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The Hard-Boiled City

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The history of Los Angeles crime fiction gives us a curiously truncated story of the city's development. The beginnings are found in Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled pulp tales, published in magazines like *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* in the Depression era. These stories articulate a dark vision of a city already eighty years old, on the brink of its emergence as a fully-fledged megalopolis, caught somewhere between the ultra-modern and a savage frontier past. Chandler set the template for generations of subsequent Los Angeles crime writers in his depiction of a discontinuous urban landscape peopled by the lonely and the atomized; a map of solitudes navigable only by means of a distinctive historical juncture: White masculinity and the mass-produced automobile. His most accomplished successor, Ross Macdonald, kept the seductive widows, the psychopathic gangsters and the hard-boiled detective, but placed Los Angeles within a larger map of Southern California in the post-World War II era, traversed by a fast-developing regional highway system. The most striking feature of the history of Los Angeles crime fiction, however, is that the inheritors of the genre's legacy in the late-twentieth century effectively froze fictional time by retaining the earlier, mid-century historical settings that Chandler and MacDonald had counted as contemporary. Thus, James Ellroy's "L.A. Quartet" and Walter Mosley's "Easy Rawlins" series returned, in the 1980s and 1990s, to the Los Angeles of the late 1940s and 1950s. In the process, genre conventions were adapted. Ellroy discarded the private-eye in favor of a more expansive police-procedural plot, and Mosley transformed the White detective into a Black one, inverting the racial codes of the classic hard-boiled hero. Nevertheless, Los Angeles

crime writing never fully transcended its inaugural moment, returning compulsively to the mid-twentieth century.

What are the logics that determine this affinity between hard-boiled crime fiction and mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles? One of the clearest starting points is provided by Fredric Jameson's suggestion that Chandler's Los Angeles—even before World War II—"is already a kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centerless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographical compartment" (6-7). According to this view, the particular features of Los Angeles's development in this period made it a bellwether for American cities, ahead of the curve in terms of its horizontal organization, the entrenchment of social inequality, and the emergence of automobility as the dominant fact of American social life. If mystery fiction since Poe had always taken urban anonymity and social division as one of its principal concerns, then mid-century Los Angeles opened up new territories in which such thematic tropes might extend and ramify. The city also offered an opportunity for crime fiction to renew its claim to the vertiginous experience of riding at the prow of Modernity.

Yet Jameson's insight requires qualification, for it was not only Los Angeles's flight into the future that determined the flavor of its modernity, but also its relationship to the past. The city's expansion in the first half of the twentieth century, driven by oil, tourism, entertainment, and aviation, made it a case study in *accelerated* urban change.[1] Many of the new metropolis's inhabitants still remembered its character only a few decades before as a much slower and smaller city. Chandler's fictional private eye, Philip Marlowe, was one of them, reminiscing in *The Little Sister* (1949) about the early twentieth century, when trees lined Wilshire Boulevard and "people used to sleep out on porches" (357). Chandler had arrived in 1913, when the city's population hovered around 350,000. By the time he wrote *The Little Sister*, it was just shy of two million ("Historical General Population"). Hardboiled

fiction's claims on Modernity were tempered by its nostalgia for modes of social life captured in the process of fading into memory, obsolescence, and residuality.[2] Its backwards-oriented temporality, which measures the shocking impact of accelerated modernization on the cultural practices of the city, meant that mid-century Los Angeles became its ideal setting.

As the total population of the city and the surrounding counties changed during this period, so did its racial demography. The city of Los Angeles in the 1920s was markedly Anglo-Saxon, with over 90 percent of its population identifying as White (Starr, *Material Dreams* 120). In the mid-century period, and particularly in the decade after World War II, Black and Mexican immigration made LA increasingly multiracial, albeit with high levels of *de facto* segregation by neighborhood. South Central, where much of Mosley's "Easy Rawlins" fiction is set, remained mainly working-class White in the 1930s (Starr, *Dream Endures* 171). By 1940, Chandler has the opening to *Farewell, My Lovely* take place on "one of those mixed blocks over on Central Avenue" (*Stories and Early Novels* 767). Yet, by the time Easy sets himself up as a private eye in the late 1940s, Central Avenue was a recognizably Black community made up of migrants from Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia. Such changes ensured that the onset of Modernity in Los Angeles was observed and experienced in large part through a self-consciously racialized lens.

In the context of the period's dominant racial ideologies, these trends also led to the city's horizontal organization taking on a quasi-colonial character, with clearly demarcated zones policed by using strategies analogous to, or even directly influenced by, practices of colonial violence deployed elsewhere in the world. Los Angeles became an important site of what a generation of Black and Mexican-American intellectuals came to describe in the 1960s as "domestic" or "internal colonialism," whereby the ghettos and barrios of the US city were subjected to both planned underdevelopment and racialized discipline.[3] Thus William H. Parker, the LAPD's notorious chief between 1950 and 1966, compared policing the Watts

Rebellion in 1965 to "fighting the Viet Cong," with his field commander Darly Gates claiming that "the streets of America had become a foreign territory" (Felker-Kantor 29). In the hard-boiled imagination, correspondingly, the streets of Los Angeles, upon which the ethics, cunning, and physical resilience of the detective were tested by adventure, were always in some sense colonial spaces, marked either by racialized criminality or else by the aggressive absence of settlement altogether.[4] Once again, Chandler set the pattern: he described his own immigration to Los Angeles from London before World War One, "with a beautiful wardrobe, a public-school accent . . . and a contempt for the natives that has persisted, I am sorry to say, to the present day" (*Selected Letters* 236).

Chandler's Nowhere-Places

Chandler began writing for pulp detective magazines in 1933. As he readily acknowledged, his style owed much to Dashiell Hammett's pioneering hard-boiled stories, as well as to Ernest Hemingway, then at the peak of his reputation. His plots were densely tangled and often hard to follow, providing the source material for most of his best novels, from *The Big Sleep* (1939) to *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) and *The Lady in the Lake* (1943). It was the treatment of place and mobility that set them apart and established the blueprint that Chandler used to build his crime writing career. By this time, he had acquired an extensive knowledge of the topography of the Los Angeles region, conceived almost entirely in terms of its road network, which mapped directly onto plot sequencing.

Chandler had observed the development of the city during the previous decade, when he had worked in the Los Angeles oil business in its boom years, for the Dabney Oil Syndicate (MacShane 24-40). Though the downtown area retained its symbolic centrality, the centrifugal expansion of the city took the form of individual cell colonies, shopping centers,

and business districts deliberately placed along its arterial routes. New developments demanded transport infrastructure, but new or refurbished roads helped to raise the value of suburban real estate too. It was a winning combination. Los Angeles's principal western axis became Wilshire Boulevard, where A. W. Ross had built a new shopping center specifically aimed at motorists in the early 1920s, leading to a widening program that transformed the road into a major route out to Santa Monica and the ocean (Starr, *Material Dreams* 81). By 1927, Bruce Bliven was able to describe Los Angeles as "a completely motorized civilization" (97).

Chandler's detectives use Wilshire Boulevard often in their quests across the city, traversing the growing metropolis and navigating between its variously characterized colonies. These trips are punctuated with gunfights and brawls at each stop, as mandated by the pulp crime formula, but it is often the journeys themselves that occasion Chandler's most striking passages. His first story, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" (1933), begins in a swanky Hollywood club where the first brawl takes place, but soon hits the road as Mallory, the detective, is kidnapped by gangsters outside and bundled into a car. The automobile's arrival in the narrative creates an abrupt transition away from the action into an entirely different mode, one of brief enchantment by the urban nocturnal sublime: "The car went out into the sea of lights, rolled east a short way, then turned south down the long slope. The lights of the city were an endless glittering sheet. Neon signs glowed and flashed. The languid ray of a searchlight prodded about among high faint clouds" (*Stories* 13). This oscillation between rapt enchantment and brutal violence was to become one of the signatures of his style, as he moved away from the pulps to the more respectable publishing opportunities offered by Alfred A. Knopf, with whom he later published his novels.

Passing from this brief moment of aesthetic pleasure at the city's spectacle, the story takes us straight back into topographical detail, inviting his readers to plot Mallory's

bewildering journey with him. The detective is driven first to a sideroad near what was then a local landmark—“the oil well that stands in the middle of La Cienega Boulevard” (13)—before, changing cars, he is taken west on Wilshire through Beverly Hills to an anonymous shabby apartment house on a hill above Westwood Village, where the next episode of violence takes place. From there, and in different company, Mallory is driven to a wealthy home in Montrose and, after another fight, back towards the city through the San Fernando pass, where he pauses on a dirt road just off the highway. Then, Mallory drives back across the city, headed for a gunfight situated in a shack on the mesa by Baldwin Hills. Finally, as dawn nears, he circles back to the apartment in Westwood Village for another shoot-out. In twenty-odd pages, Mallory’s efforts to solve a blackmailing mystery have taken him over fifty miles by car around the city and its surroundings, affording him insights into both the anonymous homes of the criminal underclass and those of the wealthy men who sponsor them.

In the course of “Blackmailers Don’t Shoot,” Chandler animates those nowhere-places distinctive to Los Angeles in this phase of its development, those disorientating in-between locations lying within the general zone of urbanization but so far unclaimed by its development, or else already abandoned. These are the abject and empty spaces, accessible only by car, haunted by the ghosts of a wilderness that has been vanquished by a modernization yet not forgotten: the side-road off Cienega, fringed with palm trees, where Mallory’s captors park in the dark opposite a vacant lot, and watch the headlights streaming past the end of the street; the dirt road off the San Fernando pass where Mallory hears the screams of the train exiting the Newhall tunnel, ending in “dead brown grass with low bushes around it” (26), littered with tin cans and torn newspaper; and the lightless shack in the Baldwin Hills, the only house on one side of the street, behind which “the gaunt shapes of a couple of derricks groped towards the sky” (27). (This image anticipates the oil sump that

provides the source of General Sternwood's wealth in *The Big Sleep*, as well as the resting place of that novel's primary missing person). Such locations present the flip-side to the imagery of Los Angeles's turn-of-the-century booster narrative, as identified in Mike Davis's well known "sunshine or noir" dialectic (15-98), and are associated in Chandler's fiction not so much with criminality as such, but rather with death made legible in spatial form.

The *locus classicus* for these spaces in the pulp tales is the "stone house" in La Crescenta described in "Nevada Gas" (1934). Chandler's detective, Johnny De Ruse, ends up here on the trail of a psychopath who pumps cyanide into the sealed rear compartment of his car to kill his victims. The house, we learn, was partly destroyed in the recent New Year's Day floods of 1934 (a real historical event in the region), and now "stood back from the road, across a wide space which might once have been a lawn but which was now packed sand, small stones and a few large boulders." Inside, "the house didn't smell like a house. It smelled like out of doors. There was nothing in the front room but sand, a few pieces of smashed furniture, some marks on the walls, above the dark line of the flood water, where pictures had hung" (*Stories* 177-78). The stone house holds a secret, however, disclosed by the feet sticking out from underneath a water-stained mattress: one of the killer's poisoned victims. It stands as another of Chandler's nowhere-places, where the waste products of Modernity—from corpses to oil-polluted water and garbage—meet the overpowering destructive forces of the natural world and create a powerful new dystopian mythology for Los Angeles.

Macdonald, Automobility, and Urban Development

Like Chandler, Ross Macdonald was not born or raised in Los Angeles, having moved to Southern California from Canada in 1946 at the age of 31. Outsider status allowed both

writers a certain freedom and latitude in their imaginative recreations of the city through the hard-boiled lens. There can be little doubt that Macdonald drew heavily on the thematic and stylistic concerns of Chandler's fiction, including the mingling of natural imagery from Los Angeles's flora and topography with detail of the region's urbanization, which accelerated further in the post-World War II era in which Macdonald wrote. Macdonald's Lew Archer novels also take up tendencies visible in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and elsewhere, by which the investigation into the immediate mystery gradually morphs into an investigation of the myths and histories of extraction and development underpinning Southern Californian wealth and status, and driving the inexorable degradation of the natural environment. In one of his earliest Archer novels, *The Drowning Pool* (1950), the plot turns on the sale value of an old ranch estate up the coast from Los Angeles, where oil reserves lurk beneath the ground, and the potential for extraction threatens to turn a supposedly cultured portion of Californian colonial history into another hyper-developed oil-satellite of the city. In a later novel in the series, *The Underground Man* (1971), Archer investigates a corpse discovered buried on another ranch, this time on the edge of Santa Teresa (Macdonald's fictionalized name for Santa Barbara). The mystery takes him into the mythical colonial past of the ranch, constituted through a Mexican land grant in the nineteenth century, and eventually acquired by an American soldier after the Civil War, a kind of Californian cousin to Thomas Sutpen, the patriarch of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In the present of the novel, the paradise of the ranch is threatened from two directions, one apparently natural and the other, decisively man-made: on the one hand, a forest fire rages across the hills; on the other, the owner has sold off some of the ranch's natural forest to real-estate developers who have installed cheap housing for Mexican Americans.

Though Macdonald's fiction takes on a more extensively regional identity than Chandler's, ranging across Southern California, Los Angeles fulfills an anchoring spatial

function. Lew Archer's private eye agency is located there, as is his apartment. Macdonald's plots typically find Archer approached in the city and drawn out of it by his wealthy clients only to be sucked back in by the process of following leads related to organized crime, drop-outs, addicts, or drifters. In this sense, Los Angeles serves as the locus for alienating Modernity in the region, even while its tendrils—in the form of the highway system—reach out into the surrounding country.

In *The Drowning Pool*, Archer is led back to the city in search of Pat Reavis, the volatile chauffeur for the wealthy Slocum family and a suspect for the murder of its matriarch. Stopping at a lunch bar on Santa Monica Boulevard, he observes the "sidewalk roamers" as they pass: "the young hepcats high on music or weed, the middle-aged men on the town, the hopeful floozies and the despairing ones, the quick, light, ageless grifters" (94). Reavis himself lives in West Hollywood, in Macdonald's equivalent of one of Chandler's nowhere-places, "one of the little lost stucco-and-frame streets between the two big boulevards," with one side gutted by fire and the other marked by "small marginal houses . . . dark behind closed blinds" (95). His bungalow court "was a row of decaying shacks bent around a strip of withering grass. A worn gravel drive brought the world to their broken-down doorstep, if the world was interested" (96). The world is not. This space betokens both Reavis's character and the city itself, in its abjection. Archer's eventual destination that night, having been abducted and beaten, is Glendale, about which Macdonald is decidedly ungenerous. Here, the anonymous city is reduced to pure feeling. Archer notes, "I didn't know where I was, but I had the Glendale feeling: end of the line" (110). "Where have you been?" he is asked the next morning. "To hell and back. Glendale, that is" (122).

Los Angeles thus represents in Macdonald's fiction the cultural degradation that threatens to engulf the rest of Southern California, showing what might befall nearby towns and cities should their inhabitants fail to be vigilant enough to fend off oil extraction, cheap

housing, and minority communities. Narratives of cultural decline have always been central to hard-boiled fiction, but in Macdonald's work a deep, conservative pessimism about the inevitable fall into post-war Modernity saturates every novel. Nopal Valley, where the Slocum's ranch is situated, has been ruined by oil. As one motel owner complains, "Great hordes of low class people, Mexicans and dirty oil crews, came in from gosh knows where, and simply blighted the town" (13). Nearby Quinto, which seems to serve as a fictionalized Santa Barbara in *The Drowning Pool*, remains preciously genteel in its cultural pretensions, with amateur dramatics and its white Spanish buildings, which "seemed unreal, a stage-setting painted across the solid blue sky" (13). Macdonald draws here on his knowledge and experience of Santa Barbara, where he lived while he wrote the Archer stories. Santa Barbara in the early-twentieth century cultivated a self-image as the anti-Los Angeles, with a strong architectural preservation ethos and little theater movement modelled on Cape Cod's Provincetown (Starr, *Material Dreams* 285). Macdonald sends up Quinto's middle class and its amateur dramatics mercilessly, as pretentious and deluded in its narcissistic historical fantasies, "lost in a dream of its own loveliness" (21).

While the labyrinthine plots of Chandler's novels can be attributed in large part to his habit of stitching together pieces of his pulp tales to create longer narratives, Macdonald had no such excuse. For him, rather, plot complexity became less accidental than an end in itself. Self-consciously literary, fueled by Freudian family romance and echoes of Greek drama, his fiction entangles both his detective and his reader in private, involuted histories of sexual taboo, shame, and concealment that parallel and complicate those narrative strands dealing with the accumulation of wealth and class prestige. Yet, for all the psychological drama of the Lew Archer novels, their project of mapping the unconscious is enabled and articulated by the material infrastructure offered by California's highway system. This is particularly evident in those works composed in the 1960s and 70s after the passage of the 1956 Federal-

Aid Highway Act, which green-lighted a huge national road-building program.[5] In this sense, Macdonald's plot webs, taking us from Los Angeles to Santa Monica and Ventura, Las Vegas and Reno, San Franscisco and as far as Mexico, rehearse the formal complexity of postwar highway planning. Archer's own powers to navigate such spatial complexity (and, by extension, to excavate the buried secrets of the past), are determined entirely by his automobility. In a striking passage from *The Underground Man*, the two registers of Freudian psychoanalysis and postwar automobility are brought together explicitly in a description of a nightmare scenario that Archer dreams midway through a formidably knotted investigation: "In the dream that took over my sleeping mind I was due to arrive someplace in a very short time. But when I went out to my car it had no wheels, not even a steering wheel. I sat in it like a snail in a shell and watched the night world go by" (133).

Without wheels, the detective becomes simply a passive observer, doomed to watch the world but never to intervene.

Ellroy's Dark Places

James Ellroy's historical Los Angeles crime fiction, set primarily in the period of his childhood—the fifteen years between the end of World War II and the arrival of what became "the Sixties"—takes a number of the motifs we have observed in Chandler and Macdonald and puts them into overdrive. From its vantage point in the late-twentieth century, Ellroy's "L.A. Quartet" (1987-1992) aggressively foregrounded the quasi-colonial racial projects underpinning the organization of the city and its policing, openly lamented the decline of White supremacy, and displayed unalloyed nostalgia for an urban mythology made increasingly untenable by Los Angeles's political, demographic, and infrastructural shifts since the Watts Rebellion in 1965.

Ellroy’s work also lays bare the extent to which his writerly development was shaped equally by the previous era’s hardboiled writing and by his experience of growing up in the city, creating a potent, hard-boiled feedback loop in his imaginative mapping of the Los Angeles. In his extraordinary memoir *My Dark Places* (1996), he explains that he read all of Macdonald’s work in various branch libraries around the city during a period of homelessness in the fall of 1968, and then binged on Chandler the following year during a two-month drinking bender (135, 141). Ellroy’s vision of Los Angeles was filtered through these reading experiences, alongside another formative influence: that of Jack Webb’s 1958 documentary eulogy for the LAPD *The Badge*. Yet, it was also inflected by his own biographical experience. Ellroy’s mother was the victim of an unsolved murder in 1958 when he was just thirteen, her body discovered discarded in another of Los Angeles’s nowhere-places, on a strip of wasteland by the curb of a neglected sideroad in the unremarkable suburb of El Monte. The confluence of Ellroy’s immersion in the city’s hard-boiled mythology with his psychological processing of the loss of his mother resulted in a disturbing set of police procedurals constructed using the scaffolding of mid-century crime fiction.

The Black Dahlia (1987), the first and most successful novel of the L.A. Quartet, fictionalizes the notorious unsolved murder of Elizabeth Short in 1947, which Ellroy identified as anticipating aspects of his mother’s case. Ellroy discarded the private-eye detectives of Chandler and Macdonald in favor of a more realist turn to the LAPD. Drawing on Webb’s account of the Dahlia case in *The Badge*, he presents the police investigation into the murder from the perspective of a young LAPD detective, Dwight “Bucky” Bleichert, who becomes dangerously obsessed with Short and the emerging iconography of the case, from images of her disfigured corpse to those created in the course of her brief pornographic career. The novel, however, opens not with Short’s murder but four years earlier, with Bucky’s initiation into police brutality during the so-called “Zoot Suit Riots” of 1943, when

groups of servicemen and White Angelenos organized to intimidate and assault Mexican youths in the city in a form of pogrom against the Mexican community. Bucky and his future partner Lee Blanchard play both sides, beating a group of rioting marines while also arresting a Mexican petty criminal in the knowledge that they are sending him to his fate in the gas chamber. For Ellroy, such events open onto a morally ambivalent world of racial violence that he sees as determining Los Angeles's mythological origins in fundamental ways. As he puts it in *My Dark Places*, "the place was built from land grabs and racial grief" (61). In the novel, though the victim, murderer, and detectives are all White, Elizabeth Short's naming by the press as the *Black* Dahlia, together with the aggressive whiteness coded in the names of the two detectives (D*wight* Bleichart and Lee *Blanch*ard), rehearses in a metaphorical register the acute racial conflicts structuring Ellroy's vision of the city.

If the Zoot Suit Riots inaugurate Ellroy's Los Angeles's mid-century mythology, the Watts Rebellion provides its endpoint, representing the moment at which the city's White dominance was finally contested on a grand scale and its cultural foundations shaken. For him, the first set of riots was instigated by Whites as form of racialized social control, but the inversion of the second provided a symbolic reckoning for Anglo Los Angeles. The cops of the LAPD, as he delicately suggests in *My Dark Places*, "lost their collective cherry" (165). The Rebellion is not represented directly in the L.A. Quartet, constituting a kind of horizon for Ellroy's historical imagination, but it is discussed severally in the memoir as a significant moment in his writerly development at which the realized that "narrative was my moral language":

> L.A. was burning. I wanted to kill all the rioters and turn L.A. into Cinder City myself. The riot thrilled me. This was crime writ-large—crime on a big plot-extrapolatable scale. . . . The riot fizzled out. It reconflagrated in my head and ruled my thoughts for weeks. (127)

The mid-century years represented in Ellroy's Los Angeles fiction offer a culturally conservative vision of the nation that he grieved after Watts. With retrospect, this was the "pre-breakdown" United States, when "America was yet to buck race riots and assassinations and environmental bullshit and gender confusion and drug proliferation and gun mania and religious psychoses linked to media implosion and an emerging cult of victimhood" (163). Such passages spell out for us what is left implicit in the fiction. For Ellroy, the LAPD and its White-supremacist ideology between 1943 and 1965 kept what he perceived as the forces of social anarchy at bay through morally dubious but ultimately justifiable means. This constitutes his version of the ethical contradiction lurking at the heart of all iterations of hard-boiled fiction: in a falling world, it is necessary to get one's hands dirty in order to achieve the good—or at least to slow down the decline.

For all the stylistic bravura and sense of place displayed in the L.A. Quartet, *My Dark Places* is where Ellroy's depiction of Los Angeles's urban development, racial diversification, and cultural decline receives its fullest treatment. El Monte, in the San Gabriel Valley, is where he spent much of his childhood, and where his mother's body was discovered. In 1958, when the murder took place, it was "White Trash Heaven" (18), surrounded by unincorporated land, 90 percent White and 10 percent Mexican; "a honky-tonk place with a more-than-distinct western atmosphere" (20). Yet its historical trajectory was already set by cheap, flat real estate, ripe for grid housing and freeway building. By 1993, when Ellroy returns in an attempt to solve the cold case with the help of a retired LAPD detective, "white El Monte was long gone" and the town "was exponentially more run-down," its crime rate having exploded along with its population (223). El Monte offers a microcosm for the development of the Los Angeles region more generally, its increasingly atomized and itinerant population presenting new opportunities for predatory sexuality, one-night-stands, and untraceable crimes. Ellroy digs up leads on possible suspects, now long gone: demented,

exiled, or dead. None of these precarious, sordid, and unremarkable lives offers any realistic way forward in the investigation and the case remains unsolved. In the process, the place comes to determine the murder retrospectively: "the region defined the crime. The region was the crime . . . The unconscious San Gabriel Valley migration explained every absurd and murderous act that went down there" (251). Ellroy thus reclaimed the anonymous sprawling Los Angeles suburbs as the symbolic home of post-war American crime.

Mosley and the Detective as Rentier

Another Los Angeles crime writer for whom the Watts Rebellion represented a combination of personal awakening and historical watershed is Walter Mosley, author of the "Easy Rawlins" series of historical mysteries set in the city between 1948 and (to date) 1969. Mosley is four years Ellroy's junior, and while the latter cruised the periphery of the riot zone with his adolescent White friends, eager to catch a glimpse of the spectacle (*My Dark Places* 126), the event was closer to home for Mosley: he had been brought up as the child of Black and Jewish parents in Watts and South Central, and had only recently moved out to Pico-Fairfax with his family (Woo). Mosley tells of arriving home on the first night of the riots, having seen them from a bus ride across the city, and finding his father drunk in the living room, caught between a desire to join the uprising and the conviction that it was morally wrong ("Author"). For Mosley, the Watts Rebellion signified not so much the opening of the gates of anarchy, as it did for Ellroy, so much as the end of the fragile alliance between working-class communities in the city, and the first step towards undermining the ethos of non-violent racial struggle ("Author"). In this sense, the Rebellion was still a historical Fall, but one of a different kind. The fracturing of cross-racial class-based coalitions by the uprising is dealt with in *Little Scarlet* (2006), when Mosley's Black detective Easy Rawlins

confronts a Black looter abusing the Jewish owner of a Watts shoe store. “Even though I didn’t know it at the time,” Easy tells us, “this was the beginning of the breakup of our community. It was the first time you could see there was another side to be on” (77).

The majority of the Easy Rawlins novels chronicles the mysteries tackled by the detective between 1948 and the Rebellion, covering roughly the same period as that addressed in Ellroy’s L.A. Quartet. Here, too, there is an element of nostalgia for an age now passed—or in the process of passing—despite Mosley’s depiction of a brutally racist Parker-era LAPD. This is partly for the possibilities still held open in the late 1940s and early 1950s for inter-racial community building based on class politics. The politics of Mosley’s Jewish mother, whom he described as a “New York Communist,” are treated in *A Red Death* (1991), which describes Easy’s friendship and affinity with a Jewish Communist organizing in Los Angeles during the onset of the Second Red Scare (“Author”). More pervasively, Mosley’s mystery fiction portrays a city in which routes towards Black social mobility are made plausible if difficult though the pursuit of economic opportunity in a booming post-war landscape. As described in the first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Easy—like Mosley’s father, a migrant from Texas and a World War II veteran—is able to get a job in the aeronautical industry after the war and become a homeowner. Easy’s hold on the property ladder is a precarious one, and his entanglement in crime comes as he loses the job and searches for alternatives ways of making an overdue mortgage payment. In the following novels, we see Easy develop his property portfolio along with his reputation as a private detective. By 1953, when we discover him in *A Red Death*, he has invested in rental properties, including an apartment building in Compton, then a fast-developing more respectable alternative to South Central and Watts for Black Angelinos. His own home moves too: Easy leaves Watts in 1956 for the Black middle-class View Park area, before ending up in an integrated neighborhood between La Brea and Fairfax in the early 1960s. In each novel,

Easy's decision to engage the criminal world is made at least in part in response to some threat to his real-estate portfolio, whether through taxes (*A Red Death*), redevelopment projects (*Black Betty*, 1994), and even the Watts Rebellion itself (*Little Scarlet*, 2004).

The particular innovation of Mosely's work in the Los Angeles hardboiled tradition, then, is that his detective benefits materially from the same midcentury urban development that Chandler and Macdonald lamented. This makes for a compelling contradiction: Easy becomes alienated from the very working-class Black neighborhood upon which the demand for his labor depends. Unlike Marlowe or Archer, it is not rich compromised widows who engage his services as the institutional representatives of White power. Rather, it is the LAPD, FBI and political class, because of his privileged access to the spaces and discourses of Black life in the city. When Marlowe and his companion Moose Malloy attempt to enter a Black club on Central Avenue in the opening of *Farewell, My Lovely*, they do so as parodies of colonial adventurers and are treated as such by the bouncer, who refuses them access. Easy, by contrast, embodies the figure of the collaborator who gathers intelligence on behalf of the colonial elite and its bureaucracy, before disappearing into the integrated middle-class suburbs.

Easy develops a set of performative identities accordingly, adjusting his behavior depending on his environment. In this context, it becomes easier to understand why Mosley referred to Easy as a "concretized Invisible Man," in allusion to Ralph Ellison's 1953 novel (*Conversations* 79). Ellison's protagonist also adopts a series of personas in the course of his migrant trajectory from the rural South to the industrialized mid-century city, disclosing his own self to be fluid, unstable, and adaptable. Significantly, however, Ellison's invisible man concludes the novel taking shelter in the basement of a building owned by Whites, tapping into the electricity supply, and biding his time for the future. Easy, by contrast, even if he sells his labor to White power, has shifted from tenant to owner, benefitting from the Los

Angeles real-estate boom. In this sense, post-war Los Angeles, more than New York, provided the ideal imaginative setting for a certain rugged Black masculinity: individualist and self-reliant, to be sure, but also deracinated, plural in identity and pragmatist in ethics. Mosley's fiction retains Los Angeles's hard-boiled mythology, with all its insistence on the city's modernity and predictive power at mid-century, but he also reorients his readers' relation to it, demanding a re-evaluation of the genre's racial codes.

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Notes

[1] On urban development in Los Angeles during this period, see Starr, *Material Dreams*; Starr, *The Dream Endures*; Davis; Klein.

[2] On hard-boiled fiction's cultural nostalgia, see Norman.

[3] For a succinct history of the term's usage in the US context, see Gutiérrez.

[4] On the relationship between hard-boiled crime fiction and colonial adventure, see Orr. On hard-boiled crime fiction and race, see Reddy.

[5] On the relationship between public perceptions of crime and the building of the interstate highway system in the post-war period, see Strand.