think of would have the money or

power to create it: "No matter how powerful, every yid in the District is tethered by the leash of 1948. His kingdom is *bound in its nutshell*. His sky is a painted dome, his horizon an electrified fence. He has the flight and knows the freedom only of a balloon on a string" (Chabon 293, emphasis added). This instance of the *Hamlet* allusion extends the Danish prince's angst from Landsman to every Jew in Sitka. Everyone in Sitka is "bound in the nutshell" of the District's original establishment in 1948, constrained by the arbitrary borders drawn decades before by other forces; they know and have access to no other world. This extension of the nutshell metaphor raises the stakes of the novel's theme of alienation arising from the individual's relationship to the city. Although Landsman as the protagonist is the character most obviously afflicted with a classically *noir* feeling of alienation from his surroundings, the same condition applies to all the other characters in the novel as well. When Landsman discovers the global reach of the Sitka-based conspiracy later in the novel, he is shocked that anything from the area has been able to escape its gravity: "the most shocking thing of all is simply that an object eight thousand miles away has been acted upon by Jews from Sitka. It seems to violate some fundamental law of the emotional physics that Landsman understands. Sitka space-time is a curved phenomenon; a yid could reach out in any direction as far as he was able and end up only tapping himself on the back" (Chabon 359).

The final instance of the *Hamlet* allusions appears in the novel's final pages and responds to the first allusion. Having fully uncovered the depth of the Zionist/American conspiracy in Sitka, Landsman has been made to sign a nondisclosure agreement to protect the secret that the Americans funded a Zionist bombing of the Dome of the Rock in Palestine. Landsman, however, is uncomfortable with silence and decides to tell the truth to a journalist, thus presumably exposing the conspiracy to the world. When he is first told the story of what has really happened

and is asked to keep quiet about it, Landsman realizes how tired he has become of centering everything in his life around the supposed destined land of Sitka: "'I don't care what is written. I don't care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to cut his own son's throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don't care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand. My homeland is in my hat. It's in my ex-wife's tote bag'" (Chabon 368). In asserting that his "homeland is in [his] hat," Landsman openly declares what he had earlier only thought to himself in the novel's first *Hamlet* allusion. Landsman agrees to silence at first, but by the end of the novel has changed his mind and decided to tell the world the truth of the conspiracy and the bombing. The reasoning that leads up to Landsman's decision harkens back to Landsman's earlier assessment of Bina: "But there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future, no fate but Bina. The land that he and she were promised *was bounded* only by the fringes of their wedding canopy, by the dog-eared corners of their cards of membership in an international fraternity whose members carry their patrimony in a tote bag, their world on the tip of the tongue" (Chabon 411, emphasis added). This final *Hamlet* allusion rejoins Landsman with Bina; whereas he had previously seen her as the exceptional one trying to save him, now he and she together share a small "bounded" kingdom. That new domain of a "wedding canopy" and a membership card is larger than Hamlet's nutshell, but still much smaller than any city or district. Landsman has been both literally and metaphorically homeless from the opening page of the novel, but at the end he finds a "home," a "future," and a "fate" in Bina. Landsman realizes that the external powers that would draw lines to demark the space of "home," whether those powers be the official map-drawers of Sitka or Zimbalist the boundary maven with his eruvim, cannot be relied upon to truly

supply him or anyone else with a sense of being at home. Landsman sees that only his allegiance

to Bina will provide him with a meaningful home.

Some critics have read this ending as offering an individualistic solution to the problems

of the novel in lieu of a systemic one. Anna Richardson argues that "Denied the resolution

offered by the restoration of social order within mystery fiction, the reader of a detective story is

instead offered consolation through the redemption of the detective. Landsman, although denied

justice within the narrative, is reconciled with his ex-wife and restored to a position of dignity"

(169). However, I contend that the fact that Landsman decides to call the journalist Dennis

Brennan and tell him the truth about the conspiracy ("'Brennan,' Landsman says. 'I have a story

for you'") indicates that the novel is not content solely to provide redemption and resolution to

its protagonist alone (Chabon 411). Although we do not get to actually see the consequences of

Landsman's final decision in the novel, it is clear that his breaking the story will have profound

ramifications for the entire social order of Sitka. This ending contrasts sharply with the fatalistic

endings of the Raymond Chandler novels to which so many critics have compared *The Yiddish

Policemen's Union*. Consider, for example, the ending of *The Long Goodbye*. After discovering

that his friend Terry Lennox has faked his own death and has had cosmetic surgery to pass as

Mexican so that he can escape to Mexico, the protagonist Philip Marlowe ends the novel thus:

> Did I want him to stop suddenly and turn and come back and talk me out of the
> way I felt? Well, he didn't. That was the last I saw of him.
>
> I never saw any of them again – except the cops. No way has yet been
> invented to say goodbye to them. (Chandler 379)

In *The Long Goodbye* as in every other Chandler novel, Marlowe is ultimately confronted by the

limits of his ability to make any sort of meaningful change in the world around him. Despite

Marlowe's efforts, Los Angeles is going to go on being corrupt, violent, and lonely. Landsman, however, might indeed have the power to reform Sitka and how its citizens relate to their home city. By telling the truth about what he has learned to Dennis Brennan (whose status as the lone American and permanent outsider in Sitka becomes symbolically significant), Landsman can redefine his and others' relationships to the city in a healthier way. Exposing the machinations behind Mendel Shpilman's murder will let his fellow Sitkans understand what has really been happening at the top level of their society and give them the chance to reject the deceptions that have been pushed on them.

The forces against which Landsman contends in the novel (e.g., the Verbovers, the Zionist extremists, etc.) all share an essentialist understanding of what it means to be Jewish. They insist that certain locations are ordained by God to belong to Jewish people and Jewish people alone and that things are the way they are destined to be. Landsman, however, understands that there is no such thing as destiny or fate, an understanding that has cost him in the past: "…there is no doubt that what broke the marriage [to Bina] was Landsman's lack of faith … in the fundamental precept that everything befalling them from the moment they met, good and bad, was meant to be. The foolish coyote faith that could keep you flying as long as you kept kidding yourself that you could fly" (Chabon 393).[79] Although Landsman's lack of faith in this sort of pre-destination was a problem in his marriage before, it is also what ultimately enables him to re-habilitate his relationship to his surroundings and to understand how his true home is with Bina. As Landsman is considering whether or not to tell Brennan the truth, he "tries to weigh the fates of Berko, of his uncle Hertz, of Bina, of the Jews, of the Arabs, of the

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[79] The "foolish coyote faith" Landsman lacks is a reference to the Warner Bros. cartoon character Wile E. Coyote, who was known for his tendency to run off cliffs into the air, but only to fall once he noticed that he had done so. This reference to an American cartoon reinforces the culturally syncretic nature of Landsman's worldview.

whole unblessed and homeless planet" (Chabon 410). This last phrase, "whole unblessed and homeless planet," recalls MacCannell's concept of "homeless *noir*" and suggests that everyone in the world is in some way stuck in the same predicament. If "home" is where one is *destined* to be (as the Zionists in the novel insist), then we (the readers and everyone else in the real world) are *all* homeless, because, as Landsman comes to understand, no one is destined to be anywhere. As humans, we will find no home except what we make with each other, as it is implied Landsman will with Bina after the novel's events. Thus, in post-postmodern fashion, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* does not just dramatize this situation of homelessness (as classic *noir* would); it actually suggests the possibility of hope in the real world for its readers. Unlike *noir* protagonists of decades past, these characters *can* find a home defined not by location but by their relationships with the people around them.

"A Threatening Geography": Learning to Navigate *The City & the City*

Where Michael Chabon creates an imagined *noir* city from an alternative-history extrapolation of the Holocaust and the Jewish diaspora, China Miéville builds the twin cities of Besźel and Ul Qoma from pure, yet grounded, fantasy. Within this elaborately conceived and heavily metaphorical urban setting, Miéville constructs a *noir* detective narrative, one clearly indebted to the novels of Raymond Chandler and *noir* visions of city life in general. As critic John Schiamanski has noted, "Working in a *noir* environment, with a hardboiled attitude incorporating the intellectual, caring and rebellious streaks typical of many latter-day crime fiction detectives, Tyador Borlú goes through many of the topoi of detective fiction" (109). Like Chabon, however, Miéville is not interested in simply recycling or re-using the pre-existing tropes of the *noir* tradition. Rather, he makes the trope of the *noir* city itself his primary object of inquiry and innovation in this novel. Chabon's novel interrogated the attachment of personal and

religious identity to physical space through the narrative of Landsman's changing relationship to Sitka, Alaska; Mieville's novel thoroughly deconstructs the ways in which people in any city relate to their surroundings through the blinders of ideology. Much as Landsman's character arc leads him to ultimately renounce the imagined claims of a particular location on his identity, Miéville's protagonist Tyador Borlú ultimately transcends the ideologies governing urban space which had limited him his entire life. Both novels, through their play with the tropes of the *noir* genre, offer recuperative models of urban existence. In a generic tradition long defined by alienated protagonists who can only see their environments as "the asphalt jungle" or "the big clock" or "Poisonville," both *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *The City & the City* offer protagonists whose investigations lead them from an initial state of alienation to the possibility of seeing their worlds in radically new ways. The texts I have discussed throughout this work have all in some way sought to ameliorate the alienation of the *noir* protagonist (and therefore of the *noir* reader), whether in his or her relationship to him/herself or in his or her relationship to others. Chabon's and Miéville's novels offer a larger-scale version of the same type of intervention, extending the scope beyond the individual's immediate social network to the individual's relationship to his or her entire society.

Prior to publishing *The City & the City*, Miéville has had plenty of practice writing about fantastical cities, such as the quasi-Victorian steampunk metropolis of New Crobuzon in *Perdido Street Station* and the floating assemblage of thousands of tied-together ships known as Armada in *The Scar*. *The City & the City* is Miéville's most grounded fantasy novel to date, taking place in a recognizable version of our own world. Unlike in Miéville's other novels, there are no monsters, aliens, or clear magical forces in the universe of *The City & the City*. The main non-realistic element is the setting of the two cities themselves, cities that share physical space

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somewhere in Europe but are rigidly separated politically, socially, and psychologically. The borders between the two cities exist only in their citizens' imaginations, but are nonetheless strictly policed by a shadowy, mysterious force known only as Breach. In order to avoid abduction by Breach, citizens of each city must be careful to "unsee" and "unhear" anything they might pass from the other city. For example, a given street might exist physically in both cities, but two strangers walking along it might be in different cities from each other. If the citizen of Besźel looks too clearly at the citizen of Ul Qoma, he or she is committing the cardinal sin of "breaching" the border between the two cities and is subject to punishment by Breach. In this strange, dangerous setting, the Besź detective Tyador Borlú investigates the murder of a young woman. The investigation eventually leads to Borlú having to cross the border into Ul Qoma and, finally, committing breach himself and being taken into the mysterious space between the cities.

From the beginning of the novel, descriptions of the setting establish Besźel as a dark, grimy city in classic *noir* fashion. As Borlú describes Kordvenna, the economically marginalized and neglected area where the body is initially found, it becomes clear that the narrative is in the type of alienating urban space characteristic of *noir*: "Technically an island, though so close and conjoined to the mainland by ruins of industry you would never think of it as such, Kordvenna was estates, warehouses, low-rent bodegas scribble-linked by endless graffiti. It was far enough from Besźel's heart that it was easy to forget, unlike more inner-city slums" (Miéville 9). Kordvenna is only "technically" an island and no longer recognizable as such; the area's natural geographical identity has been completely obscured by the manmade city's encroachment upon it. The fact that Kordvenna is connected to the rest of the city only by the "ruins of industry" suggests that it is no longer even a functional part of the city; it has outlived its economic

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usefulness and is now just a bleak reminder of better economic times. When Borlú asks for the

name of the complex they are in, his colleague's response is revealing: "'Pocost Village.' She

laughed without humor; I raised an eyebrow" (Miéville 10). Her laughter indicates a cynicism

about the idea of a "village" and the sense of community that that term implies; the industrial

wasteland of Kordvenna is clearly no space for anything so quaint as a "village." The average

citizen's appearance in Besźel does nothing to relieve the downtrodden and grim images of the

city itself: "Poverty deshaped the already staid, drab cuts and colours[80] that enduringly

characterize Besź clothes – what has been called the city's fashionless fashion" (Miéville 18).

The grey averageness of both the citizens and the physical environment of Besźel both

distinguish it from the rococo fantasy-spaces of Miéville's other fictions, and reinforce the

impersonal and alienating nature of this urban space.

Borlú himself tends to reveal the alienated nature of his own relationship to his city in

casual, even unconscious ways. In many ways Borlú is presented as a not particularly

exceptional protagonist; aside from his job as a detective, Borlú is a typical resident of Besźel,

one who is not inclined to question the status quo of the two cities. He does not dwell on his own

problems for the reader, but is matter-of-fact about both the case and the cities. When talking

about his experience with the Lestov area of Besźel, Borlú tells us, "I did not know the area well.

I'd been to the island, of course, visited the ruins, when I was a schoolboy and occasionally

since, but my ratruns were elsewhere" (Miéville 13). The choice of "ratruns" as a term suggests

that Borlú relates to his environment in much the same way as Landsman does to his "glass

cage" in his "rat hours." That both of these characters easily identify with rats early on in their

respective novels is symptomatic of their classically *noir* sense of alienation from, and half-

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[80] Because Miéville is a British writer, his spelling of words follows British convention; I will reproduce quotations
from the novel exactly as they appear.

conscious disdain for, their urban environments. Borlú and his colleagues are perpetually wary of

the people in their surroundings: "the way we watched what we passed made it a threatening

geography, and there were sufficient furtive actions occurring that that did not feel like the

rankest paranoia" (Miéville 18). Although at this point in the novel Borlú has not begun to fully

explain the nature of the Besźel/Ul Qoma divide, it becomes clear that the "threatening

geography" of the cities will become one of the central thematic concerns.

Just as Borlú's relationship to Besźel has striking similarities to Landsman's relationship

to Sitka, *The City & the City* also has a parallel to the Zionist extremists who turn out to be

antagonists of Chabon's novel. There are, we learn, a group of "unificationists" who are

dedicated to abolishing the divide between the cities through violent revolution.[81]

> The banned had at various points in their history advocated the use of violence to
>
> bring the cities to their God-, destiny-, history-, or people-intended unity. Some
>
> had, mostly cack-handedly, targeted nationalist intellectuals – bricks through
>
> windows and shit through doors. They had been accused of furtively
>
> propagandizing among refugees and new immigrants with limited expertise at
>
> seeing and unseeing, at being in one particular city. The activists wanted to
>
> weaponise such urban uncertainty. (Miéville 43)

Like Chabon's Zionists, the unificationists of the two cities believe that there is a divinely-

appointed or transcendently important destiny for the city and are willing to resort to violence to

pursue it. Although one suspects that the self-proclaimed Marxist Miéville might have more

sympathy for his fictional revolutionaries than Chabon does for his, ultimately the

unificationists' goal of imposing their own idea of meaning on their surroundings is shown to be

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[81] Indeed, they make a chaotic, abortive attempt at such a revolution late in the novel.

futile. The idea of a "God-, destiny-, history-, or people-intended" destiny for a geographical place is as doomed to failure in *The City & the City* as it is in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*.

The entire premise of Besźel and Ul Qoma as separate-yet-identical spaces resonates in instructive ways with the eruvim drawn and maintained by Zilberblat in Chabon's novel. Where the flimsy string borders of the eruvim allow the Verbovers to pretend that exterior public space is actually interior private space, the imaginary borders between Besźel and Ul Qoma allow the cities' citizens to pretend that physical space only exists in a very particular way. The eruvim allow certain characters to say, "This space is mine, and not yours"; the Besźel/Ul Qoma borders allow – indeed, force – all the citizens of those cities to say "This space is mine, and if you so much as see it, you will be punished." The restrictions that exist as religious ideology in Chabon's novel become, in Miéville's novel, "a code, an existential protocol more basic by a long way than any [Borlú] was paid to enforce [as a police officer]" (37).

The strict observation of this purely ideological code often leads to patently absurd situations. At one point, Borlú relates the existence of an "Ul Qomatown" in Besźel, a small community of Ul Qoman expatriates who have legally migrated to Besźel for their own reasons, akin to an American Chinatown. The now-officially Besź citizens of the area occasionally have accidentally dangerous encounters with people of the other city: "Very occasionally a young Ul Qoman who does not know the area of their city that Ul Qomatown crosshatches will blunder up to ask directions of an ethnically Ul Qoman Besźel-dweller, thinking them his or her compatriots. The mistake is quickly detected – there is nothing like being ostentatiously unseen to alarm – and Breach are normally merciful" (Miéville 54). It is only an artificial division in the first place that separates a Besź citizen from an Ul Qoman one, of course; but when the additional complication of an Ul Qoman-seeming citizen not actually being in Ul Qoma nearly

causes an innocent person to commit the crime of breach, the complicated absurdity of the entire situation becomes all the more obvious.

The ideological programming that generates the borders in the first place is so powerful that it can overwhelm citizens' natural reactions to basic physical reality. Borlú explains the thoroughly counterintuitive rules about dealing with unavoidable physical intrusions from the "other" city:

> When an Ul Qoman stumbles into a Besź, each in their own city; if an Ul Qoman's dog runs up and sniffs a Besź passerby; a window broken in Ul Qoma that leaves glass in the path of Besź pedestrians – in all cases the Besź (or Ul Qomans, in the converse circumstances) avoid the foreign difficulty as best they can without acknowledging it. Touch if they must, though not is better. Such polite stoic unsensing is the form for dealing with protubs – that is the Besź for those protuberances from the other city. (Miéville 65)

This description works as an extreme extension of the logic of unseeing. While unseeing itself is only a slight intensification of a habit routinely practiced in real life every day by city-dwellers the world over (for example, members of the middle class generally tend to unsee the homeless), the absurdity of such unsight is heightened when applied to such ideologically-neutral things as dogs and broken glass. The existence of "protubs" – short for "protuberances" – is a nagging reminder that the two cities are not really separate and that everyone in the cities is willing to deny plainly obvious reality for the sake of ideological consistency. Ivan Stacy notes that, in the world of the novel, "The mundane, the events of everyday life that make up the distinct cultural textures of the two cities, also remain unacknowledged, utterly outside the sphere of concern of the other group, and hence beyond empathy" (232). The extent to which adherence to ideological

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rules can overwhelm natural empathy can reach shocking extremes, as becomes clear by the way breaching is treated in comparison to other crimes.

The insistence on unseeing and separation is so powerful that breaching is treated as the most unspeakable crime, worse even than actual crimes like murder and drug trafficking. When he is comparing the act of breaching to the act of smuggling, Borlú explains,

> Smuggling itself is not breach, though most breach is committed in order to smuggle. The smartest dealers, though, make sure to cross correctly, are deeply respectful of the cities' boundaries and pores, so if they are caught they face only the laws of one or other or both places, not the power of Breach. Perhaps Breach considers the details of those crimes once a breach is committed, all the transgressions in Ul Quoma or Besźel or both, but if so it is only once and because those crimes are functions of breach, the only violation Breach punishes, the existential disrespect of Ul Qoma's and Besźel's boundaries. (Miéville 110-111)

Criminals in the cities are willing to break ordinary civil laws, but not the fundamental ideological premise that undergirds the entirety of their political and social existence. Late in the novel, a murder is committed across the official legal border between the two cities in the meeting point of Copula Hall, a murder that takes a life but manages not to violate any of the Breach rules. These instances of artificial ideology trumping commonsense morality clarify what Miéville means when he claims in an interview that the novel's premise "felt to me much more like an extrapolation of the social logic of the world around us, exaggerated to a slightly grotesque degree" (Naimon 58). By exaggerating our very real tendency to "unsee" that which is

unpleasant or ideologically inconvenient to us to such extreme ends, Miéville makes us aware of our own complicity in perpetuating potentially absurd and immoral social conditions.

At the same time that the novel makes us uncomfortably self-conscious of how we do and do not relate to our environments, Borlú admits how difficult it is to adopt a different subject-position. When Borlú is compelled to continue his investigation in Ul Qoma in cooperation with its local police department, he has to undergo intensive training to prepare him for the journey. He tells us that "Mostly …the course was concerned to help a Besź citizen through the potentially traumatic fact of actually *being* in Ul Qoma, unseeing all their familiar environs, where we lived the rest of our life, and seeing the buildings beside us that we had spent decades making sure not to notice" (Miéville 133). Nothing about the physical reality of the cities has changed when a citizen passes from one to the other; it is not as if one were going to an alternate dimension or an alien planet. All that is required is a change in ideological perspective, a purely mental adjustment; and yet this transition is "potentially traumatic" because of how much the citizens' sense of personal identity has been shaped by their cities. Interestingly, Borlú also uses the term "trauma" to refer to the experience of simply knowing that *someone else* has committed breach: ""The information was an allergen in Besźel – the mere fact of it in my head was a kind of trauma. I was complicit. It was done" (Miéville 37).

In a sense, the true climax of the novel comes not when Borlú solves the mystery of Mahalia Geary's murder (which he does), but when he learns to transcend this crippling ideology that has almost literally blinded him and everyone else in the two cities for their entire lives. While chasing an assassin out of Copula Hall, Borlú ultimately commits breach himself by shooting the suspect, who is in Besźel, from a few feet away in Ul Qoma. As a result of this

decision, Borlú is taken by the shadowy forces of Breach, and ends up learning how they work.[82]

When Breach authorities decide to enlist Borlú's aid in investigating the circumstances that led

to his own act of breach, Borlú has to learn how to exist in both cities simultaneously – i.e., to

simply exist in physical space unfiltered by his previous ideological conditioning. Ashil, the

Breach officer who becomes Borlú's guide, has to tell him, "'You're with me here … In Breach.

No one knows if they're seeing you or unseeing you. Don't creep. You're not in neither: you're

in both'" (Miéville 254). It is very difficult for Borlú to learn to exist in "both," despite the fact

that there is no natural reason why he should not. When he describes his first night-time tour of

both cities simultaneously, Miéville conveys the sensory overload that Borlú experiences simply

through seeing clearly for the first time:

> That evening Ashil walked with me in that both-cities. The sweep and curves of
>
> Ul Qoman byzanterie ajut over and around the low *mittel*-continental and middle-
>
> history brickwork of Besźel, its bas-relief figures of scarfed women and
>
> bombardiers, Besźel's steamed food and dark breads fugging with the hot smells
>
> of Ul Qoma, colours of light and cloth around grey and basalt tones, sounds now
>
> both abrupt, schwa-staccatoed-sinuous *and* throaty swallowing. Being in both
>
> cities had gone from being in Besźel and Ul Qoma to being in a third place, that
>
> nowhere-both, that Breach. (Miéville 256)

As Borlú is forced to simultaneously absorb two ostensibly separate realms of sights, sounds, and

smells, the mixture of unfamiliar and foreign vocabulary ("byzanterie," "ajut," "*mittel*,"

"fugging"), alliteration ("schwa-staccatoed-sinuous"), and deliberately ungrammatical paradoxes

("that both-cities," "that nowhere-both") reflects his experience of sensory overload. Borlú finds

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[82] Perhaps surprisingly, Breach turns out to have no supernatural powers of their own, but are simply enforcers who manage to make themselves unseen most of the time by citizens of both cities.

the simple experience of actually sensing everything around him without the usual filter to be confusing and chaotic, and Miéville's prose embodies that sense of disorientation even though the only thing that has actually changed is Borlú's idea of where he is.

Although Borlú does eventually learn how to navigate the cities as the Breach do, it is in his final confrontation with David Bowden, the anthropology professor who turns out to be the killer Borlú has been seeking, that Borlú truly learns how to see the ideology of the cities from an outside perspective. Bowden, in an attempt to flee the authorities, walks through the space of both cities in an ambiguous way, such that no one seeing him can tell whether he is supposed to be in Besźel or in Ul Qoma, and thus everyone unsees him in order to protect themselves: "That gait. Strange, impossible. Not properly describable, but to anyone used to the physical vernaculars of Besźel or Ul Qoma, it was rootless and untethered, purposeful and without a country" (Miéville 296). Only Borlú, knowing who Bowden is and being free of the need to pretend to be in either city, can clearly observe Bowden's strategy, and Borlú is impressed: "How expert a citizen, how consummate an urban dweller and observer, to mediate those million unnoticed mannerisms that marked out civic specificity, to refuse either aggregate of behaviours" (Miéville 297). Bowden, who is not native to either city, is able to objectively analyze the ways in which the ideology governing the cities manifests itself in the behavior of their citizens, and therefore is able to imitate a citizen of both and neither simultaneously. In effect, Bowden is able to at will become the sort of "homeless" *noir* character MacCannell describes, to serve his own purposes. Bowden, of course, is an antagonist in this narrative, but his manipulation of the cities' signification systems helps teach the protagonist Borlú how to be "homeless" himself.

As an outsider who can see the totality of Besźel/Ul Qoma society for what it really is rather than what it pretends to be, Bowden not only can manipulate the unwritten rules of the

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cities for his own ends, he can also deconstruct them. In his final confrontation with Borlú, Bowden explains how he could create an absurd yet ideologically consistent situation if he were to murder Borlú from his current position "between" the two cities:

> "The thing is, and I know it wouldn't work this way and so do you but that's because *no one* in this place, and that includes Breach, obeys the rules, their own rules, and if they did it *would* work this way, the thing is that if you were to be killed by someone who no one was sure which city they were in and they weren't sure where *you* were either, your body would have to lie there, rotting, forever. People would have to step over you. Because no one breached. Neither Besźel nor Ul Qoma could risk clearing you up. You'd lie there stinking up both cities until you were just a stain." (Miéville 298)

The hypothetical situation Bowden describes, of a rotting corpse lying on the ground in full public view with no one doing anything about it, is obviously absurd and horrifying; and yet it is also entirely logically consistent with everything we have learned about Besźel and Ul Qoma. In these two cities, where maintaining an artificial ideological order is literally more important than life and death, anyone following the rules would indeed be obligated to prioritize avoiding breach over doing anything about a human corpse. Bowden admits that natural human instinct most likely would actually win out over ideological programming in this scenario ("I know it wouldn't work this way"), but his analysis of what the ideology would require is correct. Bowden's argument helps Borlú to see how completely at odds the cities' governing ideology is with basic human decency.

After the confrontation is over, Bowden is arrested, and the question of Mahalia's death is resolved, Borlú is left to ponder the larger mystery of how and why he has spent his entire life

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enmeshed in such an unnatural and perverse system, and why he has never questioned the status quo. Had he been asked earlier in his life about why he and everyone else was so obedient to the rules of the two cities, Borlú likely would have responded that their compliance was due to a fear of Breach. Now that he knows that the officers of Breach have no supernatural powers and are in fact merely ordinary people themselves, that excuse no longer makes sense. The true explanation of how and why the cities work as they do is provided by his Breach contact Ashil:

> "It's not just us keeping them apart. It's everyone in Besźel and everyone in Ul Qoma. Every minute, every day. We're only the last ditch: it's everyone in the cities who does most of the work. It works because you don't blink. That's why unseeing and unsensing are so vital. No one can admit it doesn't work. So if you don't admit it, it does. But if you breach, even if it's not your fault, for more than the shortest time…you can't come back from that." (Miéville 310)

Ashil's speech is the novel's most concise explanation of a premise that initially seemed science-fictional or even fantastical. There are no magical or hyper-advanced technological forces at play in the governing of Besźel and Ul Qoma and the borders between them; the only force operative in the novel's world is a somewhat exaggerated version of the social logic governing everyday life in real cities in the real world. The approximately 80% of Americans who live in cities routinely engage in a milder, unspoken form of the novel's "unseeing" and "unsensing." Anyone who has kept their eyes on their smartphone while passing a homeless person on the street, or who has gone out of their way to avoid driving through a low-income neighborhood, knows what it means to unsee. The true power dominating the lives of the citizens of Miéville's imaginary cities is not Breach, but our own tendency to pretend that other people are not there. In a way, Ashil's explanation shows that we are all living in our own versions of the eruvim from *The*

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Yiddish Policemen's Union; we draw arbitrary borders in public space, pretend that it belongs to us, and ignore whatever does not fit in our constructed version of reality.

The ending of *The City & the City* might seem defeatist on first reading. Borlú, having for the first time gained full knowledge of the system that artificially divides the people of the cities, does not overthrow the system but becomes another enforcer for it. Indeed, as he tells us, he has little choice: "I have a great deal to learn, and no choice but to learn it, or to go rogue, and there is no one hunted like a Breach renegade. … My task is changed: not to uphold the law, or another law, but to maintain the skin that keeps law in place. Two laws in two places, in fact" (Miéville 312). Borlú's explanation is matter of fact and resigned to his situation. In affirming that there are "two laws in two places," he is assenting to a premise he knows to be a lie. He knows perfectly well by this point that Besźel and Ul Qoma are in fact the same place, kept separate only by an artificial practice that everyone knows deep down "doesn't work," as Ashil put it; and yet Borlú is choosing to go on enforcing the separation. Rather than being a servant of normal law, Borlú has become an officer of ideology.

Nevertheless, this ending is not hopeless. Borlú is not becoming a drone or a ruthless punisher. Rather, he has become clear-eyed about the system as a whole and has changed the way he relates to the cities for the better. In the novel's final lines, Borlú tells us that, "We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many other things the question of where it is that we live. On that issue I am a liberal. I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city" (Miéville 312). The Borlú of the early pages of the novel would not have thought to describe himself as a "philosopher," and he certainly never would have questioned where he lived; he was a Besź officer through and through. The fact that Borlú and the other Breach officers debate the question of where they live show that Breach is not in fact the monolithic,

fascist superpower it initially seemed, but a malleable collection of people who have the capacity

for open-mindedness. As Shannon Kuehmichel succinctly describes it, Borlú over the course of

the novel "shifts from Besźel to Ul Qoma in the either/or sense, to Breach in the neither/nor

sense, and finally to a rather transcendental both/and sense of living in a middle city that is

Breach, Besźel, and Ul Qoma all simultaneously" and is "the only character to have full sight, to

do more than perceive and sort his social imaginary into just the sounds and images he is allowed

to acknowledge and read" (366). There is a subtle but important distinction between the way

Borlú experiences the cities and the way the other Breach officers experience them: while most

Breach officers simply shift from one ideological perspective to another that allows them to see

both cities at the same time but regard neither as home, Borlú feels at home in all three

perspectives. Borlú's self-characterization as a "liberal" on the core "issue" of the entire novel

indicates his optimism about his own relationship to his environment, at the very least. It is

significant that Borlú lives "in" the city and the city, as opposed to "above" them or "outside" of

them. He does not see himself as superior to or alienated from the cities, but rather as living

honestly within them for the first time. While the unificationist rebellion has failed and the two

cities remain ostensibly separate for the majority of citizens, the cities have indeed been unified

in Borlú's mind and in his experience of them. There is hope for this world's future, but it does

not rely on violent overthrow of the existing regime, as the unificationists had hoped. Rather, this

hope depends on becoming like Borlú: aware of the true nature of the spaces around oneself and

philosophically inclined enough to be self-reflective about one's own relationships to them. Just

as Landsman had thought of "the whole unblessed and homeless planet" in his decision at the

end of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Borlú's liberation opens up new possibilities for

belonging. As in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the final note of the novel is a fundamentally

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optimistic one, allowing its formerly dislocated and alienated protagonist to reconsider his sense

of what it means to be at home in the world and in his relationships with others.

Conclusion

How is the alienated *noir* subject meant to live a meaningful life from within the

crowded, dirty, indifferent place called the city – from within these places so densely packed

with people and yet so deeply divided by innumerable social factors? Must all the cities be dark,

must the streets be mean, must the cities be full of sin? These are the fundamental questions

asked by *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *The City & the City*. These novels frame these

questions in a meta-generic way that reflects back on the *noir* tradition as a whole. From the

earliest hard-boiled crime writers of the late 1920s through the initial *film noir* period of the

1940s and 50s up to the postmodern and contemporary iterations of *noir* narrative, the dark and

alienating nature of the modern city as a setting has been a universal common thread. Indeed, the

dark city of *noir* has been more prevalent even than the *femme fatale* or the hard-boiled

detective. Chabon's and Miéville's novels are among the first major *noir* texts to self-

consciously reflect back on this common treatment of cities in these narratives. These two novels

base their entire premises on imagining "the *noir* city" in worlds slightly removed from our own

by historical circumstance. By making the city itself the primary object of investigation, these

two hard-boiled detective/speculative fiction novels are able both to question many of the taken-

for-granted assumptions of the genre and to ultimately gesture to a new way forward for the *noir*

hero. Neither novel pretends to offer easy or definitive solutions to the problems of city life;

rather, both novels end just at the moment when change becomes a visible possibility.

Landsman's decision to tell the world the truth about Sitka's shadowy conspiracies and Borlú's

newfound ability to truly see and understand the world around him both point towards futures

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where it will be possible to transcend old ideologies that have kept people alienated and unhappy for so long. In the radical decisions Landsman and Borlú make at the end of their narratives, they both become, in MacCannell's sense, "homeless" with regards to their cities as they had previously understood them; they can never go back to the familiar but unsatisfactory way things were before. By ending in the ways that they do, both novels invite us to imagine new ways of understanding "home." More than sixty years into the *noir* tradition of men going down "mean streets," these novels suggest that there is another option.

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CONCLUSION: MEM-*NOIR*

Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 memoir *In the Dream House* tells a true story, but does so by refracting the raw material of Machado's own life through dozens of conceptual prisms, many of them drawn from literary genres. Machado relates the story of her abusive romantic relationship (a period of Machado's life referred to throughout as "the Dream House") in a series of miniature chapters, each titled with "Dream House as _____." Each chapter fills in the blank with a different term that will provide the guiding concept for that chapter. Many of the terms Machado uses denote specific literary traditions – thus, we get "Dream House as Picaresque," "Dream House as Romance Novel," "Dream House as Bildungsroman," "Dream House as Lesbian Pulp Novel," and "Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure," among many other variations (10, 28, 30, 69, 162). Each genre or tradition referenced provides a filter through which Machado and the reader can understand and contextualize the trauma of her experience. After the first point in the narrative where the relationship turns overtly abusive, the very next chapter is "Dream House as *Noir*" (Machado 45).

The "Dream House as *Noir*" chapter – which, like many of the book's chapters, is less than a page long – casts Machado's girlfriend as an archetypal *femme fatale* in the manner of Phyllis from *Double Indemnity* or Kathleen Turner's Matty from *Body Heat* (1981). Machado, addressing a past version of herself as she does throughout the narrative, notes that the girlfriend is "the first woman who wants you in *that* way – desire tinged with obsession," invoking a long history of doomed *noir* romances (45). The past version of Machado finds herself recalling her father's history of talk about women being overly emotional and sensitive – talk that Machado

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had been inclined to dismiss as "gender essentialism" and evidence that her father "needs to decolonize his mind" – and suddenly Machado finds herself "wondering if [she is] in the middle of evidence that he's right" (45). Her girlfriend's abuse makes Machado question her earlier dismissal of what she had always regarded as mere misogynist stereotyping. The end of the page finds Machado doubting her faith in feminist conventional wisdom: "Maybe you really do believe that women are different. Maybe you owe your father an apology. Dames, right?" (45). By using the word "dames" in this way, Machado rhetorically links herself to the long history of literary and cinematic hard-boiled males who are seduced and ultimately destroyed by the *femmes fatales* they encounter. In the first moment of the narrative in which Machado experiences a painful disconnect from her girlfriend, her mind turns to *noir* as a way to explain this alienation to herself.

Machado's use of *noir* as one of her many framing devices in *In the Dream House* exemplifies the way in which *noir* is still legible to contemporary Americans as a way to understand ourselves. Moments of pain, alienation, guilt, and anxiety can still be processed with reference to the language and archetypes of a narrative tradition now nearly a century old. Even an avowed queer feminist like Machado can wonder in the back of her mind whether *noir* was telling us all there was to know about ourselves all along. Crucially, however, Machado's story does not end in *noir* despair and disillusionment. Although Machado's relationship and life will get much worse over the course of the narrative, she does eventually end up in a place of healing and social re-integration. By the end of the memoir, Machado has broken up with the abusive girlfriend, gotten married to a much kinder woman, and finds herself able to tell the story from a psychologically safe place. She tells her past self, "I wish I had always lived in this body, and you could have lived here with me, and I could have told you it's all right, it's going to be all

right" (242). In light of the ending of Machado's memoir, *noir* becomes a stage along her journey – a damaging and uncomfortable stage, but ultimately one that can be moved beyond.

  In the Dream House thus enacts in miniature the general trajectory I have traced throughout this project, the trajectory towards "post-*noir*." Just as *noir* is one dark step along Machado's personal path, it is also a dark moment of our collective literary, cinematic, and cultural history. Whereas the narrative logic of classic *noir* always suggested that nothing lay beyond its own ending – its protagonists almost invariably ending up dead, arrested, or otherwise trapped – the authors I have engaged with in this project seek a way out of the dark alleys and fatalistic viewpoints of their midcentury predecessors. Whether it is Lila Mae Watson learning to articulate what it means for her to be a black woman among other black people, Maxine Tarnow discovering how to hold on to her flesh-and-blood connections with her family in an increasingly digital world, or Meyer Landsman deciding for himself where his real home is, the protagonists of these post-*noir* narratives ultimately find themselves clinging to a delicate, but real, sense of hope. As contemporary literary culture seeks a viable path forward from the endless quandaries of postmodernism, the resources of the *noir* tradition provide a way of solving the mystery. After the end of the darkness of *noir*, the contemporary post-*noir* novel finds something surprising: light.

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