

Haunted Subjects:

Fragments of the “Sexual Mosaic” in James Ellroy’s Los Angeles

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Your death defines my life. I want to find the love we never had and explicate it in your name. I want to take your secrets public. I want to burn down the distance between us. I want to give you breath.

James Ellroy¹

The function of this paper is to resolve the images of two crimes. About two thirds of the way through James Ellroy’s *The Big Nowhere*, one of the novel’s detective protagonists, Deputy Sheriff Danny Upshaw, commits suicide.² The narrative explanation for Upshaw’s suicide is relatively unproblematic: he wants to avoid an interrogation that would reveal his homosexuality. But the cohesive causality implicit in this explanation belies the complex system of social and semiotic relations in which Upshaw’s suicide participates and of which his corpse functions as a synchronic index. Through the elaboration of these relations, this paper aims to refine the image of Upshaw’s suicide and to elucidate some key aspects of Ellroy’s treatment of the semiotics of sexual typology as it relates to the solving of crimes. The case of Upshaw’s suicide is interleaved here with the murder of Elizabeth Short in *The Black Dahlia* in which the narrative operation of sexual signification similarly disturbs the cohesive causal explanation of her corpse.³ Each case is made useful in the explication of the other here by way of a mutual positioning within the signifying systems of Ellroy’s Los Angeles.

Ellroy’s Los Angeles is a composite social space, in which a glut of specialised and codified social subgroups crowd the narrative to such an extent that the ‘squarejohn’ citizens (whose function it is alternately to be beguiled by the duplicitous media and to ‘rubberneck’ at crime scenes) are barely represented.⁴ But the distinctions between these groups are far from

unproblematic. The demarcation of sexual types in particular is figured as a practice through which the limits of the social are alternately regulated and subverted. Of course, this kind of tension – between those seeking to control social limits and those seeming to frustrate such limitation – is fundamental to crime fiction more generally, and any attempt to account for the socio-sexual composition of Ellroy's Los Angeles is *ipso facto* engaged with the questions of where these tensions arise, by what means, and how they affect both readers and protagonists (especially with regard to hermeneutic [ad]ventures).⁵ In this sense, investigating the semiotic operation of Ellroy's Los Angeles also involves investigating the formal limits of the genre. What is more, the doubleness of the semiotic process – that is, its productive and receptive modes – offers a productive analogy for the double narrative form of the genre, in which the story of the crime is both told through, and deferred by, the story of its interpretation. This paper takes the position that, in Ellroy's work, this binary formal structure can be viewed synecdochally, by examining the way the signs of identity (here sexual identity) in the narratives, play out generic tensions of law, culture, physiology and epistemology. As well as being theoretically useful, the focus on semiotics is recommended by the novels themselves since, in Ellroy's work, the conflict over the limits of sexual identity is articulated chiefly through the struggle for control of semiotic markers.

When Danny Upshaw is trawling the Hollywood division's sex offender files for clues, he uncovers a series of references to the covert semiotic practices of what may be called, in the context of Ellroy's Los Angeles, the homosexual underworld.⁶ "If you parked on a Griffith Park roadway with a blue handkerchief tied to your radio aerial, you were a queer", the files tell him.⁷ "The Latin inscription on the Pall Mall cigarette pack – 'In Hoc Signo Vinctes' – translated as 'With this sign we shall conquer' [sic] – was a tentative means of homo identification," the files go on, "a sure thing when coupled with wearing a green shirt on a Thursday."⁸ In these descriptions

we can discern one of the key tensions in Ellroy's treatment of the semiotics of sexual typology. On the one hand, this kind of involute codification suggests a practice of exclusion, whereby specialised knowledge allows for the production and reception of covert visual markers that designate membership of a discreet sexual typology. On the other hand, the self-conscious mobilisation of those markers suggests the possibility that the typological limits on which they depend may be controlled and subverted through their appropriative performance. This potential informs Ellroy's detectives' perception of homosexuality as a field of indeterminacy, implicating sexual orientation within the broader field of indeterminacy produced by detective fiction's puzzle-solving structure. Franco Moretti's term "equiprobability," which aptly designates the referential state initiated by the latter, generic sort of indeterminacy, is often equally applicable to the referential indeterminacy that characterises sexual signification in Ellroy's *oeuvre*.⁹

When Upshaw commits suicide, he cuts himself "ear to ear, down to the windpipe in one clean stroke."¹⁰ Initially, he puts the barrel of his gun in his mouth but he sees "how it would look, the cops who found him making jokes about why he did it that way," so he slashes his throat instead.¹¹ To focus on Upshaw's suicide as an attempt at semiotic control is not to ignore the fact that it is also a legal, political and bodily event. Rather, it is to examine those elements too, in light of the fact that this act is designed to be read. In this context, Upshaw's suicide is perhaps most readily discerned as an act of passing – he attempts to inscribe his corpse with heterosexuality by erasing the gun from the scene. In the profoundly homophobic 1943–59 Los Angeles of Ellroy's *Los Angeles Quartet* (and especially for a cop), passing is frequently necessary, and this strategy is often employed by characters in the novels.¹² But passing is only one aspect (albeit a prominent one) of the struggle over distinction that characterises Ellroy's treatment of sexual

typology. That struggle requires close inspection in part because its manifestations within the novels are diverse and often contradictory.

The conflicting meanings produced by Upshaw's suicide are manifold. As an act of self-authorship, for instance, it may be counted as a transgressive strategy by which he tries to subvert the demarcation of his sexual identity by agents of the political hegemony. Indeed, Ellroy seems to valorise the act as such, emphasising the depth and precision of the cut, and the strength of will required to make it – “Doc called the death wound ‘amazing’ – no hesitation marks.”¹³ Nevertheless, Upshaw's suicide is more broadly conformist than transgressive in its intent – he wants to be accepted as straight and is willing to inscribe his body in death in order to achieve that impression.

Part of the tragedy of Upshaw's suicide is that his world (and particularly his profession) offers no way to *out* but death. His final attempt to conform is motivated largely by the fact that the day following would have seen him facing a police interrogation involving the use of a polygraph machine and the administration of sodium pentothal (so-called ‘truth serum’). Immediately prior to Upshaw's suicide, Dudley Smith (police captain and villain of the *Quartet's* final three novels) not-too-subtly suggests to him that the interrogation (ostensibly regarding a murder investigation) will include questions about his sexual orientation.¹⁴ The scene introduces Smith as a villain; he steps “out of a shadow” to bring Upshaw this news and to intimate that it might be best for Upshaw (who has uncovered Smith's guilt in two murders) to kill himself, before kissing him “full on the lips and walk[ing] away whistling a love song.”¹⁵ This kiss is as much a semiotic act as a bodily one, as it marks out Upshaw's otherness, relegating him to a marginalised sexual typology and, less directly, to death. In this way, we might read Upshaw's corpse (and its performative instance – the suicide) as almost entirely compliant with the typological relegation imposed by the state. But the kiss also calls into

question the legitimacy of such relegation – the fact that Smith (who is not gay) is able to perform homosexuality shows the visible limits of sexual typology to be vulnerable to subversion. So we can also read Upshaw's suicide in the context of a performativity that resists typological closure. We see here the indeterminacy that characterises Upshaw's body from the moment of the kiss, until his autopsy. On a narrative level, this indeterminacy is related to the possible readings of Upshaw's sexual orientation. But this indeterminacy is dependent on the more fundamental question of the degree to which any sexual categories may be considered authoritative, closed. Moreover, the fact that a number of contradictory readings are suggested by Upshaw's suicide points to the reciprocal relationship between this typological indeterminacy and the complex and dynamic struggle that exists within the narrative over the semiotic ordering of sexual typology.

Complexity arises in part because this struggle operates across a number of connected fields and is expressed in a number of different forms, or modes of classification. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault considers the construction of sexual typology in nineteenth-century society and suggests that “[p]erhaps the point to consider is not the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression but the form of power that was exercised.”¹⁶ Foucault's subject is historical rather than literary, but his emphasis on examining the power exercised suggests a particularly useful way of approaching Upshaw's suicide, in part because of this difference in focus. Where Foucault's project is to reflect upon a determinate “sexual mosaic,” Ellroy's novels chart the constant subjective reorganisation of sexual limits.¹⁷ Because detective fiction's puzzle-solving structure involves a special relationship between the diachronic (the ongoing investigation) and the synchronic (the number of referential pathways available in a given moment), the narrative unfolding of the “sexual mosaic” is often shown in suggestive relation to its embodied expressions. Tzvetan Todorov describes

this kind of operation as the foundational structure of the “whodunit” in which, he says, an “absent real” (the ‘*fable*’ or primary image) is gradually reconstructed through the investigation plot (or ‘*subject*’).¹⁸ By paying attention to the semiotic exchange between these two elements (*fable* and *subject*), we are able to produce deeper readings of the “sexual mosaic” of Ellroy’s Los Angeles, to apprehend more clearly the importance of that “mosaic” in determining the image of Upshaw’s suicide, and to begin to engage with the image of Elizabeth Short in Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia*.

In the first instance, we will examine this *subject/fable* relationship as it pertains to the sexual typology of Danny Upshaw. The *subject* here is the gradual revelation of Upshaw’s sexuality, both to himself and to the reader, a progression that is facilitated by a series of covert references, or clues, such as his increasingly insistent rejections of dispatch operator Karen Hiltcher. But the main index of this progression is the recurring flashback to a single instance of Upshaw’s past: “him and Tim in a hot Olds ragger joy-riding to a hick town prom, changing clothes at his place... down to their skivvies, horseplay, jokes about substitutes for girls”.¹⁹ Every time Upshaw recalls this image, new details are added: “Tim giving him the fisheye when he wouldn’t take seconds on Roxie... Tim reproachful, saying, yeah it was just horseplay, but *you* really liked it”.²⁰ Each additional detail contributes to the image’s resolution, closing down the interpretative options it presents. By this device, the pre-narrative instance (*fable* for Todorov, Bloch’s *ante-rem*), which initially appears as a fixed image, is drawn into the narrative flux of Upshaw’s emerging sexual identity. As in other hermeneutic schemas, the fixity of the pre-narrative image depends upon the extent to which this image is brought into alignment with what is discovered in the unfolding narrative. But Upshaw’s suicide means that this image is never fully resolved; the truncation of his narrative trajectory leaves the prom image unfinished, in a state of semiotic flux. This unfinished image stands alongside Upshaw’s own, referentially “equiprobable” corpse as synchronic

register of the indeterminacy that characterises his *subjective* struggle with typological closure.

The effects of this particular synchronic/diachronic relationship on detection in *The Big Nowhere* are twofold. Most obviously, it provides a nuanced framework for the attempt by the reader (and, later, by Buzz Meeks) to detect Upshaw's sexual orientation.²¹ Of greater importance to the investigatory plot, however, is the way Upshaw registers those moments in the novel when *fable* (the prom image) and *subject* (his ongoing crisis of definition) are brought into contact. In these instances, the as yet unresolved semiotic disjunction between the synchronic and diachronic elements causes epistemological schisms in Upshaw. When his serial-killer investigation leads him to the window of the Chateau Marmont, Upshaw watches through the window an illicit party involving "cheek-to-cheek tangos, all male" and it gives him "distortion blur" such that the faces of the men "couldn't be distinguished individually."²² In this instance, Upshaw's perceptual confusion stems not only from the emotional effect of watching his repressed desires played out in front of him, but also from the intrusion of the prom image into the frame of those desires: "Danny zoomed out, in, out, in... more blur, blips of arms, legs, a cart being pushed... out, in, out, better focus, no faces, then Tim."²³ Here the spatial and physiological disorder of the scene through the window is linked, through Upshaw's experience of sexual typology *over time*, to the semiotic disorder of the prom image. Upshaw's evolving sexual *subjectivity* cannot accommodate the semiotic disjunction this pairing entails. As a result he is (to say the least) unable to detect effectively. It is also worth noting that Felix Gordean, the party's organiser, is a crucial link in the serial killer case Upshaw is investigating, a connection that he is forced to temporarily neglect because of his perceptual problems at the Chateau Marmont.

Upshaw's is a special case. Because the serial killer in question, Coleman Healy, intends his *modus operandi* (which includes anal rape, and placing his

all-male victims in sexual poses) to implicate his gay father, Upshaw's criminal investigation often depends on locating stable and distinctive sexual limits. But Upshaw's own sexual identity remains unstable. These situations are interdependent; Upshaw's relationship to his own sexual typology is problematised by the double operation of synchronic/diachronic exchange, while his ability to distinguish typological limits within the "sexual mosaic" around him is dependent upon his own internal cohesion. It is a pattern familiar to hard-boiled detective fictions, where it is usually expressed as a moral problem; a detective protagonist tries to discover who is 'good' and who is 'bad' while their own moral position, and thus the entire venture, is increasingly called into question by their actions along the way.²⁴ In terms of sexual typology, Ellroy's detectives often suffer from having their own sexual limits entangled in the dialectic exchange between *fable* and *subject*, but the reflexive quality of Upshaw's entanglement is uncommon. Bucky Bleichert's *subjective* entanglement with the *fable* of Elizabeth Short's sexuality in *The Black Dahlia* has more in common with the conventional 'whodunit' structure. The explication of this second *subject/fable* relationship is more sustained than the first because its operation is more complex, and because it is more intimately connected with the investigatory plot of the novel and the solving of crimes. Nevertheless, this explication also involves a tacit emendation of the *fable* of Upshaw's suicide through the comparative elaboration of the conditions that produce it.

In the case of *The Black Dahlia*, if we are to trust our narrator, the process of refining an unruly primary image by bringing it into alignment with the emerging facts of the investigation is the novel's *raison d'être*. In the prologue, detective protagonist and first person narrator, Bucky Bleichert is presented as the novel's author. He has "undertaken the writing of this memoir," he says, to present the 'true' Dahlia uncovered in his investigation: "working backward, seeking only facts, I reconstructed her."²⁵ This

subject/fable relationship is mirrored in the novel's extra-narrative context since the real and still unsolved murder of Elizabeth Short stands as an incomplete image that the novel seeks to resolve. Our focus here, however, is the operation of this relationship within the narrative itself, wherein the job of closing down the interpretative pathways that emanate from the unfixed image of the Dahlia is particularly problematic.

Josh Cohen calls attention to the instability of Short's image in the novel, identifying her as a paradigm of the postmodern consumer culture of Ellroy's Los Angeles and the semiotics of "womanly elusiveness" by which, he claims, it is characterised.²⁶ Cohen goes on to suggest that the problematic object status of the Dahlia image is perpetuated by a conflict within the narrative over the control of that image. For Cohen, the image of the Dahlia is "charged by the dialectic" between the "official media narrative" orchestrated by District Attorney Ellis Leow (which holds that Short was sweet and innocent) and the "counter-narrative" that emerges from Bleichert's investigation (which includes her promiscuity and pathological lying).²⁷ Cohen's analysis suggests a useful way of examining the interaction of the *fable* of the Dahlia with its unfolding *subject*. I want to explore his notion of a dynamic tension within that interaction, and to examine it in the context of the investigation of Short's sexual orientation. Before moving on, however, I offer one important qualification to Cohen's position.

Cohen's argument suggests that the image of the Dahlia is fragmented by a doubling of its *subjective* realisation. That is, a single (if elusive) image is simultaneously refined by two conflicting narrative explanations ("official narrative" and "counter-narrative"). But this assumes that Leow's and Bleichert's *subjective* projects are comparable enterprises. They are not. Bleichert's is an ongoing *subjective* process that involves relating to the reader his attempt to divine a 'true' image of the Dahlia through inferential progress. This is the *subject* of the novel. Leow's mediatised construct is

simply another, contingent image – an artificial *fable* against which the unfolding *subject* is measured. Cohen is of course not obliged to engage with Todorov's model of the 'whodunit.' My aim here is simply to indicate that Bleichert's role as detective, and his related role as first person narrator, proceed according to a principle of *subjective* "reconstruct(ion)." His engagement with the Dahlia image occupies a privileged narrative position, no matter how entangled it is with other readings of the Dahlia produced by other characters, and regardless of how convincing are those readings to the imagined public of Ellroy's Los Angeles.

It is important to define Bleichert's role here, in order that we may best examine his relationship to the problematic image of the Dahlia. For the same reason, we should also identify what image or *fable* is being referred to here. A 'whodunit' positions the crime as the text's *fable*; thus, in a murder mystery, the corpse is the symbolic index of that *fable*. But *The Black Dahlia* 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 with also the *fable* of identity. Thus, together with Elizabeth Short's mutilated corpse, Bleichert's *subjective* retelling of the case must also account for Short herself as a cohesive sign system. But Bleichert's progress in this area is punctuated by conflicting images (of which Leow's mediatised Dahlia is but one example) that threaten to derail his reconstructive venture and unsettle the critical faculties that enable it. This is particularly evident when Short's sexual orientation is called into question by one of her former roommates, initiating what Bleichert calls "the dyke lead."²⁸

Bleichert's casual homophobia is in part a product of the historical verisimilitude that Ellroy has attributed to his detective characters, in opposition to the "candy-assed, philosophising private eye."²⁹ It is certainly consistent with the misogyny, racism and homophobia that characterises the milieu of the *L.A. Quartet*. But homophobia in Ellroy's detectives is also related to the way homosexuality is figured in the *Quartet* as a field of

indeterminacy that resists referential closure. Before Bleichert's interview of the roommate, the police investigation into Short's murder is focussed on "the boyfriend angle."³⁰ Working from interviews with Short's acquaintances and a trunk full of letters and photographs, police uncover a series of "conflicting stories" that Short had given out prior to her death: "she was the widow of an air force major; pregnant by navy pilot; engaged to army flyer... lied about being (air corps Major) Gordon's fiancée."³¹ They discover "100's of love letters to various men (mostly servicemen)... also, many photos of E. Short with servicemen."³² Here, the distinction between the criminal *fable* and the *fable* of identity is crucial. The stories Short told in life are "conflicting" in the sense that it is unlikely for them all to be true, which problematises the criminal *fable* by multiplying possible readings of the killing while privileging none. Nevertheless, the *fable* of identity is refined by the same clues that expand the criminal *fable* beyond the limits of immediate apprehension. The pre-narrative artefacts (oral, written and photographic) uncovered by the police articulate a discreet sexual typology that includes the qualities of heterosexuality, promiscuity, fantasies of marriage and motherhood and a preference for servicemen. The fact that "[s]he told everybody nine thousand lies about being married to nine thousand different war heroes" does not destabilise the *fable* of the Dahlia's identity; it augments it by including the category of 'liar.'³³ But the suggestion that she was gay draws the Dahlia's sexual identity '*ante-rem*' into irreconcilable tension with a contradictory pre-narrative image. As is the case with Upshaw, Bleichert's struggle to accommodate mutually exclusive images of sexual typology within a unified *subjective* frame draws out the instability of the limits by which such exclusion is regulated and thereby calls into question the foundation of his *subjectivity*. Thus, when Bleichert hits the streets to follow "the dyke lead," the lesbian bars of Ventura Boulevard are figured as a locus of semiotic indeterminacy.

Bleichert's engagement with Ventura Boulevard is characterised by a number of distinct but interlocking semiotic operations, each of which serves to undermine the stability of the *subject/fable* relationship through the inversion, opposition or multiplication of images. As though the semiotics of indeterminacy were osmotic in nature, Bleichert's engagement with Ventura Boulevard begins before he arrives there. His description of the "ride out to the Valley" is coloured by his curiosity about the lesbian bars and furnished with his fantasies about "women with women."³⁴ He tries to picture the women he has slept with, wanting to visualise "pairs of them together," but is unable to recall the women's faces and resorts to "us[ing] Betty/Beth and Linda/Lorna then, mug shots and high school ID combined with the bodies of the girls I remembered."³⁵ Bleichert's mental construction of these hybrid fantasy women functions on a number of levels. Most obviously, the fragmentation and reorganisation of these images suggests a fragmentary logic of identity. The women's bodies are interchangeable, "equiprobable." It is a suggestion that is also carried by the corresponding bisection of the names of both Short (Betty/Beth) and her friend (later revealed to have performed with Short in a pornographic film) Lorna Martilkova (Linda/Lorna). This convergence of bodily and linguistic expressions of the fragmentation of identity (and, more specifically, of the identities of non-heterosexual women) already casts doubt upon the possibility of refining the *fable* of the Dahlia's identity in light of the ambiguity that surrounds her sexual typology at that moment in the novel. But these pastiche images also establish a provocative consanguinity between the *fable* of identity and the criminal *fable* re-presented by Short's corpse. In the bisection of the women and in the illegibility of the faces of Bleichert's actual lovers, these images recall the mutilations inflicted upon Short by her murderers – her corpse bisected, her face "one huge purpled bruise, the nose crushed deep into the facial cavity, the mouth cut ear to ear."³⁶ It is Bleichert's own dark sexuality, then, that draws the twin *fables* of *The Black Dahlia* into alignment. His

mental reproduction of the physical, criminal fragmentation of the Dahlia within the context of his sexual desires implicates her sexual identity in the frustration of his own narrative quest to bring closure to both the criminal *fable* and the *fable* of her identity. These entangled and incomplete images of women – Bleichert’s lovers with Betty/Beth and Linda/Lorna, the fragmented corpse of the Dahlia with her fragmentary sexual identity – prefigure the semiotic disorder that Bleichert will experience on his arrival at the first bar he enters, “The Swank Spot.”³⁷

For a start, there is the suggestion that the same-sex couples inside appear to Bleichert as a direct, almost mocking inversion of the sexual typology so far attributed to the Dahlia. The interior of The Swank Spot is “poorly lit” and it takes Bleichert “long moments for [his] eyes to adjust to the darkness.”³⁸ When his eyes do finally adjust, his first impression is of a bisected patronage: “Some were bull dykes in khaki shirts and GI issue trousers”, while the rest were “soft girls in skirts and sweaters.”³⁹ He sees no women who do not conform to one or the other of these groups. While this pattern of dress may be considered historically sound, it seems reasonable to suggest that Bleichert’s focus on this typological divide, rather than anything else going on in the bar, is the result of a pronounced homophobia that restricts his *subjective* framing of the scene to familiar patterns of heterosexual signification. This homophobic polarity of vision may also account for the fact that Bleichert does not even consider the sexual typology ‘bisexual’ until much later in the novel (and here, as we will see, the revelation sends Bleichert running from the room). More significant to the investigatory plot and the relationship of *subject* to *fable* are the specific semiotic cues by which Bleichert justifies his typological bisection of The Swank Spot’s patrons. The “khaki shirts and GI issue trousers” by which Bleichert identifies the “bull dykes” recall the uniforms of the servicemen who were Short’s (actual or invented) lovers. The “soft girls in skirts” resemble the mediated image of the Dahlia that is peddled by Ellis Leow

and described by henchman cop Bill Koenig as “a nice young cooze.”⁴⁰ Thus, for Bleichert, the scene at The Swank Spot appears as a distorted reproduction of the sexual typology that has thus far informed the image of the Dahlia. More specifically, Bleichert’s existing impression of Short’s sexual typology is problematised by its recontextualisation within a milieu that simultaneously mirrors and negates the perceived qualities of that typology. On one hand, the visual motif of military uniforms and demure “femme” apparel evokes the “nice young cooze” with a bent for servicemen that is constitutive of the sexual typology thus far attributed to the Dahlia. On the other hand, Bleichert’s imposition of this typological construct onto the women at The Swank Spot brings a set of social values (latent or actual) predicated on *uniformity*, matrimony and the nuclear family into contact with a milieu that (within Ellroy’s 1940s Los Angeles) negates the possibility of social uniformity, legal matrimony and conventional notions of the nuclear family. That these mutually exclusive, socio-sexual *fables* are so easily brought into temporary alignment suggests the instability of the typological limits that define them, which in turn calls into question the possibility of refining the image of the Dahlia.

Bleichert’s *subjective* impression is of a performative inversion of sexuality that elaborates the vulnerability of sexual typology – and, consequently, the *fable* of Short’s identity – to the fragmentary aesthetics of appropriation and pastiche. This semiotic position is a recurring motif in Ellroy’s work, in which homosexuality and appropriative identity are mutually expressed by a number of chameleonic characters.⁴¹ In the case of Bleichert’s engagement with the bars of Ventura Boulevard, the reproducibility of the image, and the semiotic equiprobability that is engendered by its duplication, is built into the décor of the bars themselves. As Bleichert puts it, “it got more and more graphic.”⁴²

The Swank Spot has “a log cabin façade and double swinging doors” that Bleichert likens to “the saloons in western movies.”⁴³ Inside, the bar is

“encircled by wall neon blinking purple, then yellow, then orange.”⁴⁴ Bleichert’s next stop, “The Duchess” is “all in an old English motif.”⁴⁵ Inside “La Verne’s Hideaway... baby spots affixed to ceiling beams [cast] shadowy light on walls covered with cheap palm tree paper” and the bar is “one long counter with coloured lights reflecting off a Waikiki Beach scene.”⁴⁶ Through their cinematic appropriations of other places and times (the old west, old England, Waikiki), the signifying surfaces of the bars are directed towards a spatio-temporal illusion. At the same time, the very use of cinematic visual strategies locates the bars within the determinate semiotic conditions of 1940s Hollywood. Thus, on one level, the appropriative décor develops a dialectic tension within the semiotic space of the bars by simultaneously contradicting and corroborating the authenticity of the appropriated images. By demonstrating – through appropriation – the dependence of the image on its context, the semiotic facade of Ventura Boulevard again suggests the instability of the image, and so casts doubt upon the potential for Bleichert’s *subjective* engagement with that space to uncover a single, authoritative image of Elizabeth Short. Similarly, the visual logic of the bars connotes the cinema’s potential for the reproduction of the image and proliferation of duplicates. This potential also finds expression in the person of Madeline Sprague, Short’s double and Bleichert’s eventual lover, who enters La Verne’s Hideaway just as Bleichert, who has learned almost nothing there about Short, is about to give up and leave.

Sprague, we learn later, had slept with Elizabeth Short before Short’s murder, and she has since cultivated a resemblance to the fragment of Short’s identity most popular with the L.A. tabloids – “a slinky femme fatale in a tight black dress.”⁴⁷ By the time Sprague has revealed to Bleichert her affair with Short, she and Bleichert are already lovers. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Sprague’s visual resemblance to the Dahlia is interleaved with the pair’s sexual merging, and with the image of Short’s corpse. In bed with Madeleine, Bleichert notes that “her smeared red lipstick remind[s] [him] of

the Dahlia's death smile."⁴⁸ The confluence of images proves traumatic for Bleichert and he sees Madeline "like she was at the end of a long tunnel, captured by some kind of weird camera trick" and he runs from the room.⁴⁹ Generally, this *subjective* withdrawal functions as an effect of the trauma inflicted by Sprague's assimilatory identity. That Bleichert describes this *subjective* withdrawal in specifically cinematic terms again relates the *fable* of the Dahlia's sexual identity to the logic of reproduction and appropriation. So it is fitting that when Bleichert first sees Sprague at La Verne's Hideaway and catches the "resemblance to Elizabeth Short" she is illuminated by a baby spotlight.⁵⁰

Sprague's appearance at La Verne's works upon the scene in a number of ways. On a symbolic level, her cultivated resemblance to Elizabeth Short functions, like the bars' cinematic décor, as a reminder of the contingent quality of an image that is subject to reproduction and appropriation (in this case, Short herself). But – apposite to Ellroy's more general treatment of cinematic illusion – the similarities between Sprague and the Dahlia are revealed to be superficial; "more hairdo and makeup than anything else."⁵¹ As a result, the distinction between the original (Short) and the reproduction (Sprague) is not entirely effaced by the symbolic exchange between the two. More central to Bleichert's *subjective* project is Sprague's role as a narrative catalyst. It is through the intervention of her body into Bleichert's *subjective* progress that his desire to make contact with a 'true' image of Short's sexual typology is irrevocably tied to his desire to close in on the *fable* of her murder. By way of this intervention, the semiotic indeterminacy of Ventura Boulevard is drawn out through the narrative *subject*.

With Bleichert's affair with Madeline Sprague, Ellroy takes the generic motif of reconstruction into darkly sexual territory. After following Sprague home from La Verne's, Bleichert meditates on her image, taking out his 'Betty Short mugs' and "superimpose[ing] the Sprague girl's face over them."⁵² By this appropriative visual strategy, Bleichert attempts to resolve

the criminal *fable* by finding a pre-narrative connection between Short and Sprague that might lead to a clearer image of the crime. But he is also attempting to resolve the *fable* of the Dahlia's identity by defining it in relation to the image of Sprague. In this regard, the fragmentation of images of non-heterosexual women once more suggests the problems posed to Bleichert's *subjective* endeavour by the indeterminacy of Short's sexual typology at this stage of the novel. Bleichert's superimposition of Sprague's image onto Short's results in his coming "away with a common, everyday resemblance."⁵³ That is, the juxtaposed images are, for Bleichert, neither coincident nor exclusive. As a result, Sprague's image is unable to function either as a comparison to, or analogy of, the *fable* of Elizabeth Short. Bleichert's photographic collage amounts to simply another pastiche of near-analogous fragments that intimates but ultimately resists semiotic cohesion.

Immediately after his mug shot 'comparison', Bleichert imagines "peeling off [Sprague's] sharkskin suit."⁵⁴ The image suggests a sexualised disambiguation; the removal of a false skin. But Bleichert's *subjectivity* is so occupied with reconstructing the Dahlia that all of his sexual encounters are aimed at a climactic reconstruction of her sexual identity. The women he sleeps with become distorted refractions of Elizabeth Short, and she of them, to the extent that disambiguation becomes hopelessly contingent and clarity becomes possible only when one image is coerced into alignment with the other. This is the semiotic precondition of Bleichert's repeated imposition of the image of the Dahlia onto his sexual partners. Sprague's is the first body to undergo this *subjective* coercion: "I made Madeline Betty – made her eyes blue instead of hazel, made her body Betty's body... so Elizabeth Short and I were formally joined."⁵⁵ For Cohen, this scene enacts the "deceptive flickering logic of feminised urbanity" in which Bleichert's masculine subjectivity is undone by the "interchangeability" of Sprague and Short.⁵⁶ But, as we have seen, the two are not interchangeable; they are simply close enough to one another that Bleichert is able to exercise his (admittedly

disturbed and disturbing, but still functional) reconstructive power. Cohen dismisses the idea of Bleichert's "visual authority" over the "transmutation" of Madeline Sprague, arguing that the image "elude[s] his perceptual control" and that Bleichert's use of the word "made" in this context is "surely compensatory."⁵⁷ I would argue that this confuses Bleichert's *subjective* engagement. The reconstruction of the Dahlia is the central narrative project of the novel as announced by Bleichert on its first page and, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, it seems fair to assume that Bleichert's goal here is to make contact with Short's sexuality. It is after all Bleichert and not Sprague who is "formally joined" to Elizabeth Short. In this context, Sprague is simply a willing model ("I'll be Betty") upon whom Bleichert can impose his *subjective* desires in an attempt to define the Dahlia's sexuality and so refine the *fable* of her identity.⁵⁸ Bleichert's post-"transmutation" orgasm attests to his momentary success in this attempt – his climax prefiguring the narrative climax of the 'who-was-she' *subject*. More problematic is the effect of this reconstructive sexual encounter on the relationship between the *fable* of Short's identity to the *fable* of her murder. Sprague's relationship with Bleichert is motivated by her desire to obscure the truth about Short's murder, which was committed by her mother and in which her father was complicit. Thus, Bleichert's attempt to refine the *fable* of Short's sexual identity suspends his narrative reconstruction of the criminal *fable*.

The connection between Bleichert's insatiable desire to consummate his sexual attraction to the Dahlia, and his desire to close down the image of her murder, escalates throughout the novel. It is most pronounced in his appropriative interlude with Madeline Sprague, but it recurs with other lovers (or potential lovers) as well. When Ellis Leow draws Bleichert into a plan to have four "lunatics" who have (falsely) confessed to the murder interrogated and forced to cut up a corpse that has been made up to resemble the Dahlia, the drive to close down the image of the murder is

brought into contact with the novel's most powerful rendition of the fragmentation of Short's identity.⁵⁹ In a meat packing warehouse, among rotting sides of meat that hang from rows of hooks, the dead woman – “pudgy... coiffed and made up to look like Elizabeth Short” – enacts the disintegrative bodily image of the Dahlia from its position in a long line of disintegrative bodies.⁶⁰ Once more, the contextual weight brought to bear on the image of the Dahlia by appropriation signals the contingency of the *fable* of her identity. What is more, this horrific tableau implicates the criminal *fable* in the disintegration of the *fable* of identity since the fact that none of the “lunatics” are the real killer means that they are unable to reinscribe the wounds on Short's corpse.⁶¹ As a result, the body on the table stands (so to speak) as an incomplete and therefore semiotically indeterminate rendition of both *fables* at once. It is from this situation of semiotic indeterminacy that Bleichert flees, “out of the warehouse... all the way to Kay's door” and sex with Kay Lake, the girlfriend of his missing partner, Lee Blanchard.⁶² Here, the frustration of Bleichert's *subjective* position in relation to the novels' central *fables* leads him to impose his *subjective* ideal of sexual cohesion onto Lake. Synthesising the social ideals connoted by the sexual typology of the Dahlia uncovered by the police, Bleichert here attempts to unify the remnants of the familial “three of us” that had been Bleichert, Blanchard and Lake, and that has been fractured by Blanchard's disappearance.⁶³ Sex with Lake, however, proves an insufficient substitute for the reconstitution of Short's sexual identity and Bleichert continues to engage with feminine sexuality as a space in which he may attempt to achieve this reconstitution.

At one stage Bleichert hires a prostitute and takes her to the hotel room that serves as an off the books Black Dahlia case headquarters for Bleichert, Blanchard and two of their immediate superiors. So as not to scare her, he has swept case files from the bed and draped blankets and sheets from the walls in order to obscure the dozens of “Dahlia photos” that hang there.⁶⁴ “The pad perfect,” Bleichert sets to work on the body of the prostitute,

Lorraine, dressing her as the Dahlia, complete with wig and accessories.⁶⁵ But he finds the image an unsuccessful reproduction – “the coiffure was askew... all wrong, whorish and out of kilter” – and, in an effort to “spark perfection,” Bleichert pulls the sheets from the walls, revealing the photos and eliciting screams of “No! Killer! Police!” from Lorraine.⁶⁶ Bleichert’s flourish with the bedding suggests the aesthetics of a magic trick and in one way at least it shares the logic of a prestige. But rather than the magic of verisimilitude, the revelation is of a startling disjunction. The juxtaposition of the photographs – which Bleichert seems to treat as ‘identical’ images of the Dahlia – and the image of Lorraine – “a skinny length of tics and twitches” – functions here as an index of the degree to which Bleichert’s *subjective* trajectory has diverged from its ‘true’ path.⁶⁷

Unable to coerce Lorraine into compliance with the image of the Dahlia, and in reaction to her shouts for help, Bleichert smothers her mouth and wraps his hands around her throat, pleading “It’s just that she has all these different names to be.”⁶⁸ Here, the many names of Elizabeth Short again stand in for the frustrating multiplicity of her image, while his strangulation of Lorraine enacts his desire for its compression. As the figurative murder of a surrogate Dahlia that would establish the authenticity of the surrogate by reproducing the conditions of the crime, Bleichert’s violence functions as a gesture towards the recovery of both the *fable* of identity and the criminal *fable* simultaneously. But he succeeds only in scaring Lorraine, and she runs out of the hotel room, leaving him unfulfilled. Thus it is through a common dependence on reconstructing the Dahlia that narrative and sexual climaxes are mutually deferred. Ultimately, Bleichert’s attempts to resurrect the sexual identity of Elizabeth Short unearth little more than a series of contingent images stripped of their objective status by reproduction and appropriation. As is the case with Danny Upshaw, the indeterminacy of the Dahlia’s sexual identity is drawn out through the narrative by a tension

between an idealised pre-narrative image and the reconfigurations of that image that emerge from its *subjective* reification.

In the phrase, “Perhaps the point to consider is not the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression but the form of power that was exercised,” Foucault uses the words “the point to consider’ in a rhetorical way, as a substitute for something like “the direction I wish to take.” Here, the consideration of what Foucault calls “the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression” has been treated as being at least as important as the “form of power exercised” because these levels and quantities, which are simply the inverse co-ordinates of the typological limit, are so important to the ability of Ellroy’s detectives to negotiate the problematic inferential pathways inherent in the narrative structure of the ‘whodunit.’ At the same time, the distinction Foucault describes between where sexual limits are drawn and how they are drawn is problematised in Ellroy’s fiction by a focus on the tendency of limits in flux to carry the imprint of the powers that shape it. Moreover, the provisional, oscillatory patterns of signification by which sexuality is mapped out in Ellroy’s L.A., and which are inscribed upon the twin *fables* of both novels, also constitute the *subjective* lens through which Ellroy’s detectives attempt to make sense of these *fables*, criminal or otherwise. In this way, the image of Upshaw’s suicide, the corpse of the Dahlia, and the *fable* of her sexual identity, are apprehensible only in their diachronic operation, through their successive narrative resurrections.

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¹ James Ellroy, *My Dark Places* (UK: Century Books, 1996), 2.

² James Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere* (1989; repr., UK: Arrow, 1990), 369. Citations are to the Arrow edition.

³ James Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia* (1988; repr., UK: Arrow, 1991). Citations are to the Arrow edition.

⁴ This reading of the social sphere in Ellroy's Los Angeles is indebted to Ralph Willett's work on the "contiguous, imbricated social worlds" of American detective fiction. Willett makes the familiar point that the discursive style of the typical hard-boiled literary detective, "terse, laconic, acerbic and witty," functions as an "assertion of autonomy... marking the investigator out from the crowd." Unlike other critical accounts of this generic tendency, however, Willett treats the hard-boiled detective's discursive autonomy in the context of the "body of customs and traditions" that are partly constitutive of the urban environment. "Urban types such as detectives, criminals, lawyers and politicians," Willett notes, "are often linked by their own language". See Ralph Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 7-8, 14.

For more on the autonomy associated with the discursive practices of the hard-boiled investigator see, for example, Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 43, and Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001), 23-27.

⁵ The opposition of order and transgression is fundamental to a genre dominated by legal and criminal discourse. Critical framings of detective fiction are often concerned with the way this tension is drawn out across a multitude of related fields: narrative, epistemological, social, bodily, semiotic. Martin Swales unifies the operations of these tensions, identifying them as components of a general and "persistent dialectic". Ernst Bloch points to the reconstructive narrative function of the literary detective, identifying the detectory schema as a refiguration of both the Oedipal myth and The Fall with its breach before the narrative instance – the "crime *ante rem*" – and the subsequent retrospective action by which the narrative seeks to recapitulate the transgressive energies of that schism. Writers like Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen, and Nadya Aisenberg focus on the ideological work of the genre, asserting its conservative nature and the role of the detective in securing social order. The increasingly popular view that this reconstructive action is, as Martin Swales has it, a "persuasive metaphor for the referential" is found in the work of writers like Franco Moretti and Jorge Hernandez Martin. See Martin Swales, introduction to *The Art of Detective Fiction*. Chernaik, Warren, Martin Swales and Robert Vilain, ed. (U.K.: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), xiv, xii; Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, Trans. (U.S.A.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988), 255-64; Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen. *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001), 2; Nadya Aisenberg, *A Common Spring: Crime Novel and Classic* (U.S.A.: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1979), 1-50; Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1983), 146; Jorge Hernandez Martin, *Readers and Labyrinths: Detective Fiction in Borges, Bustos Domecq and Eco* (NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 44.

⁶ I use the term 'Underworld' here because terms such as 'gay community' seem vastly incommensurate with Ellroy's treatment of late 1940s Los Angeles in which rampant homophobia consistently necessitates secrecy.

⁷ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 214.

⁸ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 214.

⁹ Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 146.

¹⁰ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 369.

¹¹ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 368.

¹² Ellroy's *LA Quartet* includes, chronologically, *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* (U.K.: Mysterious Press, 1990) and *White Jazz* (U.K.: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1992).

¹³ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 374.

¹⁴ *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz* are published under the collective title *The Dudley Smith Trio* (U.K.: Arrow, 1999).

¹⁵ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 367.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley, trans., (N.Y.: Random House, inc., 1978), 41.

¹⁷ Foucault, 47.

¹⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, Richard Howard, trans., (1971; repr., Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 44, 46, 45.

¹⁹ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 56.

²⁰ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 166.

²¹ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 373-81.

²² Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 166.

²³ Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*, 166.

²⁴ This kind of progressive moral entanglement is developed in Hammett's Continental Op stories and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer novels. Ellroy's tales of violent, corrupt cops bring this motif to its

limit state. See Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (N.Y.: Pocket Books, 1943), Mickey Spillane, *I, the Jury* (N.Y.: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1947).

²⁵ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 9.

²⁶ Josh Cohen, "James Ellroy, Los Angeles and the Spectacular Crisis of Masculinity" in *Criminal Proceedings: The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, Peter Messent, ed. (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 174.

²⁷ Cohen, 175, 170.

²⁸ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 127.

²⁹ Ellroy, *L.A. Noir* (U.K.: Arrow, 1997), introduction, page unnumbered. Ellroy also locates his detective characters in opposition to Chandler's knightly private eyes in James Ellroy *Brown's Requiem* (1984; repr., U.K.: Arrow, 1995), introduction to Arrow edition, page unnumbered.

³⁰ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 117.

³¹ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 114-15.

³² Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 115.

³³ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 123.

³⁴ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

³⁵ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

³⁶ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 87.

³⁷ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

³⁸ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

³⁹ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

⁴⁰ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 127.

⁴¹ Perhaps the character in whom this tendency is most obvious is Danny Upshaw, whose skilled performance of his undercover persona, Communist playboy Ted Krugman, is implicitly tied to his daily performance of heterosexuality. The most prolific gay dissimulator in Ellroy's work, however, is undoubtedly *American Tabloid's* Lenny Sands, the informant, nightclub entertainer, political operator, mob stooge and voice coach to Jack Kennedy who kills to conceal his sexual orientation. See Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*; and James Ellroy, *American Tabloid* (1995, repr., U.K.: Arrow, 1995), 105. Citation here is to the Arrow edition.

⁴² Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

⁴³ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

⁴⁴ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 133.

⁴⁵ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 134.

⁴⁶ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 134-5.

⁴⁷ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 112.

⁴⁸ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 186.

⁴⁹ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 187.

⁵⁰ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 136.

⁵¹ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 149.

⁵² Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 137.

⁵³ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 137.

⁵⁴ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 137.

⁵⁵ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 210.

⁵⁶ Cohen, 178-9.

⁵⁷ Cohen, 178.

⁵⁸ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 211.

⁵⁹ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 226.

⁶⁰ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 232.

⁶¹ The fact that the "lunatics" are prevented from attempting this re-enactment by their broken wrists and Bleichert's sabotage of the entire exercise does not mitigate the fact that they would have been unable to complete it anyway.

⁶² Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 232.

⁶³ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 110.

⁶⁴ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 310.

⁶⁵ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 310.

⁶⁶ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 311-12.

⁶⁷ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 312.

⁶⁸ Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, 312.