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“Everyone’s Favorite Dead Girl”: Historical Crime Fiction and Postwar Policing in James Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia*

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“EVERYONE’S FAVORITE DEAD GIRL”: HISTORICAL CRIME FICTION AND POSTWAR POLICING IN JAMES ELLROY’S *THE BLACK DAHLIA*

By

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Abstract

This thesis argues for the importance of crime fiction as a major literary genre with global reach. Taken as a whole, crime fiction acts as a vehicle for exploring macro-level questions of social structures, political-economic processes and power relations. Within that genre, I claim that James Ellroy is a key figure who writes at the intersection of the historical novel and literary noir. As the first work in his *L.A. Quartet* (1987-1992), *The Black Dahlia* fictionalizes the investigation of the city's most famous unsolved homicide—the gruesome murder and mutilation of Elizabeth Short. The novel, however, uses the investigation as a pretext for depicting the historical context of postwar American society, offering readers an opportunity to view past crimes as *the prehistory* of the present. In the novel, L.A. is portrayed as a site of terminal dysfunction and social inequality that provides the space for critical reflection, particularly on the systemic nature of policing and gendered violence. Ellroy's historical crime novel, I argue, critiques postwar American society through its representation of the everyday nature of violence and marginalization in this chapter of the city's development. These depictions of policing and gendered violence show readers that power structures are socially constructed and historically contingent rather than transhistorical, immutable truths.

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All I have is the will to remember

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Introduction: The Big Nowhere at 39th and Norton

> I began with the desire to speak with the dead. This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies…If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could recreate a conversation with them.
>
> –Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*

> The dead claim the living and tell us how to live. It is imperative that we listen and adhere to their sanction. This call to virtue proves efficacious over time. We send messages to a spirit and get no material answer.
>
> —James Ellroy, *James Ellroy's LA: City Of Demons*

Looking for his partner, Bucky Bleichert finds a shrine to the Black Dahlia instead. The hotel room is a "typical Hollywood bachelor flop" but "the walls were adorned with Betty Short portrait pictures, newspaper and magazine photos, horror glossies from 39th and Norton, dozens of them enlarged to magnify every gruesome detail" of Short's bisected, mutilated body (165). This is no regular, disinterested homicide investigation for the two detectives, and the scene emphasizes their mutual fixation on the case and their reconstruction of Short's life—its possible meaning that led to her untimely fate culminating on that day in January 1947. Unsure of what to do and lost somewhere in the "Big Nowhere," Bucky drives out to the only place he can think of in search of Lee Blanchard—the body-dump site at 39th and Norton, now an unassuming block of empty lots. "A Santa Ana wind blew in," Bucky writes, "while I stood there, and the more I pulled for Lee to come back to me the more I knew my hotshot cop life was as gone as everybody's favorite dead girl" (165). The narration portrays two male detectives starting to lose themselves in a gender-coded vortex of obsession and desire, where Bucky's yearning for another man expresses and channels itself through a woman, albeit a murdered, mysterious one. The investigation into this homicide, the novel shows, creates the pretext for the exploring the *context* of postwar Los Angeles, here depicted as a rapidly expanding, developing city filled with urban inequality, gendered violence, political corruption, and widespread state repression. While

the book proposes a fictionalized solution to the question of who killed Elizabeth Short, most of its content dives into the question of how individuals navigate and negotiate their positions within systems of power and domination. In other words, characters like Bucky, Lee, and Elizabeth are caught up in social and historical forces that Ellroy seeks to understand through historical crime fiction—the "private nightmares" behind "public spectacles," the individual trauma behind institutional corruption (Pepper, "The Contemporary American Crime Novel" 27).

In this thesis, I argue that James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia* (1987) critiques 1940s American society through its depiction of postwar L.A.'s policing institutions, cultural attitudes, and historically uneven development. The murder and investigation of Elizabeth Short provide Ellroy the means for such a critique because its real-life circumstances reveal the hidden processes of systemic violence that underlie the case. As a work of *historical* crime fiction, the setting of 1940s L.A. allows him a geographically and temporally specific site for reactionary depictions of L.A.P.D. officers at the heart of the novel—"the bad white men" of American history driving the narrative's action and plot. The story of Elizabeth Short's murder has spawned multiple retellings and works of fiction, many of which cover similar themes and concerns to *The Black Dahlia.* But Ellroy's novel stands out for its unrelenting representation of police repression, racial domination, and sexual violence—all which remain just as relevant in our present moment of mass incarceration, militarized policing, and misogynic marginalization.

Within American literature, I claim that James Ellroy is a major author of crime fiction who contributes to the historical imaginary of postwar American society by positing it as a period of social injustice exacerbated by capitalist modernity. He accomplishes this literary task through the intersection of historical fiction and literary noir, which Ellroy begins exploring with the depiction of L.A.'s most famous unsolved homicide. "At his best," William Marling remarks

in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, "Ellroy evokes the sights, sounds, and feel of" L.A. in the 1940s and 50s (119). Explaining further, he writes that *The Black Dahlia* itself is "an extraordinary recreation of L.A. police politics, racial and sexual attitudes, and slang" of the period, which fictionalizes the solution to Short's murder while staying close to the facts (119). Rather than meticulously recreating the facts, however, Ellroy distorts the historical record to probe the significance of "The Black Dahlia" and its continuing relevance. Any other project "would be impossible," Katherine Farrimond argues, because "the Black Dahlia case is now so deeply immersed in layers of contradictory Hollywood mythology, conspiracy theories, reinterpretations of the evidence, and contested accounts…" (34). In other words, any questions of "truth and historical authenticity" can only be approached obliquely and creatively, through the speculation and hypothesizing that historical crime fiction provides (34).

In historical accounts of the period, Elizabeth Short frequently stands in as a textual substitute for the grim, underworld reality of the city and its postwar development. "Desperate, terrible, obscene in its cruelty," Kevin Starr writes, "the Black Dahlia case mesmerized Los Angeles throughout January and February of 1947" because of its graphic horrors and for what "the brief and unhappy life of Elizabeth Short" said about Los Angeles itself—about "the anonymity, the desperation, the cruelty and brutality life could have in the City of Angels" (221). In a more recent work, Jon Lewis makes a similar observation: "[t]he long and inconclusive investigation into Short's murder foregrounded a revised mythology of Hollywood aspiration and stardom" (4). Her torture and murder "introduced an unglamourous Hollywood narrative focused not on discovery and transcendence but on the cruel realities of life as it was lived by aspiring film workers after the war" (Lewis 4). This is the lesson Ellory draws in his memoir: "Postwar L.A. coalesced around the body of a dead woman. Hordes of people fell sway to the Dahlia.

They weaved themselves into her story in bizarre and fantastical ways…The Dahlia defined her time and place. She claimed lives from the grave and exerted great power" ("My Dark Places" 127). Historical and fictional retellings of Elizabeth Short's murder emphasize its place as a defining moment in the city's history, albeit one that casts L.A.'s postwar boom as violent and dangerous. For Ellroy, the investigation provides him the opportunity to further connect the crime to the city's history but also to examine the narratives and media reports that surround her life and death.

Much of the reporting and retellings, however, characterized Short as either a loose woman, naive young girl or noir seductress—all of which demonstrate a tendency to victim-blame Short for her death. A typical account can be attributed to Jack Webb, the creator and star of television's first major police procedural, *Dragnet*. In *The Badge*, a collection of "real-life cases" marketed as too shocking to air, Jack Webb describes Elizabeth Short as "a lazy and irresponsible girl" who remains "hauntingly, pathetically alive to many" because of her "strange and awful death" (22). As a result of these descriptions," Lewis notes, "Short emerged from the press coverage of her death as The Black Dahlia, *less a person than a character or a construct*, less one particular and unfortunate young woman who had moved to Los Angeles and met with disaster than, rather, *a metonymy for a generation of young women* whose dreams were dashed on the streets of the city" (12; emphasis added). In the novel, Ellroy responds to the misogynistic sentiments exemplified by Jack Webb and identified by Lewis to detail the mistreatment of women like Short at the hands of male murderers, reporters, and detectives—character archetypes, I argue, that implicate social systems of gendered stratification at various institutional levels.

This thesis examines and analyzes Ellroy's engagement with the textual construction of Elizabeth Short and postwar Los Angeles. I hypothesize that *The Black Dahlia* exposes readers to the social forces of postwar American society associated with Short's murder, and I specifically attend to policing as an organizing principle of the novel as well as its exploration of gender relations and sexual violence. In my use of the word "critique," my argument does not attempt to ascribe any deliberate or conscious recognition on Ellroy's part. I *am* arguing, however, that Ellroy's recreation of 1940s L.A. must necessarily depict and dramatize social and economic processes, political systems, and local institutions that readers then engage with and interpret. Ellroy's L.A. is a site of terminal dysfunction and inequality that provides the space for critical reflection, especially when we consider his representation of policing and gender. Historical crime fiction poses questions to readers about larger social issues that they might not encounter in other kinds of genres. Through this intersection, Ellroy probes the unanswered, blank spaces surrounding her death that—in his reimagining—point to the systemic exploitation and violence of contemporary American society underlying L.A.'s most famous unsolved homicide.

Ch. I: "Real Detective Shit Work": Crime Fiction and the Historical Novel

In *The Black Dahlia,* Ellroy's combination of crime fiction and the historical novel places him within L.A.'s regional literature while providing him a generic form (noir) recognizable to readers, which he uses to draw parallels with the historical past. "The Los Angeles detective story since Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald," David Fine writes, "has rested on the unearthing of crimes committed in the past to find sources of present infirmity (209). Citing novels and films like *Chinatown* (1974) and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Fine notes a trend in postclassic detective fiction to structure narratives around real, recorded crimes of L.A. history. While some of these works only implicitly allude to incidents and scandals in the city's development, they nonetheless blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, event and representation, while invoking the noir atmosphere and mythology of L.A. before the 1960s. For Fine, the fictional revival of noir aesthetics alongside the city's historical reconstruction serves a nostalgic but also more serious purpose: the creation of a cultural history "that posits past crime *not as individual events but as acts implicated in the larger context of power and hegemony* in the city's development" (209; emphasis added). Within this revival of a genre and cultural memory, the unsolved murder of Elizabeth Short remains a source of sustained interest—to which James Ellroy contributes a narrative that dramatizes the hidden violence of institutions underpinning the city's history and image.

In this chapter, I contextualize my analysis of *The Black Dahlia* by connecting it to research in crime fiction studies and the historical novel, exploring the relationship between literature, genre, and history. Scholars have discussed Ellroy's ability to combine the psychological complexity of his characters with a historical interest in L.A.'s postwar development, often depicting the circumstances between systems and individuals as inextricably

intertwined with each other (Hausladen and Starrs; Pepper, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel*). In Ellroy's reimagining, the crime is the *text* that allows him a narrative *pretext* for examining, dramatizing, and historizing the *context* of postwar American society—which extends to his own contemporary moment (Fine 210). As the author himself stated in an interview, this historical approach to the case allows him to craft a "crazy quilt" of fact and fiction based on the period's newspaper circulation wars, political infighting, and behind the scenes intrigue of the Los Angeles Police Department—in addition to his "personal demons" (Swaim 13). Of particular relevance, however, is Ellroy's insistence on positing an imaginary resolution to the unsolved homicide: "I would never cheat the reader that way because the book wouldn't be published if I did" (Swaim 13). Ellroy's interviews demonstrate an awareness of genre conventions, audience expectations, and even publishing limitations that shape and inform his fiction. But they also show that Ellroy approaches crime fiction through the form of the contemporary historical novel (Heller; Lukács). This combination of crime fiction and the historical novel, I argue, acts as a critique of power and institutional authority that I will expand on in with a close reading of key moments in the novel. To support this assertion, I will first define crime fiction (and noir) while attempting to situate Ellroy within the genre as a historical novelist.

Crime Fiction as a Genre

Scholarship has pointed to the difficulty of classifying crime fiction and film noir[1]. In *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, however, the editors have recently identified a dual paradigm shift in crime fiction studies, one that moves from emphasizing "the genre and its subcomponents to highlighting the complexity and idiosyncrasies of the individual text, and from

[1] For a general overview of current issues and concerns about the genre, see Bradford, *Crime Fiction: A Short Introduction*; for a more historical overview, see Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800: detection, death, diversity*

studying crime fiction in the context of separate national literary traditions to examining the genre as a transnational and global phenomenon" (Allan, et al). In other words, the field is paying closer attention to the tensions of genre in crime narratives as well as viewing crime fiction through the lens of world literature. Nilsson et al. expand this view by defining crime fiction as *an area of inquiry* as well as a widespread literary genre whose "history and development are connected to modernization and industrialization" (2). Similarly, Gulddal and King argue that crime fiction is a "*narrative vector* for exploring a range of wider social, political, cultural, or philosophical issues that do not necessarily have anything to do with crime in themselves, yet are significantly implicated and framed by the criminal/investigative plot" (15; emphasis added). Rather than attempting to taxonomize and index the various subgenres that could be grouped under the label of crime fiction, scholars are urged to examine how these narratives "never simply embody the genre" but appropriate and repurpose it (Gulddal and King 20). To avoid reducing crime narratives to prescriptive formulations of genre, taking a "dialogic" approach instead demands careful attention to the ambiguities and contradictions of individual texts (Horsley 2).

These ambiguities and contradictions are starkly evident in Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, which adds a heightened, contemporary depiction of violence to its classic film noir setting of Los Angeles in the 1940s. Broadly put, the novel is a combination of various subgenres with their own distinct histories and conventions: the police procedural, the detective story, hard-boiled fiction, and literary noir. But within the constellations of possible definitions, Steven Powell offers a "pragmatic" genre classification: "neo-noir novels in a classic retro noir setting" ("Demon Dog of Crime Fiction" 129). In terms of a "noir sensibility," Pepper identifies a few, helpfully applicable characteristics: "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" (*The American Roman Noir*). These straightforward descriptions—moral compromise, fatalism, political critique—clarify Ellroy's place within the genre but also his engagement with the *history of crime fiction* and its narrative depictions, not only the period setting. The novel's generic ambiguity, however, seems minuscule compared to the problems posed by its reactionary content, which includes unapologetically racist and sexist characters—including protagonists Bucky Bleichert and Lee Blanchard. These surface-level features (e.g., flagrant levels of violence and bigotry) are essential to any analysis of the text, but they have often been foregrounded at the novel's expense—particularly its exploration of systems of power and cultural anxieties that surround both the 40s and the 80s.

Interpretations of Ellroy's work as distinctively reactionary are part of a larger trend that continues to view crime fiction as a conservative genre (Knight, "Form and Ideology"). Jans Wager offers a criticism of a perceived "postmodern turn" in the genre and its regressive consequences, which directly implicates Ellroy's "retro noir" aesthetic. Films like *L.A. Confidential* and *Chinatown* address tensions along gendered, racial, and classed lines and work through those tensions in a virtual, intertextual representation of the past (18). But these narratives become problematic, Wager argues, when they provide "an ideologically safe site for the portrayal of reactionary representations of gender; of muscular, violent, and successful white masculinity; and of passive and objectified femininity" (76). Analyzing *L.A. Confidential*, Wager claims the film is "retro fantasy" that signifies a "burgeoning and regressive trend" (89). Ellroy confirms this kind of interpretation to some extent, when he remarks on his desire to create

realistic Los Angeles cops of the 40s and 50s full of prejudices that might then be turned back to the reader:

> I wanted to give crime fiction back to the leg breakers of history, to soldiers of fortune, to bad white men, to racist shit-birds and the corrupt cops. I think the chief risk I've taken is to ignore the old warning of crime fiction editors worldwide. Namely, that you've got to create sympathetic characters that your readers can identify with… I want my readers to say, "Man, what a blast it would be to go back to 1952 and beat up faggots." Then I want them to realize, "Oh, am I really thinking that?" (Silet 45).

For readers perhaps interested in a potentially safe literary site of white masculinity to rehearse fantasies of rogue cops on the edge, I argue *The Black Dahlia* also offers a narrative that traces the pervasive and destructive effects of state violence and misogyny—these two elements might even be considered mutually constitutive of each other, rather than contradictory positions. By depicting the 40s and 50s as an era rife with police brutality, widespread repression, and casual bigotry, Ellroy centers a series of larger contemporary issues and problems to the forefront of crime fiction. While the narrative may answer who killed Elizabeth Short, Ellroy's use of the genre presents readers with a depiction that asks more questions than it answers—primarily about the relationship between law enforcement and the state (the bad white men and corrupt cops of history).

Crime Fiction as Politically inflected genre

While it may be a narrative vector for exploring social and cultural issues, I also argue that crime fiction is an inherently political genre because it explicitly involves itself in matters of law and order, including its unequal and repressive features. As Andrew Pepper argues, crime fiction is the "most politically minded of all the literary genres" since it investigates "how

individual lives are shaped by the push and pull of larger social, political, and economic forces, always on the nature and adequacy of the justice system and on the reasons why crimes are committed" (*Unwilling Executioner* 18). Because crime fiction is "rooted in the social and economic conditions of its time," Pepper also notes that the genre necessarily must portray individual action as grounded in those same conditions. Therefore, the psychologies of characters—including the biases and prejudices that Ellroy inserts—are always depicted as intimately interconnected with the social forces that structure the plot of a crime narrative.

If there is a single context, however, capable of uniting the disparate concerns, conventions, and archetypes of crime fiction and noir, it would be a "heightened attention to the present as well as intensified uncertainty about it" (Martin 89). As a politically minded genre, crime fiction is in a situation of "both increased awareness of the scope of the capitalist system and diminished ability to situate ourselves within that system (Martin 89). In other words, the ambivalent and disorienting definitions of crime fiction might collectively act as a useful indicator of how the genre registers changes in literature across time and space. Like other noir narratives, *The Black Dahlia* dramatizes the disruptive processes of capitalist modernity, charting fluctuations in its depiction of postwar L.A. as various characters (specifically as LAPD officers) reorient themselves to those social developments (for example, the dismantling of the iconic "Hollywoodland" sign). When Bucky and the reader are confronted with new narrative information and plot revelations, the opportunity to 'connect the dots' also reorients us to the social, political, and cultural developments of the 1940s and 80s.

But even among scholars and critics who assert crime fiction's politically inflected nature, Ellroy is described—often reductively—as a rightwing novelist. Problematizing this characterization opens up the possibility for a revitalized reading of *The Black Dahlia* that

attends to the psychology of policing and the historical uncovering of hidden violence. Placing his assessment of Ellroy in a footnote, Pepper for example labels him a "right-wing crime novelist" whose fiction nevertheless "demonstrates the corrosive effects of capitalist business practices" (*Unwilling Executioner* 11). Likewise, José Saval writes that Ellroy's use of the "hardboiled can express conservative viewpoints…despite using a form that many associate with a *politically charged, progressive message*" (329; emphasis added). Mike Davis, an author explicitly aligned in that critical tradition, describes the *L.A. Quartet* as "either the culmination of the genre, or its reductio ad absurdum" (42). While he identifies Ellroy's attempts to "map the history of modern Los Angeles," Davis concludes that he risks "extinguishing the genre's tensions" and power through a relentlessly bleak "wordstorm of perversity and gore" (42-43). By fictionalizing the Black Dahlia case as a "secret continuum of sex crimes, satanic conspiracies, and political scandals," Davis argues that Ellroy inadvertently captures the supersaturation of violence and corruption at the heart of the Reagan-Bush era—without stirring much interest or outrage at these forces (42-43). But Davis also provides a definition of noir that clarifies the relationship between literature, place, and culture, which helps to explain the genre's association as a politically charged form:

> For if Los Angeles has become the archetypical site of massive and unprotesting subordination of industrialized intelligentsias to the programs of capital, it has also been fertile soil for some of the most acute critiques of the culture of late capitalism, and, particularly, of the tendential degeneration of its middle strata (a persistent theme from Nathanael West to Robert Towne). The most outstanding example is the complex corpus of what we can *noir* (literary and cinematic): a fantastic convergence of American 'tough-

> guy' realism, Weimar expressionism, and existentialized Marxism—all focused on unmasking a 'bright, guilty place' (Welles) called Los Angeles (15)

All of these traits are present in Ellroy's fiction: the performance of hardboiled masculinity, the cinematic quality of his prose (with its rapid-fire, staccato sentences), the structural critique of power, and the author's claim to demythologize the utopian image that belies the City of Angels. While most scholars acknowledge these traits within the text, their actual function in the narrative has been elided or relegated to a cursory mention within studies of crime fiction. Ellroy's location within the "complex corpus" of crime fiction has been assumed rather than analyzed. As a result, *The Black Dahlia*'s reflexive use of history and genre has been neglected in favor of interpretations that privilege the author's biography and public persona.

But instead of attempting to reclaim Ellroy as a politically committed radical, I argue that his literary style involves a conscious strategy of performance to distinguish his novels in a crowded genre to critics, publishers, and a broader reading public interested in the death and investigation of Elizabeth Short. Ellroy's own definition of noir makes this connection evident, which performs both genre *and* gender:

> Noir is the most scrutinized offshoot of the hard-boiled school of fiction. It's the long drop off the short pier, and the wrong man and the wrong woman in perfect misalliance. It's the nightmare of flawed souls with big dreams and the precise *how* and *why* of the all-time sure thing that goes bad. Noir is opportunity as fatality, social justice as sanctified shuck, and sexual love as a one-way ticket to hell. Noir indicts the other subgenres of the hard-boiled school as sissified, and canonizes the inherent human urge toward self-destruction ("Introduction" xiii)

Writing as an editor tasked with defining the genre in the introduction to *The Best American Noir of the Century*, he also contextualizes his own novels—but implicitly casts predecessors as tame and insufficiently intense ("the sissified subgenres"). Ellroy differentiates himself from other authors and influences by performing a hypermasculine reactionary persona, possibly to diffuse any accusations of a definite political stance.

The Black Dahlia itself, however, reveals a sustained engagement with difficult questions of domination and repression, demonstrating tensions and ambiguities that defy the easy answers and readings that some critics fall into (often at behest of Ellroy's performative persona). In that same introduction, Ellroy refers to the social importance of noir, revealing some sort of awareness to the "big" thematic importance of "race, class, gender, and systemic corruption" ("Introduction" xiii). In another interview, he claims he "may have a little bit of Marxist social sense and distrust of authority, but in the end, I'd rather err on its side than on the side of chaos" (Powell, "Coda For Crime Fiction" 105). Presenting this dichotomy—between authority and chaos—reveals a central tension of Ellroy's work that Pepper argues is emblematic of crime fiction as a whole: it produces a "contradictory account of the state as both necessary for the creation and maintenance of collective life" that is also "central to the reproduction of entrenched socio-economic inequalities" (*Unwilling Executioner* 1-2). In other words, crime fiction depicts and constructs a tension between the (perceived) need for "law and order" while pointing to its (very real) unequal enforcement along various axes of identity (for example the big three of race, class, and gender). These ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions run throughout *The Black Dahlia*, as it does virtually all of Ellroy's work.

The Historical Novel

Ellroy explores these tensions and contradictions through historical fiction—at a moment of its unprecedented popularity and canonization within American literature. Writing that our contemporary fiction has never been more historical, Alexander Manshel argues in *Writing Backwards* that American literary institutions have "fundamentally reorganized themselves around the aesthetic, pedagogical, and political value of the historical past, privileging historical fiction above all literary genres" (4). To support his assertions, he cites the predominance of historical fiction in post-1945 novels taught in universities (70% according to the Open Syllabus Project) and the number of shortlisted titles for a major American prize (almost three-quarters between 2000 and 2019).[2] "The prime directive of American literary fiction," Mansel posits, has become "the drive to write and know history," renewing attention to "fiction's ability to access, reconstruct, and even recuperate the historical past" (19). Without thoroughly assessing all of Manshel's claims about American literature's historical turn, we can safely situate Ellroy's fiction within a larger field of scholarly interest.

In *The Black Dahlia*, Ellroy contributes to this trend by structuring his critique through the form of the historical novel, a distinct literary object from historical *fiction*. Manshel provides useful definitions of the two terms: "*[h]istorical fiction* describes a broad continuum of fictionalizations of the historical past. *The historical novel* describes a specific sector of that continuum occupied by narratives that are primarily concerned with world-historical figures and events, and that take place anywhere between one generation and several centuries before their publication" (12). Set in the years before Ellroy's 1948 birth, *The Black Dahlia* fits the criteria of the historical novel, considering its focus on Elizabeth Short's murder as a major event in Los

[2] The three major prizes in question: the National Book award, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle award.

Angeles's postwar development. One of the recent changes, however, to the historical novel since George Lukács's foundational work concerns the role of protagonists in these narratives. According to Manshel, contemporary historical novels move away from the view that "the protagonist of a historical novel should be" a middling figure caught in the middle of social and political upheaval—instead, they are now protagonists who "function as proxies for the reader" that "do not embody the *experience* of history so much as its *discovery*" (250). In referring to Lukács's analysis of the fictional protagonists of Walter Scott's novels, Manshel unnecessarily attributes a degree of prescriptiveness ("should be") to Lukács that misinterprets his contributions to theorizing the historical novel: (1) the emphasis on non-historical, average protagonists and (2) their modern, anachronistic psychologies.

These two elements from Lukács are directly applicable to *The Black Dahlia*, which examines the "necessarily anachronistic" psychology of its ordinary, non-historical characters in 1940s Los Angeles, specifically the two L.A.P.D. detectives at the center of its action (who do *not* portray the real-life detectives assigned to the unsolved murder). In the classical form of the historical novel, according to Lukács, the protagonist is a "middling" and average character who, "in their psychology and destiny," represents "social trends and historical forces" instead of a historical personality (e.g., Napoleon). The historical novel depicts how characters are shaped *by* history, not so much their ability to change its course. "But does faithfulness to the past," writes Lukács, "mean a chronicle-like, naturalistic reproduction of the language, mode of thought, and feeling of the past?" (61). He answers "of course not" because the past can only be imagined through the consciousness of the present. The psychology of fictional characters creates a "necessary anachronism" that allows characters "to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could

have done" (63). Bucky, the protagonist of *The Black Dahlia*, is not an actual detective from the period but the imagined characterization of an average, white, able-bodied male who joins the ranks of the L.A.P.D. and becomes obsessed with Elizabeth Short's murder. But through Ellroy's depiction, the literary construction of the character's psychology—and the pervasive effects of institutional, state-sponsored violence—becomes accessible *and* reflective. Ellroy's use of the historical novel gives readers "the concrete possibility" to encounter their own mental and material existence as "something historically conditioned" and history as "something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" (24).

To demonstrate the historical condition of everyday life, novelists like Ellroy must show how the past is accessible only through reenactment and performance—with competing yet related versions of historical events. Rather than solely enclosing postwar Los Angles as the ideologically safe site for regressive fantasies (where the detective solves the crime and brings Short's murderer to justice), the novel explores the epistemological gap between past and present—and dramatizes the hidden violence of patriarchy and modernity underlying American's postwar transformation. While he may offer a meticulous, literary recreation of postwar L.A. through retro-noir aesthetics, Ellroy depictions of institutional corruption and systemic discrimination reveal how the city's fictional and actual past is the "*necessary prehistory* of the present" (Lukács 61). As historiographer Frank Ankersmit notes, history and art share a similar function: they create textual substitutes for an actual yet absent reality (8). Ellroy's novel grasps that the historical past does not exist separately from our experiences and examinations of it. Its plot, like virtually all crime narratives, attempts to reconstruct the past through methodical investigations of cause and effect. But the past also becomes an accessible, *felt* presence in

fiction through performance. Writing about historical fiction, De Groot explains how it performs, reenacts, and distorts the past for artistic purposes:

> The past as presented in historical novels is an enactment, a recreation, a *performance of pastness*; it is a mimicking of a dominant discourse that enables the consideration of other multiplicities of identity and behaviour. In many ways, the popular historical text, whether it be film or television or book, is the other of the archive, the dissident, illegitimate reflection of the official, with playful inversion and misrecognition inherent in its being. Where the archive or the library is memory, the popular text is mismemory and misquotation (16; emphasis added).

Rather than attempting to substitute the historical record with his own speculation on Short's case (as popular trade books do), Ellroy's novel supplements it with a critical invention—one that interrogates history and views it with skepticism. He contributes to the historical imaginary by calling it into question, emphasizing that L.A.'s postwar rise is incomplete without some account of the region's uneven development. In Ellroy's historical novels, the past becomes a tangible yet solely textual present through the performance of a recognizably familiar setting and genre: film noir-era Los Angeles. History's hegemonic claims to knowledge are shown to be constructed—but along ideological lines that are never neutral but deeply embedded within power relations (Elias 24). In other words, the past is the *fiction* of the present, its repressed other (de Certeau).

If historical fiction speculates about and performs the past, Ellroy uses this function to explicitly hypothesize a history of repression, violence, and marginalization lurking behind the dominant discourses of the period. "The notion of history as repression," Johanthan Walker observes, "is at the centre of his understanding of the relationship between history, fiction and

truth" (Walker 182). This is evident within the actual content of his novels, whose narratives are structured around the discovery of hidden knowledge that *does* exist despite any reservations about its fragmentary, suppressed, nature. Walker further explains the repressive quality of Ellroy's approach to historical fiction:

> …within the world of the novels, there is always a definite (and obsessively-detailed) truth. It's instructive how often his plot resolutions involve the discovery of a secret stash of files, which allow a character to fill in the gaps but are then subsequently destroyed or hidden once more (a plot device also beloved of *The X-Files*). These might be account books (*American Tabloid*) or psychiatric files (*The Big Nowhere*) or a magazine record morgue (*L.A. Confidential*) or private photographic and document archives kept by investigating policemen (*The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*) …Ultimately, even though the historical record is what misleads you in reality, within the novel the possibility of truth is still associated with documentary proof (Walker 184)

Ellroy's historical novels provide facsimiles and distortions of the documentary record but in the hopes of probing curiosity about the complex of questions raised by Short's murder, which readers might not otherwise expect out of historical crime fiction.

Walker alludes to this process of discovery and repression in *The Black Dahlia* that we can detail and expand upon here. Ellroy announces the novel's subjective, fragmentary perspective from its opening lines: "I never knew her in life. She exists for me through others, in evidence of the ways her death drove them" (3). From the beginning, Elizabeth Short exists for the characters as a prefigured and textual construction—she is only known through the circumstances of her grim death as described by the "evidence" of coroner's reports and case summaries. But Bucky aims to reconstruct the "brutal facts" behind her death and its subsequent

investigation into a coherent narrative (without revealing any answers immediately, per generic conventions). Since "he owes her a great deal," he has "undertaken the writing of this memoir" as "the only one who does know the entire story" (3). As Walker noted, there is a definite truth in *The Black Dahlia* but it is only revealed through Bucky's written recollection of the case's "facts" that are never depicted as *separate* from the author's personal experience as an L.A.P.D. officer. By framing this as a memoir, Ellroy suggests that knowledge of Short's killer actually exists but remains repressed and hidden—therefore accessible only through fictional reenactment. More importantly, however, Ellroy's reimagining of Short's murder allows him to link this specific case to its larger, postwar L.A. context. "But before the Dahlia," Bucky writes, "there was the partnership and before that there was the war and military regulations and maneuvers at Central Division, reminding us that cops were also soldiers…" (3). Before Ellroy's narrator can reveal the details of what he knows about the Dahlia, he must remind readers there is an entire history that is inextricable from that murder. The plot of the novel immediately links itself to historical events through its exposition, evident in its inclusion of a WWII prologue.

Ch. II: "The Good Guys were really the Bad Guys": The Performance of Policing

To tell the story of Elizabeth Short's murder and investigation, Ellroy curiously starts the narrative in wartime L.A. in the summer of 1943 on the eve of the so-called "Zoot Suit Riots." This prologue is about the city's interwar years that sets up the relationship between an older and newly recruited police officer—but it also foregrounds the antagonisms and tensions of the period that immediately challenge the protagonist's conception of law and order (i.e., the police are always and have always been uniformly good and just). The riot—more of a racial pogrom against L.A.'s communities of color—indicates Ellroy's engagement with history as a mode of repression and state violence. Setting the scene, Bucky informs readers that "[s]kirmishing broke out inland: navy personnel from the Chavez Ravine naval base versus pachucos in Alpine and Palo Verde" (5). The newspapers spread rumors of Nazi sympathies among Latino youths while every "Central Division patrolman was called in to duty, then issued a World War I tin hat and an oversize billy club known as a nigger knocker" (5). Transported to the "battleground" in army personnel carriers, Bucky and his L.A.P.D. cohort are ordered to restore peace between military servicemen and civilians. The narration here blurs the boundary between a domestic police force and a military one, and shows how the department encourages an adversarial approach to policing that views civilians as insurgents. This is emphasized by the war imagery that Ellroy includes: their transportation, their helmets, and their weapons are all objects of the two world wars. As a member of the L.A.P.D., Bucky is being pressured into viewing policing as a military endeavor where violence is either officially sanctioned from the top-down or overlooked by superiors.

As a proxy for the reader, Bucky's internal conflict stems from the historical conditions surrounding him—he is only confused by the chaos around him because he has viewed policing uncritically and unambiguously "*good*." This is the realization that comes as such a shock to him: "the good guys were really the bad guys," he says, when he sees soldiers, sailors, and marines targeting and terrorizing civilians in their racially motivated rampage of downtown L.A. (5). But this shock at seeing "the good guys" engage in wanton acts of racist violence is possible only because the protagonist has never fully experienced state violence at this scale and from this perspective. Noticing "fellow officers" merely standing by and "hobnobbing with Shore Patrol goons and MPs," Bucky demonstrates disorientation and uncertainty, unsure of what to do, who to put the cuffs on, and how to make sense of these events *because* his preexisting beliefs about authority have been experientially challenged (5-6). Bucky's disorientation, we see, is a historical disorientation that poses identical challenges and questions to different readers' conceptions of policing and militarism. When Bucky equates "the good guys" with "the bad guys," the disorientation comes from the contradiction between what he believes about authority (and its representatives) with the actual violence that they carry out. Soldiers and cops—paragons of virtue defending American values during the Second World War—are *problematized* by the novel. In Ellroy's rendition, these figures either enable, ignore, or participate in illegal, excessive acts of state violence that make all of them complicit in this chapter of the city's development.[3]

[3] Jim Mancall makes a similar observation about *The Black Dahlia* in his essay examining the traumatized police officer figure in Ellroy's body of work: from its opening pages, it contains "questions of heroism, cowardice and the *institutional pressures* that define them," which all converge in Bucky's narrative (39; emphasis added). In my own analysis, however, I detail these pressures further as part of the novel's critique of policing—Ellroy's text posits that the case might have been solved *if not for these pressures*.

As an introduction to the history and politics of mid-twentieth century Los Angeles, Ellroy's prologue to *The Black Dahlia* reinforces the connection between the city's most famous unsolved homicide and the events that precede and inform the case. In this chapter, I examine how Ellroy depicts the relationship between individuals and institutions—specifically how the performance of *policing* inflects all of Bucky's encounters and narration. Rather than assume the viewpoint of any specific person actually connected with the case, Ellroy's protagonist is an imaginary rank and file member of the L.A.P.D.—an average, middling figure of history imbued with an anachronistic, modern psychology (Lukács 63). This approach allows the novel to unfold through Bucky Bleichert's eyes, who acts a proxy for the reader as they attempt to investigate Short's murder. But both reader and character must also navigate the tension and contradictions of the modernizing, postwar police department that Ellroy depicts. *The Black Dahlia's* opening moves situate the investigation and its cast of characters within the larger historical contexts of institutional discrimination and American militarism that erupted in the violence of the "Zoot Suit Riots" (among other incidents, like the "Sleepy Lagoon Murder" of 1942). Reflecting on the "Watts Riots" twenty years later, Ellroy writes in his memoir about the narrative potential of major historical events like these (specifically Watts 1965):

> The riot fizzled out. It reconflagrated in my head and ruled my thoughts for weeks.
>
> I ran stories from diverse perspectives. I became both riot cop and riot provocateur. I lived lives fucked over by history.
>
> I spread my empathy around. I distributed moral shading equitably. I didn't analyze the cause of the riot or prophesy its ramifications. My public stance was "Fuck the niggers."
>
> My concurrent narrative fantasies stressed culpable white cops.

> I never questioned the contradiction. I didn't know that storytelling was my only true voice (*My Dark Places* 153).

Bracketing the author's reactionary, rightwing posturing (including the frequent use of slurs, both in the voices of characters and narrators), Ellroy purports to write fiction that centers on the interiority of characters as they contend with the push and pull of social, political, and economic forces. *The Black Dahlia* is no exception, which imagines the "lives fucked over by history" primarily through its police protagonists (as they question and reconcile "contradictions"). In framing the riot and Short's murder through a police officer, Ellroy must necessarily contend with the portrayal of institutional hierarchies and power relations of the period—his "concurrent fantasies" of cop and criminal collide against fictionalized representations of law enforcement's repressive functions.

Ellroy's representation of these forces and institutions, I argue, veers into social critique when he charts how Bucky and Lee reorient themselves to history's seismic events—these characters respond by reverting to their ascribed roles as L.A.P.D. officers. In other words, they come to an understanding of state violence and unequal social relations by thinking and feeling as police officers first and foremost. Their professional framework becomes their personal worldview. The introduction of secondary protagonist Lee Blanchard (Mr. Fire to Bucky's Ice, per the boxing promotions) is indictive of this pattern. Described by Bucky as "The Southland's good but not great white hope," Lee fights off three marines in pursuit of Tomas Dos Santos, "the subject of an all-points fugitive warrant for manslaughter committed during a Class B Felony" (7). Rather than intervene in the on-going violence consuming the city, Lee decides to roust a Latino felony suspect "because I knew there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about restoring order, and if I just stood around I might have gotten killed" (7). If patrolmen are going to risk

their lives in the line of duty, Lee rationalizes, it should be for a "reason"—namely the advancement of their careers by adding felony arrests and convictions to their records. As stand-ins for the "average people" of a historical novel, these two characters look to the logic of institutions (i.e., career promotions) to avoid dealing with the complicated questions raised by seeing servicemen and police officers engaging in acts of violence. Lee's personal motivations may be career-driven but they are institutionally supported, suggesting that police officers—as government agents acting in their capacity to enforce the law—have (perversely) logical reasons for pursuing felons instead of intervening in the violence against civilians.

The point takes on a pedagogical function when Lee—as the more experienced officer successfully socialized into the L.A.P.D.'s institutional culture— sizes up Bucky and tries to pass down the rules of the game. Pitted as two boxing rivals (Mr. Fire and Mr. Ice), Ellroy's description of their first meeting stresses male bonding, even with a "criminal" as they wait out the conflict by breaking into an unoccupied house to spend the night. All three share a drink and Lee predicts their respective fates: Dos Santos will be his "ninth hard felon for 1943" who will be "sucking gas inside of six weeks, and I'll be working Northeast or Central Warrants inside of three years" (8). As the older, ingratiated mentor-officer, Lee shares advice on how to become successful in their profession: follow orders and catch felons while ignoring any questions of justice or equity. Ellroy captures Pepper's tension early on in the novel: the state is depicted as necessary for maintaining societal order (quelling the riots) while simultaneously reproducing social inequalities ("Manslaughter Two's a gas chamber jolt for spics"). This tension, however, is rendered visible when it trickles down into the decision-making and dilemmas of the characters. Lee, for example, demonstrates an awareness of this tension when observing the unjust and excessively harsh application of the death penalty for the crime of *purse snatching*. He even

comments on the racial connotations of this injustice. But as a seasoned police officer of the L.A.P.D., he resolves this tension by accepting his role as an enforcer of the state. In the novel, authority figures in the military and law enforcement have clear incentives to carry out the state's repressive functions, which the novel then dramatizes through the ebbs and flows of Bucky's failures and successes as a police officer.[4]

By turning to historical crime fiction, Ellroy uses this unsolved homicide to examine the roles that individuals play in institutions and systems—the private lives that are affected by and in turn affect social processes. The prologue provides a sense of the sort of institutional dilemmas that Bucky will face throughout the novel, as he grapples with the consequences of his actions as a state actor throughout various stages of his career. But the novel's potency, I claim, derives from its ability to examine the repressive and hidden violence of L.A.'s development (which Ellroy posits as inextricable from Short's murder). Through Bucky's narrative, Ellroy shows how policing is imbricated through multiple facets of life, using 1940s Los Angeles as the temporally and spatially specific site for this depiction. Rather than a series of tangents, Bucky's interactions as a police officer—his side-investigations into the murder—explore the social dimensions of the city itself. By focusing my textual analysis on the scenes around Short's investigation, I try to foreground the elements that develop Ellroy's critique of authority—which is at its most visible when detailing the power relations within the city and the L.A.P.D.'s institutional hierarchies. In the following pages, I examine how policing inflects the various interactions and encounters in the novel to support my hypothesis: Ellroy's novel critiques the

[4] The L.A. city council's proposed ordinance against the wearing of zoot suits—rather than any disciplinary action against either the military or the police— provides further evidence of Ellroy's engagement with this unequal enforcement of state power since he mentions this proposal in the novel.

culture of militarized policing and misogyny that surrounded (and potentially hampered) the investigation of Short's murder.

"Bad White Men Doing Bad Things in the Name of Authority:" Bucky as Police Protagonist

Like most crime novels, detection is the organizing principle of *The Black Dahlia.* Detection poses questions to the reader and structures the novel's narrative around the investigation, which privileges process over resolution and closure. Protagonists assume the role of detective as they make observations and attempt to answer two key questions: who is responsible and why? Writing about Raymond Chandler's novels, Fredric Jameson remarks that readers are able to see and know society through the detective figure, who "fulfills the demands of the function of knowledge rather than that of lived experience" (7). In other words, the inquisitive protagonists of crime fiction appeal to readers because the genre fails to offer "any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped" (Jameson 7). But Ellroy fulfills both functions in this novel: we know *and* experience the world through the psychological interiority of Bucky Bleichert, the divided and tormented L.A.P.D. protagonist. This approach reflects a trend in crime fiction that moves away from the private detectives of Chandler's fiction and towards the inner lives of police officers. Ellroy comments on this shift when dismissing Chandler's "man of honor" (987) as insufficiently interesting:

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

From private eyes to glorified henchmen, these protagonists ("the unsung legbreakers of history") turn from social observers into state actors accompanied by institutional resources and emotional baggage (Duncan 85). Ellroy's police protagonists adhere to the L.A.P.D.'s official and unofficial orders or risk the consequences. Bucky accepts this imperative to chase felony suspects and maintain the status quo until Short's investigation puts him at odds with powerful interests—e.g., career-minded politicians, crooked cops and an established, connected L.A. family (the Spragues). Ellroy's protagonists, as the author himself so aptly puts it, are "bad white men doing bad things"—but virtually always "in the name of authority" under orders from higher-ups and superiors (Wroe).

This political dynamic is established early on, when Bucky and Lee are recruited into a public relations boxing match to increase the L.A.P.D.'s coffers and raise officer pay. In a City Hall meeting with Lee, Thad Green (Chief of Detectives), and Deputy District Attorney Ellis Loew, Bucky reads off an early draft of a planted *L.A. Times* editorial: voters will decide on a bond proposal to fund an 8% pay rise in an off-year election. Manufactured interviews have been provided for Lee and Bucky, who purportedly quit their promising boxing careers to "serve the community" and "fight more dangerous opponents like criminals and communists" ("It's subtle," Bucky remarks) (19). The chief provides a revealing explanation for the proposal's uncertain future: "we were shorthanded during the war, and some of the men we hired to remedy that turned out to be rotten apples and made us look bad" (19). Implicitly, these authority figures suggest that events like the Zoot Suit riots were the result of inadequate oversight, not systemic discrimination or historical grievances. The proposal can pass, Loew mentions, because "wholesome white boxers are a big draw" that can impress voters and enhance the department's image (20). By participating in a public relations scheme, Bucky courts favors with superiors in

exchange for personal gain since he's immediately promoted to Central Warrants after the proposal passes (a plainclothes job with added class connotations). In this encounter—and throughout the novel—Ellroy's police protagonists face institutional dilemmas with broader social consequences rather than simply resolving mysteries and catching criminals.

These institutional dilemmas and decision-making also play out on an individual and psychological level. Ellroy initially shows this process when describing Bucky and Lee's routine as rising detectives in the L.A.P.D.'s ranks. Under "Lee's tutelage," Bucky learns "what police work really was" as they operate under "Ellis Loew's direct orders, the felony sheet, and squadroom scuttlebutt" to apprehend "hard felons, traffic warrantees, suspicious loiterers, and parole absconders" (56). They employ coercive measures, or go "strong-arm," Bucky says, when "it was the only way to grab results" (56). In this portrayal of procedural, routine police work, Ellroy's describes the psychological pressure that affects their conduct:

> The partnership wasn't perfect. When we worked twenty-four-hour tours, Lee would shake down hopheads for Benzedrine tablets and swallow handfuls to stay alert; then every Negro roustee became "Sambo," every white man "Shitbird," every Mexican "Pancho." All his rawness came out, destroying his considerable finesse, and twice I had to hold him back for real when he got carried away with his black-hat role (56-57)

When their institutional responsibilities demand too much physically and mentally, Bucky and Lee resort to prejudice and substance abuse—they become the "bad cop, black-hat" roles that they adopt to intimidate regular characters. In one possible reading, Ellroy drums up a sympathetic portrayal of police officers driven to the edge by occupational hazards. Police work, at least in Ellroy's fiction, makes drastic demands of the human psyche because of their on-the-ground role in the larger complexity of an increasingly bureaucratic approach to social control

(which still requires physical, urban enforcers). [5] While institutional violence undoubtedly falls on the most marginalized and overpoliced in 1940s L.A., it also damages and affects those most responsible for this violence (involuntarily showing the boomerang effect of police violence). These protagonists think professionally and suffer emotionally (Nestingen 301).

In crime fiction (and police novels especially), the protagonist is the contact point between the abstracted state and the fictional population. Bucky and his fellow officers are the embodiment of state power, which determines their interactions with other characters in the novel. As police protagonists, Messent notes, they "are part of the system of law and *officially subject to its disciplines*, but with access to the resources and authority of the profession…that the private eye lacks" (41). In exchange for the resources and authority of the L.A.P.D., these characters also assume the role of state actors, charged with mandates to police and maintain order in addition to investigating crimes. Just as detection structures the narrative, so too does the imperative to exert and enforce the law throughout the novel. Through Bucky, as a police protagonist, readers encounter the "institutional and systemic context" (Messent 43) of crime fiction—including its depiction of law enforcement as part of a larger "state apparatus" within society (Winston and Mellerski 2). In the novel, these responsibilities—to investigate while enforcing state power—create a dramatic tension that Ellroy explores through various conflicts of interest between interdepartmental factions that this new detective figure turned police officer

[5] Winston and Mellerski argue that the focus on procedural police work reflects "the technological penetration of increase bureaucratic complexity of post-industrial society" that "operates by proposing *a squad of individualized detective*s, each possessing certain crucial skills which enable them to work collectively to investigate the same systemic evil that the hard-boiled detective nostalgically confronted alone" (6; emphasis added). In that case, crime narratives like *The Black Dahlia* take a special interest in the relationship between the everyday operations of police work, dramatizing not just the investigation but their role within law enforcement departments. Ellroy demonstrates an awareness of this hierarchically organized institutions when describing why, for example, an occupation within central warrants would seem distinct (and even preferable) to a patrolman's beat. Police procedurals, then, create drama from the complex compartmentalization that occurs within law enforcement institutions, a reflection of the increasing postwar professionalization of American police departments.

must manage, navigate, and negotiate in the course of their career. As Bucky puts, an officer's sense of "squadroom politics" must always take over (132).

This tension is evident in the novel's depiction of police interrogations, which attempt to examine leads in the Dahlia case as well as exert forms of social control against the undesirable, underclasses of the novel. We can see this dynamic at work when Bucky and Fritz Vogel (an overtly corrupt police officer) are tasked by Ellis Loew with interrogating confessors to Short's murder. None are viable suspects but the Deputy DA requires them to perform a "muscle job" with "appropriate props" to ensure their docility (188). The investigation coincides with an opportunity to maintain social control through quasi-sanctioned police violence against a perceived criminal class. "I skimmed the rap sheets," Bucky says, "hoping for facts that would make me hate the four enough to get me through the night and back to warrants" (190). As a police officer, Bucky must force himself to view these characters as criminals deserving of extrajudicial torture for the good of his career and to meet expectations from his superiors. As they make the confessors stand on chairs, dangling from meat hooks (note the imagery as disposable cargo), Vogel encourages Bucky to see them as less than human. "Don't be timid," he says while beating them, "[t]hat bird made little boys suck his hog" (191). Bucky only pulls the fire alarm to end the interrogation once Vogel wheels out a naked female corpse made up to resemble the Black Dahlia in a climatic, theatrical moment.

While the violence takes outside the official boundaries of police work, Ellroy alludes to institutional nature of this episode—Bucky and Vogel are ordered to brutalize characters (coded solely as criminals) at the behest of a politically connected figure. Bucky's emotionally overwhelmed response becomes "the costliest act" of his life: he is demoted from a plainclothes

assignment back into uniform and a patrol beat[6] (194). Failure to properly perform the unspoken rules of policing results in punishment, even if the orders fall outside the scope of sanctioned state violence. Ellroy's description of the aftermath supports this interpretation. "It was the word of a five-year officer," Bucky says, "versus a twenty-two-year man and the city's future District Attorney" supported by corroborating witnesses: the "two radio car officers" on scene who are promoted to the Central Division Warrants team, "a piece of serendipity guaranteed to keep them quiet and happy" (194). In Ellroy's reimagining, this incident and its subsequent cover-up reveals the sort of repressive and unequal environment that characterizes the investigation of Short's murder (and suggests real-life parallels and an institutional failure on behalf of the department).

The novel further develops this systemic critique of institutional violence by including Bucky's attempt to rejoin the detective bureau after his setbacks. For going against the department and reporting Fritz Vogel's obstruction in the Dahlia investigation, Bucky is relegated to a corner's assistant. Eager to become "a real cop" again, Bucky writes, he is reassigned to a uniformed division as a "training ground" (251). Describing his Newton Street assignment as a "war zone," Bucky's words demonstrate how policing inflects both place and people in the novel:

> Newton Street Division was southeast of downtown L.A., 95 precent slums, 95 percent Negroes, all trouble. There were bottle gangs and crap games on every corner; liquor stores, hair-straightening parlors and poolrooms on every block, code three calls to the station twenty-hours a day. Footbeat hacks carried metal-studded saps; squadroom dicks

[6] Bucky's description of his duties provides additional information Ellroy's depiction of policing norms: "The unspoken rule down there [Skid Row] was that foot beat hacks worked strong-arm…. It was attrition duty, and the only officers good at it were the transplanted Okie shitkickers hired in the manpower shortage during the war" (196).

> packed .45 automatics loaded with un-regulation dum-dums…I reported for duty after twenty-two hours of sack time, booze-weaned off the Benzies (251)

A community of color is defined first by its demographics, then the conclusive "all trouble" modifier. The neighborhood exists primarily as a division for the L.A.P.D. to patrol and establish a presence in—a duty supplemented by a militarized mentality that Bucky adopts alongside his fellow officers. To advance back to his former position and prestige, Bucky has to gather information on the "*real* bad guys" (felony suspects) to "kosherize" himself to the department (252). He intimidates substance abusers ("grasshoppers" and "winos") with trumped-up charges, selectively exerting power as a transaction in his official capacity as a representative of the state. All of this labor, the text suggests, is undertaken for the sake of other officers (and civilians) as a performance of policing—to prove his masculinity and self-worth. Bucky makes this observation when he provokes various suspects (all black men) into resisting arrest. Employing force (including a "Lee Blanchard boxing move" to emphasize the homosocial connotations) to "roust up" these "felons," a crowd of "bluesuits" and onlookers turn into "an audience" according to Bucky's narration (252-253). After a successful performance and subsequent arrest, a police sergeant yells out "Bleichert, you're an honorary white man!" leading Bucky to remark "I knew I was kosherized" (253). In these moments, the novel depicts a cultural and social attitude that rewards these acts of police brutality and violence, all of which contain the gendered and racial dynamics of profoundly unequal power relations. Textual moments like these are not represented as isolated incidents but the outcome of social processes: specifically militarized policing, racial hierarchies, and gender violence within the novel.

Shortly after, Bucky turns into a different type of police protagonist who resolves the investigation only by *breaking* with the official channels to pursue his own leads. In police

novels where narratives "move towards an exposure of the injustices and failures of the official machinery of law and order," Horsley argues, the individual investigator retains a degree of autonomy *within* bureaucratic state control, not outside of it (101-102). For Ellroy's protagonist to solve the case, Bucky requires the access and resources that police authority provides as he independently moves towards solving the case. Both a member of the L.A.P.D. and outside of it, Bucky stands as a "mediating figure between the authority of the law (and the social order it upholds) and an emphasis on an individual or alternative sense of moral responsibility" (Messent 46). In other words, Bucky's personal sense of justice and responsibility to apprehend Short's murderer drives the novel's plot while revealing professional barriers and obstacles to the investigation's success within its narrative. One such interaction occurs towards the end of the novel, when Bucky reinterviews Buzz Meeks, the head of security at Hughes Aircraft and "unofficial liaison" to the Hollywood studios (and former law enforcement):

> "I have a few questions about an old case you helped Homicide out with."
>
> "I see. You're with the Bureau, then?"
>
> "Newton Patrol."
>
> Meeks sat down behind his desk. "A little out of your bailiwick, aren't you? And my secretary said you were a detective."
>
> I closed the door and leaned against it. "This is personal with me."
>
> "Then you'll top out your twenty rousting nigger piss bums. Or hasn't anyone told you that cops who take things personal end up from hunger?"
>
> "They keep telling me, and I keep telling them that's my hometown. You fuck a lot of starlets, Meeks?" (274)

In this exchange, Bucky steps out of his prescribed role. After admitting to only being a patrol officer, Buzz becomes hostile because Bucky lacks authority with the right departmental agency (the Homicide squad). This scene demonstrates the conflict and tensions that arise from Bucky's failure to observe unwritten norms and customs, leading to threats of violence that are heavily racialized in Ellroy's dialogue. Bucky, as usual, only attains answers through a violent display of masculinity, threating him a silenced .45 as he mentally runs "pictures of Betty hooted at, propositioned" and "kicked out to die" (276). Contemplating beating Buzz (for burying information at Loew's behest), Bucky writes "I loathed him too much to give him *the satisfaction of punishment* and left with his price tag hanging in the air" (276; emphasis added). Bucky's narration here links pain and masculinity to each other, as well as weakness of character with bribery and corruption.

Bucky, like virtually all of Ellroy's police protagonists, blurs the boundary between legality and criminality in the novel (Spinks 134-135). As a police officer in 1940's L.A., he is routinely expected to commit normative acts of violence and repression in the name of authority. The textual moments I have included here (Vogel's interrogation, the Zoot Suit riots, Bucky's tour of duty in communities of color) clarify Ellroy's approach to historical crime fiction: the violence is systemic and institutional, not simply a question of individual actors behaving erratically. By striving to depict the lives of police officers at the time, Ellroy—consciously or not—creates room for critique of the dynamics, cultural processes, and social relations present in postwar Los Angeles and its carceral institutions. Using Ellroy's L.A. Quartet as an example, Messent writes that in some police novels "the sense of social malaise, of crisis, and large-scale social dysfunction, is so strong that the normal binaries structure the genre—good and evil, law and criminality, the civilized and the savage—collapse in on themselves completely" (47). *The*

Black Dahlia's depiction of policing—as an obstacle to Short's investigation—sustains this sense of dysfunction and crisis throughout, specifically through Bucky as a police protagonist reckoning with his role in all this.

Ch. III: Look for the Woman: Performance and Possession

In this chapter, I examine the novel's psychological treatment of policing as an inherently *gendered* act. These two elements of the text—the interiority of police officers and the gendered social relations between characters—are inseparable and interconnected with other forms of identity and power. But I analytically differentiate between them to focus on the representation of gender in the novel, while bracketing its other salient features of race and class. In the fictional depiction of Elizabeth Short's murder, gender is centered alongside Ellroy's treatment of traumatized and emotionally conflicted police officers. Ellroy reinforces this connection when he notes the "great themes" of his work: "the lives of police officers and bad men in love with strong women" ("Conversation with Joesph Wambaugh"). Building off my previous claim that police protagonists (and their inner lives) form part of an institutional logic of repression, I argue that this logic is necessarily constructed along gendered lines. In the novel, policing and gender are deeply intertwined to show the various threads of systemic violence and oppression that Short's death symbolizes—but only as the most extreme and gruesome instance of a larger social process. Ellroy's depiction of a violent culture of misogyny both inflects *and* implicates the hypermasculine culture of policing in L.A.'s postwar period.

To situate my analysis of Elizabeth Short as a literary construction within Ellroy's novel, providing some context about the social construction of gender can help clarify my use of "systemic violence" and "social processes." A system is the collective organization of individuals into social groups; it has no existence outside of real, historically situated people. But it perpetuates itself through human labor and social reproduction—through practices, norms, symbols, and the allocation of material resources. All individuals are part of a socio-historical context, part of groups that are granted or deprived of privilege based on membership to various

social formations (e.g., race, class, gender, only to name a few of the most pertinent axes of identity). Violence, then, becomes *systemic* when it turns into a social practice legitimized by one group against another. It is systemic "because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group…the oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity" (Young 58). Elizabeth Short's murder is an act of spectacular violence but it is *not* an aberration when we consider the ongoing historical processes of gendered discrimination and oppression.

The novel demonstrates an awareness of this systemic marginalization of women, which opens up the possibility of understanding how social relations between different characters are realized through literature. Along with pastness and policing, gender's performativity is revealed and highlighted in the novel. Judith Butler's foundational work on this notion provides an important reference point for the novel's representation of gender, which remains the primary focus in this chapter. Gender, we should note, is one way of turning differences between bodies into rigid, binary distinctions (man/woman) that are then essentialized and stratified into a social hierarchy that produces widespread oppression.[7] The resulting oppression is material and symbolic: resources are denied to people on the basis of their successful assimilation of gender. Success, in this sense, is defined as an effective, conforming performance of norms and practices that line up with one's assigned sex. As Butler observes, "the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through *discursive routes*: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands at once" (199; emphasis added). In other words, gender is materially

[7] For an excellent primer on the social construction of gender, see Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*.

produced through discursive and symbolic acts—and it is stabilized through repeated performances of masculinity and femininity. Literature reflects and actively participates in the construction of gender norms and practices.

Since gender is a social construction built through repetitive acts that consolidate and stabilize an identity as natural and immutable, how are these gendered relations constructed among characters in the novel? My argument is that gender is performed in two ways: through the gender inflected performance of policing and the policing of gender norms. In other words, policing is framed as a masculine endeavor that tests and produces masculinity through overt displays of violence, conflating both one's actions as a state actor and subject of heteronormative masculinity. But this is also a male logic of possession which seeks to flatten—and possess—female characters into objects of desire and motivation. Reflecting a patriarchal postwar society, the roles are clearly demarcated: femininity is passive and masculinity is active, a dynamic reflected in the novel by Bucky's longing for women, especially Elizabeth Short. As character motivation for the protagonist, Short represents an unattainable object of desire to alleviate Bucky's inner (policing induced) turmoil. This literary construction of "The Black Dahlia"—as a meditated presence and textual substitute—allows Ellroy to both explore the psychology of his main characters and demonstrate how an individual obsession is structured by systemic violence against women in postwar Los Angeles

A later textual moment clarifies this connection between policing and gender. When Bucky commits acts of violence and then seeks support from women (Kay and Madeleine), the character is externally performing masculinity as a police officer and then controlling the gendered expression of others. Women like Kay and Madeleine respond to Bucky's turmoil, and the novel constructs this comfort-seeking behavior as a gendered social relation whereby

femininity is defined by its ability to ameliorate the consequences of male violence. For example, during a quiet week as a patrol officer (when he hasn't made a single arrest), Bucky brutalizes a homeless man in front of a "gaggle of trampy-looking girls" at a drive-in diner (254). Unlike other incidents where the performative violence is enacted for both on-lookers and police officers, this moment emphasizes Bucky's trauma as a result of his profession—its occupational hazard—and shapes his view of women as objects of desire. He "eyes" the "peroxide blondes," thinking about processing their names for outstanding warrants for a "shakedown" out of sheer boredom. His thought—and fantasying—is interrupted by the presence of a "spectral wino" talking to the "bottle blondes," who flips Bucky off after getting flashed by the patrol car's headlights. The narration links the subsequent beating with Bucky's other experiences of violence in the novel: "Sirens in my head, the smell of rotting meat at the warehouse, even though I knew it couldn't be. The old geez blubbering, 'Pleese.'" (255). After brutalizing him, Bucky throws him his paycheck and tries to call his wife, just as he did after the interrogation at the warehouse. When he can't contact her, he rushes off to Madeleine Sprague, a former lover and person of interest in the homicide investigation who also resembles Elizabeth Short. "No. Not yet. It's all I have to keep you with" she says when Bucky reaches for her (255). Her gesture acknowledges that his attraction stems from her resemblance to Short, signifying the takeover of Bucky's Black Dahlia obsession into both his professional and personal life.

But this scene also illustrates the gender dynamics between characters, specifically the complimentary construction of masculinity and femininity as active and passive, respectively. This encounter between Bucky and the "spectral wino" forms part of a larger pattern: he erupts into spontaneous acts of violence, expresses shock and regret over the brutality of his actions, and seeks comfort through one of the novel's women characters. Throughout the narrative,

Bucky's contends with emotional turmoil through overt displays of violence that are then diffused in gendered interactions. "You're just frightened of anything," Kay tells him, "that doesn't involve fighting and cops and guns and all that" (155). His narration stresses gender further: he *lets* himself be held by her, knowing "she'd nailed me clean" (155). Bucky expresses emotional vulnerability only through these interactions, which are visibly heteronormative and gendered. But when he pummels this "spectral wino" (the label emphasizes the motif of ghosts, people existing as mediated presences), Bucky repeats this pattern with Madeleine, someone who derives a sense of power and agency from her resemblance to Elizabeth Short. "For a month she held me in a tight velvet fist," he says (259). Madeleine assumes a "Dahlia act as a *strategy*" to get Bucky back, which he describes as a "reunion of avowed tramps" made possible through a "Dahlia seduction" (259; emphasis added). A character like Madeleine exerts influence over this male protagonist because power is symbolically invested in the image of women as objects of desire and attraction. Short exists as a textual substitute for the characters—but always along gendered lines:

> Madeline spoke of her utter malleability, Betty the chameleon who would be anyone to please anybody. I had her down as the center of the most baffling piece of detective work the Department had ever seen, the disrupter of most of the lives close to me, the human riddle I had to know *everything* about. That was my final perspective, and it felt bone shallow (260)

Short's textual malleability is possible only through passivity. As someone discursively defined solely by the event of her death, Ellroy suggests that Short is knowable and accessible only through fragmented and incomplete accounts of her life—all leading up to her discovery as a deceased corpse. Through the investigation of her murder and the tangential encounters

surrounding it, Ellroy must narratively make sense of the motivations underlying her gruesome death. These motivations, I argue, posit gendered, systemic violence as the reason behind both the fascination surrounding her case *and* the motive for her murder. In the novel, women's bodies and lives are controlled by male expectations. And the men must self-police their behavior along the same expectations, especially in their roles as officers of the L.A.P.D. This gender dynamic creates the space for Ellroy's analysis of postwar American society, which depicts masculinity as hegemonic and oppositional, relying on domination and state-sanctioned violence that characters must navigate in accordance to various aspects of their identity (i.e., along racial, gendered, classed line).

Gender is the primary inflection point of the novel, present from Bucky and Lee's first meeting as rival boxers to the narrative's revelation of Short's killer and her motivations. All of the characters must negotiate, perform, and construct an identity in accordance with—or in opposition to—traditional notions of gender roles. They are subordinated to a heteronormativity, whose depiction is necessarily part of the novel's sustained engagement with historically contingent social forces—misogyny in this case. These representations of gender, however, consistently portray the everyday, systemic exploitation and oppression of women at the hands of institutions (e.g., Hollywood and law enforcement). As one victim among many, Short is the entry point into a larger culture of repression and routine violence.

As "The Black Dahlia," Elizabeth Short is at the center of the representation of gender and sexuality in the novel but primarily as a mediated presence for characters to investigate and *interpret*. The plot, Joshua Meyer writes, is "as much a 'who was she' as a 'whodunit' and it is clear that we are not engaged solely with the criminal fable, but also the fable of identity" (10). Her identity, however, is defined through her status as a white female murder victim and the

image of her dismembered body. Bucky makes this clear when describing the "the girl's face" as the "worst of the worst:" it resembles "one huge purpled bruise, the nose crushed deep into the facial cavity, the mouth cut ear to ear into *a smile that leered up at you*, somehow mocking the rest of the brutality inflicted" (69; emphasis added).

The narration directly addresses the reader in the second-person and highlights the significance of her facial wound. According to Josh Cohen, the "grotesque leer" of her mouth transforms her into a "taunting distortion," a "smiling female object" of male fantasy. Stripped naked and cut in half, she is reduced to her anatomy—a corpse that "potentially enacts 'the graphic fragmentation' of the feminine wrought by postmodernity's allegorical crisis of seeing" (5). In other words, Ellroy uses Short's death as a concrete metaphor for male chauvinism and gendered violence, in addition to the unknowable and fragmented nature of identity that a postmodern orientation might suggest (Powell, "Demon Dog" 104). Katherine Farrimond similarly argues that the image of Short's mutilated body holds "a specifically visual power as a marker of misogynistic brutality" that gestures towards a "deeper critique of sexual violence" (44). Through Bucky's investigation, Short's murder becomes the most extreme case of the everyday misogyny and sexual violence that pervade the events of the novel.

If the novel explores this historical crime as a metaphor for the systemic nature of gendered violence in postwar America, Ellroy develops this metaphor through the interpretations of Short by other characters. The most pertinent example involves the attribution of the name "The Black Dahlia," which lends a noir sensibility to the notoriety of the case (and its enduring curiosity). While the actual circumstances surrounding the moniker are disputable, the novel suggests the possibility of ulterior motives in pursuit of attention-grabbing newspaper headlines. "We can thank Bevo Means for all this 'Black Dahlia stuff,'" one of the detectives says, referring

to the real-life reporter for *the Los Angeles Herald-Express* (94). Because a hotel clerk mentioned that Short wore tight black dresses, "Bevo thought of that movie with Alan Ladd, *The Blue Dahlia* and took it from there" (94) By associating Elizabeth Short with film noir (and one written by Raymond Chandler no less), the moniker provides a cinematic point of reference to make sense of her life and its inevitable conclusion—the tragic demise of a femme fatale. But within the larger representation of gender in the novel, this labelling exemplifies the symbolic, misogynistic violence enacted against Short in addition to her physical torture and death. Her narrative is exploited by newspaper reporters and detectives who render her into a failed Hollywood starlet. Her life is made intelligible through the same misogynistic narratives that call to mind Jack Webb: the victim is responsible for her own death because she stepped outside the bounds of permissible, socially acceptable courtship (i.e., dressing in black and hanging out in bars by herself). For the characters of the novel, she is either a noir seductress or a fallen woman. In either case, men fix the meaning of her life *for her*.

Bucky's obsession with Short, for example, as a fallen woman becomes possible through this mediated gaze. The internal narration shows how Bucky—as a heteronormative, white, police officer—views women:

> I eyeballed the street while I sat and listened, trawling for white hookers, telling myself that if I saw any who looked like Betty Short, I'd warn them that 39th and Norton was only a few miles away and urge them to be careful.
>
> But most of the whores were jigs and bleached blondes, not worth warning and only worth busting when my arrest quota was running low. *They were women, though, safe places to let my mind dawdle*, safe substitutes for my wife at home alone and Madeline crawling 8th Street gutters (254; emphasis added).

Women's bodies are safe sites of desire but only if they fit Short's class-inflected and racially coded mold. In this passage, white sex workers are the only respectable women worthy of avoiding the Dahlia's fate since they resemble her image the most. Women of color, or even "bleached blondes," fail to register except as objects of desire or criminalized subjects to increase Bucky's arrest numbers. Elizabeth Short, as "The Black Dahlia," represents an ideologically safe sort of victim. The text develops this idea further when Bucky's canvassing reports in Leimert Park repeat the same talking point: Short was "a glamorous siren headed for Hollywood stardom" before being cut down by the underworld reality of LA (119)[8]. Much like the "criminals" described in the previous chapter, there are worthy and unworthy victims of the city's systemic violence.

When Bucky's obsession reaches a climax, it also reveals some of the power dynamics at work in the novel's representation of gender. After Kay catches Bucky cheating and throws him out of the house, Bucky runs off to a Hollywood Vice sanctioned lounge to pick up a sex worker (Lorraine) who can dress up and imitate the Dahlia for him. His desire and power are foregrounded throughout their encounter as she indulges this fantasy by putting on his "props" to resemble Short. When Bucky notices her obvious discomfort at his instructions and the police-issued gun and handcuffs, he expresses his arousal. "I got the urge to calm her down," he says, "by telling her I was a cop—then the look made her seem more like Betty, and I stopped" (263). The association with fear, death, and sexuality are further reinforced as Bucky pulls down the sheets covering all of "portrait-perfect Betty/Beth/Liz pictures," causing Lorraine to scream for

[8] Bucky conclusions from his field reports and canvasing emphasize this malleability further: "Pressing for facts, I got sincere fantasy—taken from the papers and radio when she was really down in Dago with Red Manley or somewhere getting tortured to death. *The longer I listened, the more they talked about themselves*, interweaving their sad tales with the story of the Black Dahlia…it was as if they would have traded their own lives for a juicy front-page death" (119; emphasis added). In death, characters exploit her memory, pointing to the novel's treatment of Short's a textual construction for all sorts of accounts and interpretations.

the police. While the moment does signify Bucky's disregard of the law and his descent into psychosexual obsession, their encounter is framed both through his desire *and* his status as a police officer. He tries to reassure her with his ID buzzer and LAPD badge—he is just looking for a sexual release from his safe substitutes. But for Lorraine, the character only sees gendered violence and the stark possibility of mutilation and death that never seems to occur to Bucky here (as the figure with all of the power). The scene highlights his inability to consider and realize his complicity in sexual violence, including his use of Short as a passive object of desire for him to project onto other women.

But while this encounter may focus on Bucky's desire, it forms part of the larger representation of sexual violence in the novel. Ellroy's inclusion of two peripheral characters in the investigation—Sally Stinson and Sheryl Saddon—develops this theme of gendered marginalization. Sally is a sex worker and associate of Short interviewed by Bucky and his partner because her name appears in Short's address book. Initially, Sally asks if they came by for shakedown money. "I put out for the Sheriff's more ways than one lately," she says, "so I'm tapped in the cash department. You want the other?" referring to sex in lieu of a bribe (204). This dialogue exchange reveals the transactional relationship between women's bodies and authority, which is virtually always *male* in the novel considering its depiction of police officers (as uniformly white men). The plot emphasizes this connection when Sally mentions being forced to sleep with Fritz and Johnny Vogel as part of a "father and son cop act" where's asked to play "Master and Slave" and "Cop and Whore" (208). "I proved I'm not no nancy boy," Johnny says about this experience, "Homos couldn't do what I did. I'm not cherry no more, so don't say nancy boy" (138). By accepting their requests and performing a "slave/whore" role for them, Sally performs a subservient version of femininity at the best of male authority figures. As

previously mentioned, Bucky makes a similar demand of Lorraine to subsume his fixation of Elizabeth Short, signaling a trend in the power relations between these characters and the roles (sex workers and police officers) they perform and inhabit.

Ellroy extends this observation about women's subordinated status in postwar America with a scene involving a background extra (Betty's roommate Sheryl) who attempts to find employment in Hollywood through B-movie productions. Waiting for an extra-truck to bring her to three days' worth of work on a low-level horror movie (*Curse of the Mummy's Tomb*), Bucky notes their apartment: "sloppily made-up bunk beds lined the walls" and "suitcases, valises, and stream trunks" spill out of open closes (97). The description gives readers a sense of the common situation that Short shared with other young women, highlighting their exploitation as transient workers both in the city and the Hollywood studio-system. The dialogue further draws this connection:

> I looked around the room, counted twelve bunk beds at a dollar a night apiece and thought of a landlord getting fat. I said, "Do you know what a casting couch is?"
>
> The mock Cleopatra's eyes burned. "Not me buster, not this girl *ever*."
>
> "Betty Short?"
>
> "Probably."
>
> I heard a horn honking, walked to the window and looked out. A flatbed truck with a dozen Cleopatra and pharaohs in the back was at the curb directly behind my car. I turned around to tell Sheryl, but she was already out the door." (99)

Taken together, these encounters with Sheryl and Sally depict a version of postwar Los Angeles where women are disposable and expendable. As a "3 Day Cleopatra" (Bucky's words), Sheryl is reduced to a marginal status within the larger studio system, just as Sally must navigate

protection money to the L.A. county's sheriff's department. While Ellroy seems most interested in exploring characters at the margins of the city (as opposed to historical personalities), the women of the novel are the ones who must frequently negotiate men's sexual desires and power. This imbalance, the novel suggests through its depiction of gender relations, is inseparable from the causes behind Short's death and its lasting legacy as an unsolved homicide. As Sally puts it, "Everybody who knew Liz remembers where they were then. You know, like when FDR died. You keep wishing you could go back, you know, and change it" (206). By comparing her death to the passing of America's longest serving president, Ellroy marks Short's death as a major event in the city's history. But through his fictionalization, as I have argued, Shorts murder reveals the widespread processes of misogynistic violence and police brutality of the larger postwar period.

If we interpret *The Black Dahlia* as a critique of postwar gender relations, then we must consider the novel's ending and its revelation of Elizabeth Short's killer—Ramona Cathcart, wife of Emmett Sprague and Madeleine's mother. Although Farrimond writes about De Palma's adaptation, her observation might also apply to Ellroy's source text. The narrative's proposed resolution, she argues, bypasses the plethora of male suspects in the real-life investigation and potentially "indicates that women are both directly and indirectly responsible for Short's death" (Farrimond 47). In the novel, Short is introduced to her killers Ramona and George Tilden (the family friend and gardener, a disfigured WWI veteran and Madeleine's biological father) because of Madeline's narcissistic desire to meet and seduce her doppelganger. "Sugar," she tells Bucky, "Betty and I made love once, that one time we met last summer, I just did it to see what it would be like to be with a girl who looked so much like me" (152). Similarly, behind Ramona's motivations (as she confesses to Bucky at the narrative's climax), are feelings of jealously and

hatred resulting from Short's resemblance to her daughter, which "felt like the cruelest of jokes was being played on her" (313).

But rather than displacing a brutal act of misogynistic violence onto women, Cohen offers a different interpretation of this narrative twist. Because of her position within the "economy of the family," he argues, Ramona has been forced to "internalize the crisis of her husband's masculinity" (5). As previously discussed, the women of the novel are always subject to male sexuality and social control. This patriarchal domination, the text shows, extends even to the financially well-off wife of an established, wealthy L.A. family, whose repression leads her to commit performative acts of violence against her husband through indirect means—against her husband's objects of desire. An earlier passage gestures to Ramona's burgeoning resentment:

> "When Emmett married me for my father's money, he promised my family that he would use his influence with the City Zoning Board to have a street named after me, since all his money was tied up in real estate and he couldn't afford to buy me a wedding ring. Father assumed it would be a nice residential street, but all Emmett could manage was a dead end block in a red light district in Lincoln Heights…Well, after Emmett succeeded in getting Rosalinda Street changed to Ramona Boulevard he took me for a little tour there. The prostitutes greeted him by name. Some even had anatomical nicknames for him. *It made me very sad and very hurt, but I bided my time and got even*" (131-132; emphasis added).

Within Ramona's description of her husband's class mobility and infidelities, the novel also suggests that her resentment stems from a symbolic act: her name is attached to a "red light district" in one of L.A.'s economically disenfranchised neighborhoods, not one of its many affluent suburbs. Violence's symbolic and performative nature is further dramatized by

Ramona's admission that she would stage little pageants to embarrass her husband by deriding his masculinity and occupation as a housing developer. Staging plays on their front lawn for the whole neighborhood to see, Ramona explains how she would enact episodes out of Emmet's past to get back at him: toy houses falling down to signify his "jerry-built shacks crashing in the '33 earthquake; children hiding under store mannequins dressed in ersatz German uniforms" to portray his cowardice during WWI (312). Ramona exerts power and agency through these performative acts of violence, which ultimately culminate in Short's death. She tortures, mutilates, and murders Short out of feelings of rage at her own subordinate status within patriarchal processes of gendered marginalization and oppression.

Ramona's confession to Bucky about her motivations demonstrates the complex nature of gendered power dynamics in the novel, since she embodies the dual roles of victim and victimizer. While she is subject to the same sort of marginalization and diminished agency as other women in the novel, Ramona's class status differentiates her in power and privilege as the daughter of a respected L.A. family and the wife of a profitable (if corrupt) real-estate developer. Her stated reasons for the murder—jealousy and feelings of inadequacy—are rooted in male-dominated logics of possession and perceived desirability. But her positionality as a *wealthy*, white woman allows her to act on this rage and move undetected and unsuspected by law enforcement, including Bucky until the final chapters. Her motivations are important in any analysis of the novel but incomplete without a recognition of her material means to carry out the crime in the first place. As a suburban housewife of a prosperous family, she has both the free-time and the money required for successful evasion, reflected in the novel's explanation of how she was able to torture Short for days in an abandoned row of shacks owned by her husband (conveniently located in the Hollywood Hills, adjacent to the namesake sign). For a character

like Ramona—a wealthy, white woman, the everyday misogyny depicted in the narrative is internalized along the logic of male desire and externalized through a similarly masculine inflection of violence, where the object of its misogyny remains the same—a young, vulnerable, white woman. While Ellroy may depart from the historical record through his choice of Short's killer (since most accounts posit a male suspect), this change shows the porousness and pervasiveness of postwar misogyny, which characters must always grapple with and navigate through their various axes of identity (like race and class, in the case of Ramona). In other words, the women of the novel have some measure of power in a patriarchally organized society. Because of her wealth, however, Ramona has privileges that others like Elizabeth Short lack on this basis of this class-determined difference.

Rather than indicating that "men have become the victims of women's desires" (47), the ending revelation suggests that Short's murder signifies the logical outcome of everyday misogyny—one that permeates into the subjectivity of the women of the novel as well. In explaining the decision to cut her mouth, Ramona mentions that she cut slashes her "ear to ear like Gwynplaine (reference to Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*) so Short wouldn't hate her after she was dead" (313). As one of the most distinctive features of Short's case, this visual marker also doubles as a potent metaphor for the novel's critique of the circumstances surrounding Short's investigation: both in life and death, she is subjected to the whims and desires of others. She is posthumously disfigured for the sake of one's conscience. Dumped in the lot, Ramona says, they "left Elizabeth Short there to become the Black Dahlia" (314). Through the actions of others, she's ascribed a label and a notoriety out of her control that relegates her to an object of desire, fascination, and curiosity. Among the representation of the rest of the characters, the novel suggests that Short's murder is unique only in the sheer level of

brutality and exploitation. But the processes that led up to it are systemic, violent, misogynistic, and pervasive. "*The Black Dahlia*," Farrimond writes, probes one disastrous incident that stands for the world that Elizabeth Short inhabited. As the first chapter in the LA Quartet, Ellroy "reshapes 'noir' into social history" that focuses on how "psycho-sexual obsession" and other forms of mental life and interiority shape the nature of public life (Pepper, "The Contemporary American Crime Novel" 26). The private nightmares of Bucky and the public spectacle of Short's mutilated corpse, I claim, are shown to be part of larger and systemic forces that are the prehistory of the present.

Conclusion: "I Asked Betty to Grant Me Safe Passage in Return for My Love"

Among popular and easily recognizable genres, crime fiction provides an area of inquiry (Nilsson et al. 2) and a narrative vector (Gulddal and King 15) for novelists and readers to contemplate macro-level questions about political, legal, economic, cultural, and social processes. Inextricable from the genre, these questions challenge power and authority in the most modest of ways—they show that forms of social life are intertwined with each other and subject to change simply because they are not immutable, transhistorical truths but reproduced through everyday action. All of these questions, however, are given tangible shape in Ellroy's fiction as he attempts to recreate the period by imagining the individual lives behind these larger social forces. In Bucky's case, his interiority—his sense of self that is then performed outward, externally for other characters—is conditioned, influenced, and shaped by his actions as a white, male, police officer in 1940s Los Angeles. This relationship between institutions and individuals, between the L.A.P.D. and Bucky Bleichert, opens up the possibility of critique because they exist in tension with each other. The novel's central conflict—Bucky's attempts to solve the murder while being derailed and sandbagged by his fellow officers and his superiors—depicts a major postwar, American city as a place of political corruption, racist state violence, sexual exploitation, and terminal dysfunction. In Ellroy's literary historiography, the crime novel "becomes the stage upon which the dialectic between the individual subject and collective history can most effectively be staged" (Comyn 35). In short, the social world of the novel—*its discursive, diegetic field*—is one of repression and unrelenting violence at the hands of authority and officials.

This approach to history follows a developing trend in American fiction that charts the consequences of empire-building projects. As a late twentieth century writer, Ellroy's novels

operate at the intersection of crime fiction and historical novel, suggesting a connection with the postwar past as a period marked by social stratification and state violence. His work fits within one of the most distinctive paradigms in American literature today: "society as conspiracy" (Anderson). There is no "ostentatious dictator," or criminal mastermind behind all of the violence and repression in *The Black Dahlia*—they are only social structures and systems of power. Explaining further, Perry Anderson remarks that today's historical fiction posits "the secret network as the hidden ossature of rule." In other words, social, political and economic structures are implicated by Ellroy in the murder of Elizabeth Short—not a single individual but *a network of power* that operates most visibly through police officers. The murders in the L.A. Quartet, Walker argues, "are always *symptoms*, expressive of and intimately connected to the wider culture, not just isolated causes mechanically driving a plot" (183; emphasis added). Within Ellroy's text itself, women are objects and commodities, valued chiefly for their sexuality, whether as production extras in Hollywood's revolving door of disposable labor or as exploited sexual workers working under the sanction (and extortion) of higher-ups in police departments. These same institutions of law and order (i.e., the L.A.P.D.) hold a real-life monopoly over the legitimate use of collective violence. But in Ellroy's historical crime novel, violence is consistently the first resort by its police characters as a means of repression and social control.

As a significant figure in a major literary genre, Ellroy's value as a novelist comes from his ability to recreate 1940s L.A. for readers across temporal and spatial contexts, acting as a cultural ambassador for the city. Within the genre, "cities like Bangkok, Beijing, Cairo, London, Los Angeles, Milan, or Stockholm become settings for exciting plots while at the same time *highlighting vernacular and national discourses* that, with the novels' translation, spread to a cosmopolitan audience for whom the works become ambassadors for their country of origin"

(Nilsson et al. 4-5). As local authors in a global, transnational genre, crime novelists formulate a social critique upon their native contexts by raising questions about "life and death, crime and punishment, conflicting values and moral systems" (Nilsson et al. 4). Invoking these questions is inherently a social critique because it posits alternative ways of thinking about ready-made narratives, including the L.A.P.D.'s trade-marked motto "to serve and protect." In the actual text itself, the critique arises from the ambiguity, from the tension between Bucky's moral center and the department's desire to benefit politically from the investigation (and then dropping it once the attention fades).

Responding to Mike Davis, if Ellroy's novels *feel* like the "actual moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era" this is because they *are* from the Reagan-Bush era (45). As cultural and literary artifacts, the novel creates and reflects assertions about national and local American culture (Haut 145). To portray the police in anything but a self-serving, flattering light is to view authority as socially constructed and historically contingent, which shows readers that these structures are not immutable or absolute. Literature, we can argue, frames forms of experiences and makes forms of subjectivity thinkable, possible, and imaginable for readers (Rancière). By dramatizing the conditions of postwar LA and the Black Dahlia case, Ellroy also must produce an account and *an analysis of the conditions* that make this depiction possible (Foucault 459). These conditions unequivocally center violence, repression, and patriarchal power structures at the heart of postwar America. Ellroy's importance comes from portraying L.A. as a city of nightmares where even the idea that there were bad white men doing bad things in the name of authority is an analyzable, evocative claim.

The novels themselves point towards the futility of reforming modern American policing within the system, suggesting that what Bucky sees and experiences is more than just the result

of a few bad cops on the take. The bleakness of Ellroy's fiction can do more than "fail to interest or outrage" from its "wordstorm of perversity and gore" that results in an "supersaturation of corruption" (Davis 42-43). On the contrary, we may read a different meaning from Ellroy's text that bridges Davis's observation: the corruption and violence are so pervasive and widespread that they suggest a systemic dysfunction in need of radical restructuring through a critique of root causes. The depiction of violence and corruption *suggests* this as a possible interpretation, but it is not a *given*, fixed, static meaning of the text. Nor does it automatically dissuade readers looking for an ideologically safe site to rehearse reactionary fantasies of hard-boiled police officers in the 1940s.

The end of the novel, however, shifts its focus from social forces to individual agency, indicating the possibility of redemption, hope, and *change* in an atmosphere of violence and repression. Bucky is kicked off the force as a sacrificial scapegoat for the department and flies to Boston for a potential reconciliation with Kay after learning of her pregnancy. But Bucky's departure from both the city and the department signifies the difficulties of reforming policing institutions—he solves the murder but is unable to achieve "justice" in the conventional sense of making an arrest and getting a conviction. Instead, there is only the suggestion that the truth behind the case *does* exist but is only approachable through fiction. Within the form of the historical crime novel, the narrative asserts that there is no stable, teleological version of history. In that case, the past can happen again because it is part of a social and historical context with underlying causes and processes that must be recognized as such. This is the enduring importance of Elizabeth Short that Ellroy depicts in the novel. When he remarks that "the dead claim the living and tell us how to live," he means Short's case offers lessons to readers, who must see the present as a socially constructed and historically contingent existence that is subject

to change. In depicting the circumstances leading up to Short's murder, Ellroy offers a more convincing interpretation of Short's all too brief life: "there is no human terror that the persistent application of love and devotional consciousness cannot transcend" ("Dead Women Own Me"). In *The Black Dahlia*, Ellroy offers an opportunity for readers to reflect on their own historicity. The dead speak to *us*, not vice-versa—and they tell us that the future is not yet written.

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