

**BEYOND THE FOG:**  
NOIR, GENRE PLAY AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN THE NOVELS OF ROBERT  
COOVER, MEGAN ABBOTT, THOMAS PYNCHON AND MAT JOHNSON

By

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Eleanor Ruth Evangeline Gold has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

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*“I have found, Mr. Noir, that if you make a story with gaps in it,  
people just step in to fill them up, they can’t help themselves.”*  
ROBERT COOVER, *NOIR* (2010)

## **Introduction: Towards a Generic Understanding of Noir**

You are at the morgue. Where the light is weird. Shadowless, but like a negative, as though the light itself were shadow turned inside out. The stiffs are out of sight, temporarily archived in drawers like meaty data, chilled to their own bloodless temperature. Their stories have not ended, only their own readings of them. In your line of work, this is not a place where things end so much as a place where they begin. (Coover 9)

Robert Coover's *Noir* opens with the protagonist—one Philip M. Noir—standing in a morgue, questioning the night attendant about the disappearance of the body of Noir's client. Except this scene is not quite that simple. The novel counteracts every injection of traditional noir tropes with something new and disorienting. *Noir* is part of a new wave of neo-noir literature, the contemporary hardboiled sub-genre whose every use of traditional sub-generic convention is met with an equally powerful attempt to transcend that sub-genre and force it into conjunction with the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup> Noir is an unusual genre, but not necessarily for this reason: with the convergence of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture brought about by the advent of postmodernism, many modern authors have experimented with this method of constructing narrative. The past five years have seen a greater resurgence of this form of literary experimentation, of which *Noir* is but one example.

Philip M. Noir is neither the internally focalized, first-person narrator of traditional hardboiled fiction (examples are Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, or

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms "noir" and "hardboiled" interchangeably, though I do recognize that there are problems with this categorization. When I refer to the film sub-genre, I will refer to it as "*film noir*."

Dashiell Hammett's *Continental Op*, both first-person narrators with a distinctive "voice"), nor is he an externally focalized, omniscient narrator. Philip M. Noir is "you," and with the introduction of the second person into what has otherwise been telegraphed as a traditional embodiment of the noir sub-genre, the reader is forced into complicity with the text, with Noir's decisions, and with the events as they unfold. One could draw the connection between this use of the second person and the cinematic technique of Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947) or the first third of Delmer Daves's *Dark Passage* (1947), both films that use the so-called subjective camera technique, where the film is shot from the point of view of the protagonist. This conflation of the reader/viewer and the protagonist, then, has its roots in traditional film noir techniques, albeit ones that never became mainstream. One of the major effects of this technique, in both film and prose, is to draw the focus back to the subjectivity of the detective. This "private eye" is more often cast as a watcher—a viewer—than as an acting subject, one who narrates others' stories while denying responsibility for his involvement. By displacing the "eye" onto the reader, Coover breaks down the distinctions between the reader who follows the protagonist's exploration and the detective who acts within the novel.

*Noir* is distinctive for its extensive use of surprisingly cinematic technique within the prose narrative. The prose is largely visual and leans heavily on the use of chiaroscuro, a style well known to be a traditional film noir trope, often used to imply the sense of moral ambiguity necessary to establish the milieu of noir. This focus on the visual casts *Noir* as homage to film noir as much as to hardboiled fiction. At the same time as the use of second-person aligns *Noir* with a certain cinematic style, however, it

forces the novel away from such standard conventions of noir as the disconcerting film angles, the voiceover or the flashback. Though each of these may appear in *Noir*, the altered perspective changes their effect. Contemporary hardboiled fiction, however, relies on the shift away from standard convention. The constant fluctuation between sub-genres and the persistent attempt to exceed the conventions of the sub-genre are not only inherent to contemporary writing, but to the very idea of noir itself, which is a sub-genre that actively fights against its own categorizations (Schmid, “Noir and Its Heretics”).

The continuous publication history of hardboiled fiction since its inception, in greater or lesser incarnations, demonstrates the sub-genre’s consistent popularity either as pulp or literature. It has been said with some assurance that the sub-genre of hardboiled fiction originated in the stories of such authors as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, in their novels and in the short stories written for the pulp fiction magazine, *Black Mask*. The origins of film noir are harder to pin down: as Marc Vernet notes in “*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom,” film noir “is a great example of cooperation—the Americans made it and the French invented it” (Vernet 1). According to some, it began with the German Expressionists and was used by American filmmakers in their adaptations of mystery novels; according to others, film noir depends as much on the actors it stars (Humphrey Bogart, Robert Montgomery, and Dick Powell are examples of this trend) as the narratives of the films (Vernet 23). Both film noir and hardboiled fiction retained their popularity through the latter part of the twentieth century, with authors like Ross MacDonal and Chester Himes and directors like Roman Polanski, David Lynch and the Coen Brothers producing noir from the forties through the turn of the new century.

Outside of film, neo-noir detective fiction has remained similarly popular, both as a mode for literary authors as well as popular or pulp novelists. Paul Auster, Martin Amis, Walter Mosley and John Banville, among others, are all examples of authors who have repeatedly produced work that fits within the hardboiled tradition. Most recently, Robert Coover, Denis Johnson and Thomas Pynchon published novels that tie them to this camp. Postmodern novelists have consistently engaged with a sub-genre many theorists have written off as formulaic and unnecessarily restrictive. If genre is indeed overly limiting, as Jacques Derrida implies in “The Law of Genre,” what does it provide that would justify this constant return to noir?

### **Understanding Genre and Sub-genre**

When addressing the problem of sub-genre and its limitations, it is necessary to have an idea of how sub-genres function in literature. As John Frow points out in “Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need: Genre Theory Today,” there is a “continuing prevalence of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy,” due in large part to the popular readings of theorists such as Jacques Derrida (Frow 1627). While Derrida states in his essay “The Law of Genre” that genre imposes a limit “and when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind,” he also posits that there may be “lodged within the heart of the law [of genre] itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination” that undermines the very rules that the law imposes (56-7). Derrida’s final conclusion, however, seems to be less optimistic than his initial supposition: genre may be inherently flawed and unstable, its rules solely oppressive, a “madness” that imposes false

boundaries (81). Frow's article and Thomas O. Beebee's book *The Ideology of Genre* attempt to combat this conception, replacing it instead with a more practical understanding of genre, which relies on the work of theorists Hans Robert Jauss and Tzvetan Todorov rather than the so-called neoclassicists.<sup>2</sup> This practical approach casts sub-genre as an integral part of the structure of a text. Instead of acting as the type of prescriptive formulas with which Derrida takes issue, sub-generic conventions serve a specific function within a text, serving as a key for readers to recognize the sub-genre and apply its specific functions. Beebee labels the function that sub-genres serve for the reader as a text's "use-value."

Genre is use-value, in the sense that it gives a reader "not understanding in the abstract and passive sense but use in the pragmatic and active sense," providing a key that allows a reader to interact with the text (Beebee 14). Even the most hackneyed of sub-genres have their use-values, Beebee contends, such as the romance novels that provide modern women with the emotional nourishment of which they may be culturally deprived in a way that men and children are not (Beebee 4).<sup>3</sup> By using specific sub-generic conventions, the text telegraphs the themes and issues with which it interacts, since specific conventions are tied to specific themes. Sub-genre is associated with the context for the textual narrative, and so "the context is never simply given separately from the sense we make of it through generic construals" (Frow 1630). John Frow, with this

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<sup>2</sup> Beebee uses "genre" throughout his book to refer to genre in the neoclassical sense as well as sub-genres. I will be using "sub-genre" to distinguish between the literary forms (epic, romance, novel, etc.) and the sub-genres of the novel, such as noir.

<sup>3</sup> To forestall any confusion, I would like to point out that Beebee is referring to the pulp sub-genre of romance (whose sub-genres include Harlequin or Regency romance) rather than either the medieval romance or the Romantic period.

statement, constructs genre as a performative aspect of literature, in that the structure of a text is as important to its interpretation as the narrative itself.

Not only does the use of genre and sub-genre in postmodernism<sup>4</sup> rely completely on “there being readers sufficiently familiar with the system of genre to appreciate the deliberate confounding of that system,” it also relies completely on readers who are able to identify the roots and connections between specific sub-generic conventions (Beebee 12). Sub-genre is a literal “user’s guide,” albeit one that requires translation, showing readers the way towards an interpretation of the text if they can only spot the correct signposts. Beebee compares the function of sub-genre to Douglas Hofstadter’s description of encoded messages:

[All] messages are really composed of three layers. . . . (1) The message itself, (2) a message about how to decode the message, and (3) a message that tells us “This is a message.” Now, the statement “this is a message” can be taken both as an act of generic classification and as a statement about the purpose a particular object should serve. (Beebee 12)

Sub-genre could be said to act on all three of these levels: encountering certain sub-generic conventions, a reader will be made aware that these conventions point to a specific way of reading the text. Use-value, then, not only describes sub-genre’s purpose within a text, but sub-genre’s purpose in the text’s external interactions: it often gives away how the text is to be used in a social context. Sub-genre is both its own ideology as well as a method of interacting with a larger enactment of an ideology; it is the

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<sup>4</sup> While this is not the place to engage in an extended discussion of the period dubbed “postmodernism,” I am taking the relevant sectors as that movement which “so blend[s] literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional rubrics” (Abrams, Harpham 203).

deformations in sub-genre that expose ideology, not the ways in which the text perfectly conforms.

This rendition of use-value does not preclude multiple sub-genres; in fact, it demands them. The interactions between sub-genres within a text create points of connection where the sub-genres overlap and, in so doing, exceed their own supposed limitations. By interacting with other genre systems, these systems evolve, a process that actively rejects the supposed stagnancy of prescriptive sub-generic conventions. The points of connection are the sites of play that Derrida sees in literary texts, where uncertainty and ambiguity reside. Working like this, sub-genre does not have a single center so much as it has multiple foci, destabilizing its own structure and allowing for nuance and an open system. How sub-genres relate to each other within the text is at least as important as how they relate separately to the content of the text. By taking the sub-genres of a particular text both by themselves and together, one can build an understanding of the structure of the text itself and a pre-awareness of the themes addressed by the text. The specific combinations of sub-genres signal the applicable themes of the text.

Of course, this understanding of sub-genre relies on a reader with a certain amount of cultural cache: enough, that is, to recognize certain aspects of sub-generic conventions and react accordingly. Each sub-genre—whether it is noir, the campus novel, science fiction or even romance—contains a set of tropes, recurring images or topics that the reader is expected to connect to a particular generic subcategory. Texts do not exist in an informational vacuum. This approach results in a kind of reverse anxiety of influence, where it is the reader's literary experience, rather than the author's, that

affects how a text is read. Hans Robert Jauss labeled this effect the “horizon of expectations,” wherein a text “predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions” (Jauss 23). The horizon of expectations, furthermore, is consistently changing shape, since each new interpretation of a specific genre changes the expectations of that genre. For a certain text to succeed as an embodiment of a sub-genre, it must exceed that sub-genre as it stands at the time of writing. Those texts that perfectly inhabit sub-genre—aside from being impossible—are seen as clichéd or hackneyed, since they only “live up” to readers’ expectations, rather than surpassing them. This is where the insistence on a combination of sub-genres becomes so important: these combinations achieve certain things that a single category might be unable to do (even discounting Beebee’s and Frow’s insistence that all texts are multi-generic, which would be unwise). With each new incarnation, the horizon of expectations broadens, making genre as well as sub-genre something that is constantly evolving: a living construct, rather than a stagnant set of rules and conditions.

Though sub-genre may be constantly changing, it still relies on certain sets of conventions that make recognition reliable; however, this means that one of the major pitfalls of sub-genre is its commodification. “Genre fiction” is seen as restrictive, turned into a commodity and nothing more, and not without reason: it is easily packaged and easily sold. Any airport or supermarket bookstore shows ample evidence of this (Beebee 1). This way of viewing sub-genre, by focusing on the places where sub-genre exceeds itself, fights that commodification. When they exceed their own sub-generic

conventions, texts break out of the “packaging” of sub-genre, undermining the very idea of commodification.

### **Noir as Sub-genre**

Unlike other forms of “genre fiction,” noir actively fights its own categorization: one of the most enduring arguments surrounding noir is over its very status as sub-genre. While many instances of hardboiled fiction involve a private detective and a crime, there are quite a few that do not, yet obviously do fit within the sub-genre. The closest to an absolute definition as is possible still seems to be Raymond Chandler’s assertion that the hardboiled sub-genre depends on an author who can portray the voices of real people, the “speech of common men,” and everything else is secondary (Chandler 15). Many of the critics in *Shades of Noir* point out that noir only exists in a certain milieu, though as Marc Vernet states, “the classical list of criteria defining film noir is totally heterogeneous and without any foundation but a rhetorical one” (Vernet 2). Any attempts to define noir very specifically seem to result in an even fuzzier definition.

David Schmid, in his talk at the 2009 NoirCon titled “Noir and Its Heretics,” defines noir as a “heretical” category, one that actively works against orthodoxy and the prescriptive rules of sub-genre. To Schmid, noir must remain subversive to the very notion of sub-genre if it is to succeed as noir. He takes critics’ confusion over noir’s status as sub-genre as a good thing, since it means that noir is actively fighting its own conversion into a set of prescriptive requirements. For all that noir consistently fights against categorization, however, it is not necessarily a progressive sub-genre: the nostalgia that often characterizes noir (or at least its protagonists) is usually associated

with conservatism. This nostalgia is tied directly to the use-value of hardboiled fiction. The general perception of noir is that of a “political critique of American society . . . a warning about the disastrous social issue of a felt mutation of power,” although of course there are exceptions (Copjec x-xi). Traditional readings of hardboiled fiction note the modernist feelings of betrayal and Depression-era anxieties, though noir also involves a heavy dose of nation-building, since the American hardboiled novel has its roots in the English detective story, yet is obviously something entirely different. The detective has been “Americanized”: in films, he has a distinctive look (that is, he looks like Humphrey Bogart or Dick Powell) and in fiction he has a certain way of speaking (Vernet 23).

Marc Vernet suggests that the hardboiled detective novel or film is a form of an American jeremiad, wherein the abandonment of traditional moral values is blamed for any and all catastrophe (Vernet 19). This categorization of detective noir into what Vernet terms a “half-political, half-religious discourse” demonstrates the consistent tendency of noir to be paired with other sub-genres. In fact, Slavoj Žižek notes that contemporary film noir tends to pair itself with other sub-genres (notably occult and science fiction, in the examples that he uses), and therefore suggests that noir constitutes a “kind of logical operator [that introduces] the same anamorphic distortion in every genre it is applied to,” such that noir is not a sub-genre at all but merely a system of codes (Žižek 200). While this may be true, for the purposes of this argument, noir acts as a sub-genre, providing a system of signals that call attention to a particular method of interpretation. Noir interacts with other sub-genres in specific ways, bringing out specific elements in a text. Žižek argues that the films *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Angel Heart* (1987), in combining the elements of science fiction or the occult with noir, have the

same outcome, namely “the radical undermining of self-identity masterminded by a mysterious, all-powerful agency” (Žižek 200). The common element between the two films is the sub-genre of noir. The conventions of noir, therefore, bring out the conventions of science fiction and the occult narrative that correspond with them—the issues of identity, progress and subjectivity that are present in all those sub-genres but become more apparent when fused with noir.

These sub-generic conventions, among others, prompt certain analyses of a text: as in the case of *Shades of Noir*, those analyses are often psychoanalytic, feminist or racial. These analyses rely heavily on the horizon of expectations that noir prompts: we expect a certain milieu from the sub-genre, along with femme fatales, wry dialogue, and a relative lack of closure. We expect corruption and violence, as well as the emphasis on the “speech of common men” that attracted Chandler. At least some of these expectations must be fulfilled in order for the text to be categorized as noir, although it could be that it only subscribes to that certain milieu, and none of the others. Yet to be successful, noir must also transcend those elements, widen the horizon and introduce something new and unexpected.

The four novels I will address in the following chapters fit this view of contemporary hardboiled fiction. They range between holding very closely to the conventions of noir, to flaunting those conventions in an almost parodical fashion. Robert Coover’s *Noir* and Megan Abbott’s *The Song Is You* closely adhere to the conventions of hardboiled fiction. As mentioned above, *Noir* is both homage and a parody of *film noir*, from the detective’s name to the visual focus and nearly unintelligible timeline. I will examine these elements through the lens of genre theory in

order to place the points where *Noir* transcends its own boundaries as homage or parody. Abbott's novel seems a straightforward interpretation of the sub-genre; Abbott herself has previously written on gender and masculinity within hardboiled fiction, and thus the gender dynamics and constructions within her novel exist in dialogue with her own criticism. *The Song Is You*, unlike *Noir*, operates rather apparently as historical fiction: whereas *Noir* is set within an indiscernible time period, *The Song Is You* is specifically placed within the years between 1949 and 1955.

Mat Johnson's graphic novel, *Incognegro* (illustrated by Warren Pleece), merges the superhero tale with noir in the form of an undercover black journalist from Prohibition-era Harlem. Through the themes of perception and subjectivity present in noir, *Incognegro* addresses issues of racism and "passing." Thomas Pynchon's novel *Inherent Vice* has been labeled "psychedelic surfer noir" and forms the third installment of his California Trilogy. A modified version of Vernet's American jeremiad, *Inherent Vice* mourns the end of the sixties and the destruction of the possibilities that era heralded. These interpretations of noir change the sub-genre in a similar way as *Blade Runner* and *Angel Heart*, adding new themes and focusing on existing ones. The narratives of *Incognegro* and *Inherent Vice* are concerned with systems of perception and identity: in *Incognegro*, those systems are largely formed by race, whereas psychotropic drugs influence those of *Inherent Vice*. I will also examine how these novels function not only as noir, but also as historical fiction, since they are both set in periods other than the ones in which they were written.

Contemporary authors merge sub-genres and introduce current themes. In doing so, they create interplays and points of connection that cast the sub-genre as something

new, even in its more traditional forms. What is it about the sub-genre of noir, then, that lends itself to contemporary themes, and where do these novels transcend the original conventions of noir? I propose that these iterations of contemporary noir, like much contemporary sub-genre fiction, rely on the convergence with other sub-genres in order to successfully transcend the boundaries of hardboiled fiction. Noir, furthermore, is so useful to contemporary authors because of its status as a heretical sub-genre; in actively fighting against its own legitimization, noir undermines what many see as the stagnancy of sub-genre. Authors grasp onto noir for its thematic associations and the milieu associated with it, which allows their narratives to develop the themes already contained within the sub-genre itself. Noir's themes of corruption and the threatening environments constructed within the sub-genre coincide all too perfectly with the contemporary world, where corporations appear to wield more power than individuals and natural disasters continuously bombard even the most populated of areas.

The epigraph, which comes from Robert Coover's *Noir*, is a statement made by Blanche, Noir's assistant and the apparent mastermind of the entire plot. She tells Noir that the reason so many characters became involved in her plot is because her story was purposefully left full of holes. Perhaps more than any other quote from these novels, Blanche's statement provides the key to understanding how noir functions as a sub-genre in these texts. If sub-generic conventions act to fulfill desire, and noir is notable for its consistent lack of closure, then encoded within the sub-genre of noir is a constant deferral of satisfaction. When the mystery is solved, the gaps fill and close off the narrative. If hardboiled fiction presents unsatisfactory solutions, it propels the narrative beyond its supposed end. Noir may be a sub-genre of desire, but it is of desire unfulfilled.

### **Black and White and Red All Over: Sub-generic Convention in *Noir***

Though noir has never exactly fallen out of favor, the recent resurgence in literary hardboiled fiction forces a closer look at the comparisons between the contemporary era and that of the classic noir novel. Many would argue that the traditional hardboiled sub-genre grew out of anxieties surrounding the Depression and World War Two. Traditional gender roles began to crumble in the face of growing female involvement in the workplace, as well as the loss of work many men experienced during the Depression. Frankly, as Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo put it in *Noir Anxiety*, the hardboiled novel is still feeling the effects of “the precarious sexual divide left in the wake of the demolition of gender stereotypes that have confounded [noir] since its beginnings with its tough women and emasculated men” (189). While some of these novels were written before the stock market fell in October 2008, that crash is only one of the similarities between the contemporary period and the heyday of noir. Union membership is at a historic low since that period, and the introduction of the so-called “retrosexual” into popular discourse indicates the cultural fascination with the social and sexual mores of bygone eras—eras, of course, that were rife with a more virulent sexism than anything that occurs in the U.S. today. The sub-generic conventions of noir, problematic as they are, can be used to critique this current era as well as they did their own.

*Noir*, Robert Coover’s 2010 hardboiled novel, lacks any temporal or physical markers that would situate it in a specific place. This abstraction places focus on the function of the sub-genre, and the nearly farcical treatment of noir—even in the midst of homage—turns the novel into something of an essay, albeit one with plot. *Noir* begins

with the detective, Philip M. Noir, standing in a morgue.<sup>5</sup> His client has been murdered and her body has disappeared. The timeline of the novel is extremely non-linear and seems as if the narrative is constructed through a form of free-association. The story “begins” with a widow, dressed and veiled in black, walking into Noir’s office and hiring him to find out who killed her husband. Her story is complex and unbelievable, but Noir is too distracted by her legs to notice, although his assistant Blanche points this out to him later. Noir embarks on a circuitous hunt after a possible mob boss nicknamed Fat Agnes with proliferating doubles and a fondness for smutty miniature figurines, all the while hunted himself by the police captain, Blue. Flame, Noir’s lover, Blanche, his assistant, and the widow, who remains nameless, all lend Noir as much assistance as they can, in a case that appears to be as intangible as the widow herself.

The sub-generic conventions in *Noir* are easy to spot: the rainy streets that crowd one another, the perpetual night, the private eye and a femme fatale veiled and dressed in black. Each of these conventions works as a form of what Oliver and Trigo label in psychoanalytic terms as condensation. While the figures of the city, the private eye or the femme fatale are individual characters in themselves, they are also “various elements of different ideas or desires . . . combined into one figure or composite image” (xvii). The private eye does not *represent* white masculinity; instead, he constantly *refers* to it in such a way that these traditional assumptions are always already present in his actions. With the introduction of a certain “type,” all the baggage bound up in that type is immediately integrated into the expectations of the reader.

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<sup>5</sup> To forestall any confusion over my use of pronouns, I will be treating Philip M. Noir as a traditionally focalized narrator for the early sections of my discussion of *Noir*. I will end this section by addressing the use of the second person.

The femme fatale is a well-known figure of noir. She is the archetypal spider woman, imbued with a fatal sexuality that is usually, though not always (as all of these conventions go), juxtaposed against a “good girl,” a woman who is “innocent” compared to the femme fatale. She is “whiter” than the femme fatale’s often “Orientalized” presentation. The good girl could be an absent wife or sister, a desexualized character that is powerless and therefore non-threatening. The femme fatale, on the other hand, is all presence. She provokes desire, but also anxiety. There is a certain look to the femme fatale, an “iconography: highly made-up, long clawlike fingernails, tight revealing clothes, high heels, bad-girl looks, and bad-girl actions, smoking, drinking, and sex” (Oliver, Trigo 189). The femme fatale dresses to create a persona or a mask, because her body is a weapon. The femme fatale embodies a white male fantasy in order to manipulate the hero, who assumes that what he sees is the truth. She is the manifestation of hardboiled novelist Cornell Woolrich’s “odd, persistent and rather terrifying conviction that by sheer will one can transform oneself into the complete image of another’s desire and thereby destroy him” (Reid, Walker 83). Sometimes the femme fatale is a love interest, and she is usually a betrayer. As indicated by her designation, desire for the femme fatale is nearly always fatal—either for her or for her lover.

The most overt embodiment of the femme fatale in *Noir* is in the character of the widow. When she first walks in to Noir’s office, it is dusk: “maybe she planned it that way, entering as though bringing on the night. Or dragging it in her wake” (Coover 11). Many of the light cues signal the widow’s presence; as stated above, she is often portrayed in silhouette or in shadow. The widow exudes “a kind of presence,” since she is unusual, enigmatic, and seems always to be referring to something *more*, something

unpronounceable, or outside of the symbolic order (Coover 12). Noir cannot even look at her entire body, though the disjointed representation of the widow's body can be attributed to her "Otherness" or to Noir's male gaze. The widow is presented as "fragmented, sexualized body parts," her hands, legs or breasts seemingly existing independent of her self (Oliver, Trigo 189).

Even as her body is fragmented under Noir's gaze, the widow retains a measure of power over him. His sexual attraction to her allows her to manipulate him. When the widow walks into the office as Noir is waiting for his laundry while wearing Blanche's underwear, he is caught (literally) exposed, and her reaction shows that she is the one in power in this situation:

You were still staggering about the room in the tight undies . . . fighting the urge to fall out on the sofa, when the widow turned up. Mr. Noir, she said, as though somewhat exasperated. I never know what to expect. Are you really a private detective, or do I have the wrong address? (Coover 47)

The widow's exasperation means that walking in on Noir like this does not upset her; rather, her response is condescending. For all that she supposedly needs his help, she feels superior to him, largely due to his unprofessional behavior in her presence. This question, of what Noir "really" is, represents one of the many methods the widow uses to keep Noir off balance and under control. Noir's sexual attraction to the widow makes him willing to believe whatever she tells him; furthermore, he is willing to believe what she *shows* him. Her persona is just a mask. Whenever Noir begins to make headway on the widow's case, she shows up at his office to tell him of new elements in her past—

incest, her criminally inclined brother, her father's abuse—in order, it seems, to distract him.

Critics point to the femme fatale as evidence of women's oppression and empowerment, often in the same breath. The femme fatale is usually punished for her sexuality; the protagonist either murders her or allows her to be murdered by another. Still, her sexuality affords her a measure of power that other female characters lack. The femme fatale, as a deceptive, sexually aggressive woman, is often associated with the threat of castration. In *Noir*, sexual attraction to the widow is *literally* emasculating: her first boyfriend is drugged and castrated by her father. "My father was always a great experimenter. Perhaps my sweetheart overindulged. He awoke several hours later less a man than he was before," implying, of course, that the widow's father castrated the football player for his sexual attraction (and activity) towards his daughter (Coover 140).

This femme fatale is complicated, however, by the ultimate revelation that Blanche was the widow all along. Throughout the novel, it has been apparent that Noir's Girl Friday is much more competent than he himself is; this is one of the reasons that Noir's insistence that he knew it was Blanche all along rings false (Coover 185). Blanche, of course, is "one tough cookie," and when Noir tries to comment on her appearance and turn her into the sexualized femme fatale that she played as the widow, she fires her gun at him and forces him back into his seat (Coover 188). Blanche will not allow Noir to fetishize her and thus reduce her power over him. She is able to maintain her position of power through physical force as well as narrative. Blanche is an extra-linguistic form of Oliver and Trigo's "natural translator"—women who are able to navigate noir—because she is both the femme fatale and her "good girl alter ego"

(Oliver, Trigo xxvi, 228). In this case, the femme fatale is not just a doubling of the detective, but of herself as well.

In the hardboiled novel, the femme fatale is one of the primary actors whose decisions and will drive the plot. No other female character, until the advent of a female detective, was allowed to have quite so much narrative power. This narrative power, combined with the sexual aggression so often attributed to the femme fatale, makes her at least as dangerous as the male protagonist. She is possibly even more dangerous than he; the femme fatale is rarely afflicted with the ontological anxiety that frequently paralyzes the hardboiled protagonist. Blanche's narrative force is such that even characters not directly involved in her game with Noir find themselves playing a part in the story she has constructed. In a twist on the femme fatale, Blanche's persona was fatal for neither Noir nor herself; in fact, the entire scheme was designed to save Noir from himself (and his disastrously atrocious skill as a private eye). Though her narrative was fatal for a host of other characters—notably Fingers, Rats, Michiko and the panhandler—both Blanche and Noir emerge relatively unscathed.

In *Noir*, as in much traditional hardboiled fiction, the city is another type of femme fatale; it is desirable yet fatal, seeming to exist only to punish the hardboiled protagonist for unknown crimes. Classic *film noir* used “impossible camera angles” to create a disconcerting effect, making those scenes that supposedly took place in cities seem cramped and warped (Vernet 7). The buildings both tower over the viewer and appear as if they are about to crumble; there is tension in the very framing of the image. Classic hardboiled authors would use this technique as much as they could; for example, Philip Marlowe's meditations on architecture and the spaces he inhabits are well

documented. The city, then, is a physical manifestation of the anxiety inherent in noir. Oliver and Trigo relate it to Freud's idea of the mind as a city:

It is the plethora of walls in Freud's eternal city that makes it an absurd, unimaginable, unrepresentable image. There is a direct correlation between the superimposing walls, or the continuous stratification of the psychic apparatus, and loss of meaning . . . . It's as if [Freud] could not stop [himself] from producing buildings upon buildings, walls upon walls, layers upon layers for the mind, until there was no room to breathe, until the mind represented by the image was so compressed as to be drained of life. (Oliver, Trigo 214)

The city in the hardboiled novel operates in its relation to the protagonist in much the same way as Freud's city. It is malevolent or inescapable because it has been constructed and maintained by a corrupt system. Architecture in noir, similarly, is often a literal representation of the protagonist's psyche.

The city in *Noir* is as malevolent as any of the cities in classic noir. It is "the urban nightmare," the "vile bleak life of the inner organs . . . bubbling with a violent emptiness" (Coover 42). *Noir* compares the city's roads, alleys, tunnels and passageways to internal organs that twist back upon themselves and move—more specifically, to internal organs experiencing indigestion. The streets of *Noir*'s city are filled with bile, yet it is "sinister," unnatural (Coover 42). The city's indigestion makes it threatening. It is nearly impossible to navigate, but there are certain characters who seem to have free rein of the city's underground ways. These characters, interestingly, seem to mostly be women—Mad Meg, Michiko, Flame and even Blanche to an extent are able to travel

through the city in ways that Noir cannot. There are tunnels crossing through the city, old smuggler's routes to which Flame, Noir's lover, provides him access.

These tunnels, combined with the alleys down which Noir follows panhandlers, homeless women or prostitutes, suggest a city as dense and contorted as a rabbit warren, pocked with bars, brothels and gambling dens. The city distorts space, allowing Noir to "catch a glimpse of the pale blue police building glowing faintly in the wet night. You shouldn't be able to see it from here, but you do. The city can be like that sometimes" (Coover 161). Certain parts of the city can come into contact with locations distinctly separated from them just as they draw away from places to which they are connected. While the police station is visible from Loui's, Noir's journey there takes twice as long as it should, as "everything's stretching out. The blocks are longer somehow" (Coover 161). This warped sense of space characterizes many of Noir's interactions with the city. Though it cannot control his actions (there is another force at work there), the city can still cause him pain.

Even as Noir describes the city as sinister or malicious, he demonstrates his obsession and love for the city, along with many of the male characters. They describe the city as "she," a siren-like figure who lulls them in and then tries to kill them (Coover 161). The city is the woman of their dreams who convinces them to strip in the middle of the street and then runs away laughing (Coover 171). In the final scene, when Noir is walking with Blanche, he speaks directly to the city: "You reply, silently addressing the dark naked city: You, sweetheart. Joe was right. We were made for each other" (Coover 189). Even as the city turns on him, Noir knows that he is "at home nowhere and anywhere," comfortable even in the malignancy into which the city has evolved (Coover

41). He feels most comfortable, in fact, with the homeless; Mad Meg, for whom Noir saves buttons and knickknacks, and the panhandler, who tells Noir meandering stories of women and manholes and accepts donuts as pay, though he apparently never eats them.

Noir follows that panhandler through the streets on three separate occasions. At the end of each one, he is knocked out after smelling a familiar odor only to wake up in some unfamiliar location. The first time the police rob him and Blue threatens to “work him over” at the station, the second time he wakes up in the morgue with a tattoo, and the third he wakes up in a hall of mirrors for a final confrontation with the missing widow. These attacks are always accompanied by a familiar smell that Noir cannot place, one of many unnoticed clues that contribute to the overall confusion of the text. The last two times, Noir begins to follow the panhandler with the same sense of resignation, as if this is an action he is required to take. Just as Noir begins to think about the panhandler after seeing him through the window, he finds himself “as though compelled, following him again, drifting into mazy dimly-lit inner-city streets in the hapless way one drifts into a repeating nightmare. Of course, there has been a transition,” but the action begins to occur before the transition is even addressed (Coover 50). The panhandler leads Noir through twisted streets until Noir no longer knows where he is. The city, during that chase, seems to morph into a maze, labyrinthine but with blind alleys and dead ends. At the end of each scene, the exact point that he loses the panhandler or, in the case of the last scene, when he finds the panhandler’s body, Noir is attacked and rendered unconscious.

The city’s threat and the malevolence of public space in hardboiled fiction often correlate to a surprising amount of safety imparted by personal spaces. While public

spaces (cities, docks, bars) may be dangerous, personal spaces, such as offices or homes, are substantially less so. Perhaps this is due to the association of a space with the person who inhabits it in such a way, as Fredric Jameson states in “The Synoptic Chandler,” that the space is constructed in “a kind of substitution of an architectural language for that of individual characters: it is not so much that these ‘people’ in Chandler are their spaces, as that these spaces in Chandler are ‘characters’ or *actants*” (Jameson 43). For all the attacks that occur when Noir is walking through the city, his personal space is surprisingly secure. The widow is able to enter Noir’s office without his realizing, as are various other characters. Noir, however, seems to have nearly absolute control over their actions when they are in the office—except for, perhaps, the widow, but her presence in his office is complicated by the technical fact that it is her space too, since she is actually Blanche. When Blue breaks into the office, he is repulsed by the women’s underwear (Blanche’s) that Noir is wearing, and gives him ten minutes in which to get dressed before Blue returns to arrest him (Coover 58). Noir, of course, uses those ten minutes to escape.

In hardboiled fiction, space takes on a character of its own, and personal spaces associate themselves with those who reside within them. When the space is a city, it takes on the malevolence of the corrupt systems that operate within it, and the schizophrenic disassociation that confuses those attempting to navigate it. The city becomes “a hallucinatory night town, the definitive *noir* landscape; it can ‘look familiar,’ even humanized in the sunlight, but is incapable of disguising its malice after dark” (Reid, Walker 78). The city’s malice is temporally specific; during the day it may seem

non-threatening, but it becomes actively malicious at night. In *Noir*, that's the only time of day it is.

Nearly all of *Noir* takes place during the night: at one point, told to meet someone at sundown, Noir thinks, "Sundown? That thing still came up?" (Coover 146). This temporal specificity, besides making for an amusing joke at Noir's expense (like most of the novel), is one of the markers of sub-genre convention. There is quite a bit of attention paid to light in *Noir*, from the opening lines ("You are in the morgue. Where the light is weird") to the depictions of "puddled shadows" and the "pale luminosity" of a fleeing figure (Coover 9, 12, 70). The chiaroscuro descriptions, like the fragmented visions Noir experiences, are constructed in homage to the visual aesthetics of *film noir*.

Light in *Noir* provides scenes with dramatic effect. The widow is often silhouetted against a hanging bulb, or a shadow falls across her face at just the right angle to hide her features. The "light is weird" in the morgue because it is a place of death that stays brightly lit even at night, unlike the ice-cream parlor or Flame's bar, living spaces that stay well-lit. Death in *Noir* happens at the docks, in back alleys and in tunnels, in places where the light flickers and changes, where it is "nightmarishly dark" (Coover 9). One can assume that the morgue is filled with fluorescent light, making everything visible. There are no shadows in the morgue, making it all the more astonishing when the widow's body is discovered missing: who could steal something in such a brightly lit place? No one; as it turns out, the body is missing because she walked away.

### ***Noir*, Interpretative Violence, and Transcending Sub-genre**

Within the narrative, Noir is subject to multiple acts of violence, usually at the hands of an unknown assailant. The beatings are traumatic, not only for Noir, but for the reader as well, who is implicated in Noir's own pain through the "you," Coover's use of the second person. Noir's beatings are usually presented in figurative language rather than explicitly. "You were being dragged through an old film projector. . . . Your sprocket holes were catching, tearing. Your head was caught in a mechanism" (Coover 42). Noir characterizes his attack as if he were a reel of film, something which captures images and replays them either for education or entertainment. The beating interrupts his ability to replay the images—that is, to recall his memories—and possibly damages them permanently. This image of the torn film reel in the context of a physical attack creates a deeply disturbing impression. The beatings and torture he receives at the hands of the police are projected onto the reader. "Do the dead feel cold? Is that what hell is? A frozen eternity living with the pain you died with?" (Coover 54). It is not just Noir's pain; it has become the reader's pain as well. Like most instances of projection, however, the being on whom the experience is projected does not necessarily cooperate. While some readers may certainly feel a heightened sense of sympathy for Noir's pain, "his" experiences are not theirs. The existence of any reader as an independent entity precludes such absolute empathy with Noir from taking place.

By not just preventing the empathic connection between reader and narrator—that is something already inherent in any narrative—but also forcing an awareness of that prevention, Coover essentially suspends the possibility for ethical judgment within the bounds of the narrative. Noir misses clues and because he is unable to recognize them as

such, they go unnoticed. In retrospect they may appear, but only as an awareness of something forgotten: “Well, there *was* a clue, but you didn’t recognize it as one at the time and didn’t tell her about it” (Coover 14). The clue to which “you” refer turns out to be irrelevant, but neither the reader nor the narrator is aware of that. The use of the second person displaces the responsibility for the narrative onto the narratee, the one whose actions are narrated. The reader is the viewer, and what Noir sees is what the reader sees; this is more pronounced than in a traditionally focalized narrative or even a narration by an unreliable narrator. An unreliable narrator may present a skewed version of the facts, but the focus of the narrator is often more dispersed than it seems to be in *Noir*. In *Noir*, the extremely subjective narration prevents the reader from solving the mystery until Noir himself does. It is unlike the classic detective novel (the whodunit) where one is expected to solve the mystery along with the detective, to piece together clues and narrative threads in order to reach a conclusion. “You,” however, are so reticent about the case that the solution comes as a surprise to everyone involved.

The second-person narration is one of the most innovative moves Coover makes in *Noir*. In a sub-genre that focuses so closely on perception—that is, after all, the purpose of a detective: to *detect*—the dominant mode of narration is first person or, sometimes, an internally focalized third person. The subjective “I,” who observes and processes, who forms opinions and acts as mediation for the events of the novel, lies at the heart of hardboiled fiction. The “private eye” is named for the gaze of the detective, the need to know. It is also the private *I*, the knowing subject, the one who investigates. The nature of the first person narrative closes off interpretation to a certain degree. The hardboiled detective is the storyteller, and while there is room for interpretation on the

reader's part, there is a strict separation between the narrator and the reader. The lines are blurred in a first-person narrative more so than in an omniscient third-person narrative, where the reader stands in the part of voyeur, rather than self-replacement.

In *Noir*, these boundaries are removed completely so that the reader appears to be as complicit in the narrative as Phil M. Noir "himself" is. Where there would usually be a first person pronoun to distinguish the narrator's actions, or a third person pronoun assigned to a protagonist, the insertion of the second person narrows the distance between the narrator and the reader. The reader is usually the "focus" of the narrative, the listener to whom a story is directed, but with this move the reader also becomes the "source" of the narrative, the main actor whose decisions drive the plot. Since the reader cannot control the plot, however, this move simultaneously acts to distance the reader from the text and heighten the absurdity. As Brian Richardson notes in his essay "The Poetics and Politics of Second Person," the use of the second person "brings with it an element of instability . . . [and an] absence of clarity" that would be dispelled by the third or first person (314). Within *Noir*, this instability refers back to the subjectivity of the hardboiled novel, where the mystery was far more subjective than the collection of facts presented by its predecessor, the classic detective story. The interpretative violence is no longer simply the responsibility of the reader; there is an act of violence in the novel's relation to its reader as well. The address is startling, disorienting; this type of narrative function is unusual and therefore disruptive.

Robert Coover has worked in past novels using both pastiche and parody as forms of appropriation as composition. Both of these modes are dependent upon the prior knowledge of the reader to develop their structure: pastiche is a collection of references,

and it is only fully successful if those references are understood. Sub-genre operates in much the same way as pastiche and parody, and Coover's use of sub-genre in such an over-blown, humorous way has been labeled parody by some and homage by others. *Noir* appears to be an attempt to reify noir by fulfilling as many sub-generic conventions as possible. Since one of the conventions of noir, however, is a lack of closure that prevents such satisfaction, this attempt is constantly deferred. In its attempt at satisfying what must remain perpetually unsatisfied, *Noir* becomes a treatise on the function of sub-generic convention in hardboiled fiction. *Noir's* collection of sub-generic conventions, paired with the use of the second person and the absurdity of the novel create something more complex than either, that works in such a way as to expand the horizon of expectations with which one approaches the sub-genre of noir.

While Coover may be working towards a theory of sorts, Megan Abbot's novel is far more concrete. Not only is *The Song Is You* located in specific temporal and physical spaces, but the narrative is also deceptively simple and conventional—in the sense that it obeys the sub-generic conventions of noir. The interactions of genre and narrative in Abbott's novel, while subtler than those in Coover's, parallel *Noir's* enactment of those same conventions.

### **Critiquing Hardboiled Masculinity: Abbott and *The Street Was Mine***

Before Megan Abbott wrote her first novel (*Die A Little*), she published a book of criticism titled *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film*. In this book, Abbott performs an analysis of hardboiled fiction through a psychoanalytic lens, incorporating race and gender theory into her critique of white masculinity in the hardboiled novel. She discusses the way the hardboiled “tough guy” figure evolved from the thirties to the fifties, as the figure of the “noble loner” became admirable during the Depression and then suspicious during the fifties and the McCarthy era. The hardboiled loner, who strictly avoids marriage and the family unit, became suspect for operating outside of the Oedipal structure and, moreover, refusing to be a part of it. This family structure became so problematic as critics of the sub-genre drew attention to the homosocial elements of the novels, and decried the hardboiled hero’s solitude as a marker of homosexuality (despite, or perhaps because of, classic noir’s frequent inclusion of homosexual characters as villains). His aversion to family threatened the changing societal ideal of the fifties, which prioritized the nuclear family and a strict separation of gender roles.

Abbott concentrates on the construction of masculinity and whiteness in the hardboiled novel and film. She sees previous criticism’s focus on the femme fatale and its construction through the male hardboiled characters as a failure to analyze masculinity itself, as the questionable construction of masculinity in the novels is in large part responsible for the similarly questionable construction of femininity, and cannot be taken for granted, as it so often is by critics. This previous form of analysis often takes whiteness and masculinity as the norm against which race and femininity are juxtaposed,

a problematic assertion in itself and more so within the structure of the hardboiled novel, where masculinity is often figured as unstable even before the incursion of an Other. The white urban male in this American city perceives himself to be under constant threats to his masculinity and whiteness in these novels, whether subtle or overt. Thus, he is constantly required to protect himself from these threats, usually through rhetorical means:

[This] need to affirm his whiteness, his conventional masculinity, is not mere means of identification but, as we will see, crucial to the mechanisms by which he distances himself from ‘Others’ . . . (Abbott, *Street* 11)

These “Others” may be political, racial, ethnic or gendered Others, or they could be separated from the protagonist in some different way. However, as Abbott notes, the threats do not only come from outside; the hardboiled hero finds his masculinity under attack even before the entrance of a threatening Other. His body has become the site of instability, as his physical reactions often become involuntary or even disembodied. Abbott notes the recurrence of such moments where the protagonist hears his own voice asking questions, or the prevalence of unconsciousness in the hardboiled novel. This disassociation and loss of control is one of the main ways that the hardboiled novel problematizes the commonly held construction of “tough guy” masculinity, against the commonly held perceptions of masculinity at the time, which were themselves becoming problematized by the Depression and its aftermath.

Although Abbott rejects the image of the femme fatale as the only one juxtaposing the white masculinity of the hardboiled novel, her analysis does depend in some part on the existence of the female character in order to oppose the masculine one

and present something against which he may define himself. These characters do not necessarily have power on their own; often race, class or economic restraints curtail what social or sexual power they may have. What power the femme fatale does have is usually afforded her due to the male protagonist's own assumptions or the instability of his own identity (Abbott, *Street* 40). Abbott notes that the male protagonists often reject female sexual advances or, in the rare cases where those advances are accepted, allow the women to be more-or-less punished in some way for their (sexual) transgression.<sup>6</sup>

Abbott distinguishes the forms of the hardboiled novel into two categories, the private eye novel and the crime novel. This split exists in the “significant thematic and ideological differences between the crime novels of men doomed by their own lusts and greed, and the detective novels of Chandler, in which the private eye seeks to save the innocent while remaining true to personal ideals” (Abbott, *Street* 11). As we shall see in Abbott's own novels—which are usually formatted as crime novels—the distinction between the private eye as an honorable man and the sap or accidental murderer of the crime novel, while all but erased in their perceptions of threats to their identity, appears as a major element in their interactions with and construction of the narrative of the hardboiled novel. Since the majority of Abbott's narrator-protagonists are women, their relationship with the hardboiled narrative is already destabilized. Abbott has stated in interviews that she is drawn to stories of marginalized characters, “people who are trapped, or who trap themselves” (Kelly, “The Ladies of Noir”). As her novels usually

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<sup>6</sup> Note the examples of Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* or Dolores Gonzalez in *The Little Sister*, who are respectively arrested and murdered. Gonzalez is more problematic: as a false “Hot Latina” (to use an anachronistic cliché), she is a grotesque caricature, and Philip Marlowe's inaction at her murder is read as both judgment and resignation.

center around women in an almost explicitly male-dominated sub-genre (both in terms of writers and characters), the focus on a male protagonist in *The Song Is You* draws attention to the assumptions of masculinity as the norm in much the same way as Abbott does in *The Street Was Mine*.

### **Male Control and Masculine Subjectivity in *The Song Is You***

Megan Abbott's second novel, *The Song Is You*, is based around the historical disappearance of Hollywood starlet Jean Spangler, and incorporates many real-life elements of the era into the fictionalized account. Jean Spangler was a bit-part actress and a single mother who disappeared in 1949. The police found her purse and a note addressed to an unknown man in an empty lot. *The Song Is You* takes those elements and merges them with the story of the fictional Gil Hopkins, whose actions the night of Spangler's disappearance may have been connected to her possible abduction by the acting duo Gene Merrel and Marv Sutton. Hop is not directly involved with Spangler's disappearance, but his guilt stems from his actions in covering up whatever crime was committed. When Iolene, a friend of Jean Spangler, shows up at Hop's office two years later, Hop scrambles to cover his tracks while simultaneously attempting to discover the real cause of Spangler's disappearance. The trail leads him from the house of Spangler's sister, who was disguised that night as a dancer named Miss Hotcha, to the Red Lily, the brothel where Spangler was attacked by Merrel and Sutton. Though Hop discovers Jean Spangler alive at Merry Lake, the novel does not necessarily have a "happy" ending. Hop's promotion comes at the expense of his friendships, not to mention Iolene's life.

Gil “Hop” Hopkins, the male protagonist, begins the novel as a tabloid reporter known for writing “fluff” pieces about actors and actresses for *Cinestar*. He becomes a “studio publicity man” following Spangler’s disappearance and Hop’s involvement in the cover-up (Abbott, *Song* 16). Hop’s job is to clean up after actors and spin the story for the press so the studio (never named in the book, but definitely MGM) never has its name associated with questionable events or characters. Hop, therefore, is introduced with a certain amount of narrative control: his job, literally, is to tell stories. This makes it all the more disconcerting when he becomes unable to control the course of what is supposedly his own narrative.

Unlike the rest of Abbott’s protagonists, Gil Hopkins begins the novel from a place of power. Hop’s job is to protect the studio by, effectively, rewriting disastrous narratives. The first scene after the prologue illustrates Hop’s storytelling ability and his use of it on behalf of the studio to manipulate actresses: “He’d spent just three weeks knocking out press releases before proving to the big guys how smooth his tongue was. Now he was the one they went to. Or one of them, at least” (Abbott, *Song* 16). The final sentence—“Or one of them, at least”—demonstrates Hop’s uneasiness in his position. He knows that, for all his charm and eloquence, his position is one of many. As the job he is undertaking in this scene proves, everyone in Hollywood is expendable. Barbara Payton, the “slutty starlet,” has been deemed a risk by MGM, and Hop is tasked with getting rid of her “sweet and soft enough to avoid lawsuits” (Abbott, *Song* 17). This is the way things are done in Abbott’s Hollywood. Hop relies on his charm and his control to manipulate people and stories into doing what he wants, controlled at all times by the studio that signs his paycheck.

Payton is the primary target of this charm, and she appears three times through the course of the novel. Her appearances reveal Gil Hopkins's normally stable character as the persona he presents to the studio and to those over whom he has power. During Payton's first appearance, Hop, after attempting to convince her to leave the studio and return to Warner Brothers without a fuss, is forced to persuade her to marry one of her lovers in order to dispel the rumors that surround Payton. Hop's professed fondness for Payton and for women in general is interspersed with moments where he unknowingly betrays his misogyny. They begin early on, in Hop's recognition of the eroticism of Payton's story of being raped in a bathroom by her friend's father: "[The story] always had its own deathless power to arouse. As it was meant to, even if they didn't know it (some of them, like Barbara, did)" (Abbott, *Song* 22). The story is presented as false, as just one in a series of versions that actresses have told to Hop in bids for pity. He is practically inured to tales of sexual abuse and domestic woe, since "girls like that know what they're getting into" (Abbott, *Song* 39). These offhand judgments align Hop with his hardboiled predecessors, who respect "nice girls" but are not comfortable with explicit sexuality.

Payton's final appearance effectively bookends the narrative, describing her as a ruined star: "Oh, Barbara, [Hop] thought, all that's left are the tits and your dirty mouth" (Abbott, *Song* 237). Payton has turned from the object of Hop's efforts to a contemptible figure not worthy of them, a "whore who got lucky . . . [whose] luck finally ran out" (Abbott, *Song* 237). Hop's contempt for Payton is indicative of his own uneasiness in his position; their dirty secrets are able to destroy both their careers if they are revealed. The

main difference lies in Hop's frantic attempts to keep his secrets concealed while Payton seems perfectly willing to make headlines.

Gil Hopkins's involvement in Jean Spangler's disappearance, though not explicitly laid out in the prologue, is enough to make him a liability if it were ever to become public knowledge. As Hop's recollection of that night states, "when the brunette Jean went missing, Bix [the press agent] called and Hopkins helped him out. End of story" (Abbott, *Song* 33). Obviously, for Hop it was not the end of the story; after two years he recognizes immediately what Iolene's visit is about when he sees the "spiny fear" in her face (Abbott, *Song* 29). Iolene's visit sparks Hop's spiraling loss of control that continues throughout the narrative until his discovery of Jean Spangler in Merry Lake. What Abbott terms "male hysteria" in *The Street Was Mine* is figured in noir through the bodies of the male characters as well as through their loss of control and, often, consciousness.

While Gil Hopkins never loses consciousness in *The Song Is You*, at points he loses total control of his own body, either through the effects of alcohol or heightened emotion. This phenomenon is usually evinced through Hop's voice: he can "hear his own voice talking," the words "issu[ing] from his mouth in long, taffy strings," a voice that "didn't sound like himself at all" (Abbott, *Song* 61, 57). Since Hop's words are how he makes his living—hiding information and spinning it—these moments effectively destabilize his internal balance, the sense of self that depends so heavily on Hop's ability to manipulate and control others (however benevolently). When Hop loses control, it is nearly always in an interaction with a woman. The split between his voice and his perception are startling, especially considering his introductory scene wherein he talks

Barbara Payton first into leaving MGM without a lawsuit, and then into marrying one of her boyfriends in order to quell the rumors surrounding her social life. Abbott marks similar splits between speech and awareness in Chandler's Marlowe novels:

[The] void is a space of splitting allowing him to judge himself as if he were both himself and an Other. Other times, however, it offers Marlowe, at the most basic level, a method of self-effacement in which he surrenders response and responsibility. (Abbott, *Street* 58)

Her analysis provides an insight into this function within *The Song Is You*: if this phenomenon of hearing his own voice is a site of "splitting" that allows the narrator a space in which to judge his own actions, then Hop finds these spaces where he becomes bereft of his control useful in some manner. Since these splits mainly occur in Hop's interactions with women, they can be read as moments of introspection where he analyzes his own behavior and finds it reprehensible, as he is usually shocked or horrified by what he hears himself saying (Abbott, *Song* 57).

The moments when Gil Hopkins's speech and perception split are mainly in his interactions with his ex-wife, Midge, or with Frannie Adair, the "girl reporter." Both of these women (as with nearly all the acting women in *The Song Is You*, save perhaps Barbara Payton) embody some part of the femme fatale: Midge is mysterious and deadly and always capable of forcing Hop to lose control, and Frannie, though more benign than Midge, is still presented as a hard-nosed and amoral journalist like Gil Hopkins. These women are a threat to Hop's masculinity, not in the sense that they actively try to emasculate him (though Midge does that), but in the sense that they challenge the systems by which Hop has constructed his "masculine" identity. Frannie Adair is a cute

novelty as the “girl reporter,” until she proves to be as good or better at her job than Hop is at his. When he barges into her apartment and “accidentally” tells her everything he knows about Jean Spangler’s disappearance, she follows up on his story exactly the way any reporter would. Thus Hop is left scrambling to cover his tracks and protect himself from this very real threat. Interestingly, Hop ultimately protects himself not by spinning the story the way he would for the studio, but by giving up narrative control; first to Jean Spangler, who is discovered alive in Merry Lake, and then to those who were being blackmailed by Spangler and Iolene, by returning the photos and documents to them.

Another facet of Abbott’s male hysteria, one that is often figured in terms of exaggerated emotional or physical response as well as a split between the body and the narrator’s perception, is very much in evidence within *The Song Is You*. Gil Hopkins’s discovery of Iolene’s body prompts a narration filled with physical description but very little monologue, in contrast with most of Hop’s narration up until that point. When he sees her body, Hop feels “his body rise out of his skin,” and his focalized narration becomes distanced, without the amount of internal monologue that characterizes much of the novel. Within this scene, the narrative becomes mainly movement, action: Hop “took several long breaths. He walked slowly to the bathroom and turned the water on. . . . He walked out of the bathroom. Then he walked through the dining room and into the kitchen” (Abbott, *Song* 165). It is only after Hop has found the files that Iolene was using as blackmail and read through some of them that his usual narration returns and, in returning, begins to disintegrate. The smell of Iolene’s death—a sensory phenomenon, part of the body rather than the mind—cuts through Hop’s detached haze and sparks a memory of Iolene that falls apart into a disjointed flood of other memories.

The discovery of Iolene's body is an overt intrusion of death into Hop's already disturbed narrative. Jean Spangler's disappearance began a sequence of events that Hop could not control, and Iolene's death and her physical corpse, though seemingly disconnected to Spangler's disappearance, is a physical reminder of an event so totally beyond Hop's ability to turn into a narrative. Strangely, it also serves as a stabilizing force on the overarching narrative: Jean Spangler's disappearance is so unnerving because there is no physical proof of action, only an absence. Hop cannot construct a narrative surrounding Spangler's absence because there is no center to it. She regains her narrative power in life, when Hop finds her at Merry Lake, and is able to tell her story and thus re-stabilize the narrative. The false assumption of Spangler's death causes the narrative's instability. Iolene's death, however, with its physical proof, allows Hop to construct an alibi as proof of his innocence (not that it is needed). His search for Jean Spangler's story is so frantic because it refuses his efforts to control the narrative.

### **Race, Femininity and the Femme Fatale**

As suggested above, Iolene is only one of the many women cast as a femme fatale in *The Song Is You*. She poses the first threat to Hop's narrative control; when she shows up at his office, he knows by the "spiny fear in her face" that she is there because of Spangler's disappearance (Abbott, *Song* 29). As it turns out, Iolene's threat is no threat at all. She does not want a job or money to buy her silence, only safety, perhaps—although she never speaks long enough to ask for it. Iolene's second appearance in the present timeline of the novel is as a murder victim. The threat she poses is only that of memory, as her very presence stirs up the guilt and desire that drive Gil Hopkins's decisions. She

is an uneasy femme fatale. Iolene's importance in the text is understated; her main role lies in the facts surrounding Spangler's disappearance. It is obviously Iolene's own guilt that drives her to contact Hop, not any desire to punish him: he had a much more passive role in Spangler's disappearance than Iolene did. Iolene is, apparently, 'punished' for that role; her murder is assumedly directly related to the blackmail photos that she took in conjunction with Spangler (Abbott, *Song* 170).

Race is not an obviously telegraphed theme in Abbott's novel. There are, however, key moments that define the interactions between characters of different races—most notably between Iolene and Gil Hopkins. The closest Hop comes to recognizing his own whiteness is during his visit to Iolene's home:

He'd sized up Iolene for classier digs. . . . This particular strip of road was a big step down. And when Hop began to get closer, he felt kind of lousy for her. Sure, a Negro girl, no matter how finely turned-out or how talented, was never going to be the next Ava Gardner, but Iolene had always worked steady in the past . . . (Abbott, *Song* 50-1)

Hop is appalled by the dilapidation of Iolene's neighborhood. Although she "was never going to be the next Ava Gardner" due to her blackness, Iolene is actually described as having "coffee-with-cream skin" or "honey skin," a trait which makes her desirable to Hop and acceptable to Hollywood, though only for bit parts (Abbott, *Song* 164, 53). In Iolene's predominantly black neighborhood, Hop "feels conspicuous" in his rich clothes, which mark him out as of a contrasting class (rather than racial or ethnic identity). He actually relaxes when Iolene's neighbor tells him, "You ain't so white"—a comment that

would have thrown the traditional hardboiled heroes into frenzies of self-doubt and rage, from Abbott's descriptions in *The Street Was Mine* (Abbott, *Song* 51).

Even when race is apparently irrelevant to the interaction that is taking place, it lurks behind Hop's narration. When he visits the Red Lily and meets the girl, Lemon Drop, who was a witness to Jean Spangler's disappearance, Hop notes that the lamps in the brothel have a "henna glow," creating a metonymic association between Lemon Drop and otherness even before he sees that "she was of indeterminate race" (Abbott, *Song* 129). Of course, the very fact that her race is "indeterminate" implies that she is not white. This, as much as Lemon Drop's name and suspicious glances, prevent Hop's identification of her with Shirley Temple (Abbott, *Song* 129). Lemon Drop is an ambiguous character; she is marginalized as much by her age and profession (though she does not yet work in the brothel, that is assumed to be her future) as she is by her race. This is similarly true of Iolene, whose attempt to escape Hollywood fails because she cannot become just her race.

Abbott's construction of the hardboiled novel stays close to the sub-genre's origins, in contrast to the parodical absurdity of *Noir*. Her iterations of the figure of the femme fatale are more complex—in that they are never "full" femme fatales, but always mixtures of the femme fatale and her "alter ego"—than those in *Noir*, where the femme fatale is a parody of herself and the idea. In Abbott, as in Coover, the sub-generic conventions are closely tied to the narrative of the novel, which involves a mystery as deceptive as any in classic noir. As we shall see, neither Mat Johnson nor Thomas Pynchon chooses to follow these conventions as closely. Instead, Johnson will turn noir's problematic history with race on its head in *Incognegro* as he uses noir's traditional

white/black dichotomy to critique racial inequality, and Pynchon will undermine noir at every turn, as he plays with the nature of perception in his drugged-out rendition of the sub-genre.

### **Passing or Passing By?: Race and Perception in *Incognegro***

The central image is a horrifying one: a man, stripped to the waist, is pulled up by the noose wrapped tightly around his neck as he balances precariously on a pile of boxes in front of a figure in a white robe with a pointed hood and a painted cross. The Ku Klux Klan member carries a knife, and the terrified gaze of the hanging man is clearly focused on that weapon. Men with two-by-fours surround him, their faces twisted into paroxysms of anger as the image freezes them in the act of swinging at the bound man. Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the scene, however, is the crowd that stands further back from the center image. The foreground has the aspect of a fair or a community barbecue. A photographer carries his camera and a suitcase towards the front of the crowd. Two men share a flask as they chat with a third. A woman smiles at her daughter as a young boy attempts to push his way forward past the legs of a pair of men carrying a box of soda bottles. The faces of the inner ring of spectators are filled with disgust and rage, easily discernible hatred, but the faces of those standing at the outer edge are possibly more disturbing: they are smiling, laughing, and clearly having a good time.

This is the first page of *Incognegro*, Mat Johnson's 2008 graphic novel illustrated by Warren Pleece. The dialogue boxes, source of the voiceover designates this image as a flashback, come from Zane Pinchback, the titular "incognegro." His stated purpose, as a reporter who goes undercover as a white man in the American South in order to expose lynchings, is to reverse the view of white newspapers that "another nigger dead is not a story. So [Zane's] job is to *make* it one. That's all" (Johnson 7). Zane is not only a well-known columnist in Harlem, New York—as *Incognegro*, anyway—he is nationally syndicated, in both black and white papers. His "superpower" (because this is, after all, a

postmodern superhero story) is not only to pass as a white man; he is able to use his voice to fight racial oppression<sup>7</sup>. Johnson's representation of Zane Pinchback's quest draws attention to racial oppression and violence through the combination of the superhero narrative and noir, a sub-genre with its own problematic history with race.

In his essay "*Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema*," Manthia Diawara describes the classic noir sub-genre's problems with race as issuing from the use of "tropes of blackness as metaphors for the white characters' moral transgressions and falls from grace," that "*film noir* is black because the characters have lost the privilege of whiteness" (Diawara 262). While black authors of noir produced work that contested that assertion—specifically the Harlem detective novels written by Chester Himes—many of the early examples of both *film noir* and hardboiled detective fiction used racial indeterminacy as a marker for moral ambiguity (Abbott, *Street* 117).

Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo link noir's approaches to race with those of another popular film sub-genre of the era, the so-called "Negro problem" film, which were ostensibly anti-racist but were also concerned with the "morality" of passing. Racial indeterminacy, in these films, brought up issues of identity and agency, with characters who were previously living as white either discovering or revealing to their community their racial identity (Oliver, Trigo 22). "Passing" was presented as morally questionable, mainly because it destabilized the very idea of race: "Insofar as race passing conjures an invisible blackness in these films, it is a symptom of cultural anxiety over the security of white identity" (Oliver, Trigo 19). These films depicted racial

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<sup>7</sup> Zane's use of his "voice" to expose oppression and systems of violence contrasts heavily with Gil Hopkins's use—hiding illegal and immoral acts in order to advance his career.

equality as something desirable, but what that usually meant was erasing race and ethnicity altogether. “Pass if you can” became the moral of some of these films, while characters in other films were viciously punished for their desire to access the privilege their light skin afforded them (Oliver, Trigo 16). Passing in *Incognegro*, alongside its connections with the “race traitors” of cinema, is also associated with Walter White, one of the main inspirations for the book and the “former head of the NAACP . . . [who] went undercover, posing as a white man in the deep south to investigate lynchings” (Johnson 4). Walter White passed as a man of one race in order to defend another, and became one of the heroes of the early Civil Rights movement.

Besides the overt examples of identity and agency, noir’s anxiety over race was at the root at one of the major tropes of the sub-genre: the malevolent city. Critics often associate the growing theme of the threatening urban atmosphere with the increase in “white flight” following WWII. With the lure of easily accessible travel and affordable housing, minority groups began to relocate from rural areas to urban areas and white families moved out to the newly developing suburbs (Reid, Walker 86). Between the growing diversity of urban areas and the previous decimation wrought by the Depression, the cities of hardboiled fiction developed into the “abandoned cities” of authors such as Cornell Woolrich (Reid, Walker 68). Even while this was occurring in the novels of whites, the city became the focus of African-American authors such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Chester Himes, though they each had drastically different visions of their contemporary cities (not to mention their contemporaries). The pastoral ideal, so popular in hardboiled fiction, is absent in the detective fiction of Chester Himes, where if it appears it is as something lost, a “deadly illusion” (McCann 281). This abandonment

of the pastoral ideal reflects how “for many African-American migrants to northern cities, the historical memory of slavery and the indignities of Jim Crow foreclosed on nostalgia for rural life” (Barnard 51). The rural space has become malignant because it is out of the reach of any effective judicial system, even the corrupt one of Himes’s novels.

These are the tropes of noir at work in *Incognegro*: the crisis of race in hardboiled fiction, the problematic politics of passing, and the urban/rural dichotomy that sets up one as an ideal and the other as an irreversibly corrupted location. *Incognegro* uses noir but subverts these issues totally. The detective is black and the rural area is threatening. Darkness is not used as a device to cast a character’s race, and therefore their morals, into question; rather, it is whiteness that is morally questionable. One of the main complaints that this novel received in its reviews was that it was “angry,” that there were no “decent” white characters: as we shall see, this is only an inversion of the classic noir formula, where whiteness ‘naturally’ meant moral superiority (Solomon, Shawl).

### **Passing in *Incognegro***

Zane Pinchback’s light skin allows him to pass for white, posing as the “Incognegro” to investigate lynchings and other race-related crimes in order to expose the oppression and violence that often goes ignored. The way he uses that ability is an anomaly, as is made apparent in the first scene of the novel:

CORA: Joking aside, Zane, what you do is a great service to our *people*.

You’re not just passing for white to get a table at the Waldorf-Astoria.

CARL: Now honey, I take offense at that. Can’t a black man eat a Waldorf salad without being branded a race traitor? (Johnson 12)

Cora and Carl's comments, though humorous, expose the tension underlying Zane's actions. These tensions are expanded upon later, when it is revealed that Zane has a twin brother whose looks are more obviously "black" than Zane's. Zane and Carl's access to the privilege that would otherwise be denied them as black men is seen as untrustworthy or even traitorous. In the early part of the novel, Carl uses that access to benefit only himself, whereas Zane attempts to make a difference in what is deemed a more worthwhile use of his natural skin tone than Carl's. Zane's work, besides being perceived as worthwhile, is unusual. In response to Zane's expressed desire to quit and start a local column, his editor comments that "what [he] only [has] one of, and what nobody else has, is a white nigger columnist *mad* enough to go out and get the story from hell itself" (Johnson 15). Zane is the only "Incognegro," and his alter ego is well-known enough that Zane feels a certain amount of professional jealousy. Upon discovering that his brother, Alonzo Pinchback (or "Pinchy"), is accused of the murder of the white woman Michaela Mathers, Zane strikes a deal with his editor: one last Incognegro report, and he comes back to an arts beat and a managing editor's title.<sup>8</sup>

The superhero montage—Zane's transformation into Incognegro—is a process that requires no masks, no special costume, only a bit of "Madame C.J.'s magic," or a set of hair straighteners and skin lightening creams (Johnson 18). Zane compares himself to Zorro and the Shadow, both superheroes who could affect how people see them through their use of props. Unlike them, Zane's disguise is genetic:

My camouflage is provided by my genes; the product of the southern tradition nobody likes to talk about. Slavery. Rape. *Hypocrisy*. American

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<sup>8</sup> Proof, perhaps, that Zane has internalized the same bourgeois ideology to which Carl subscribes?

negroes are a mulatto people; I'm just an *extreme* example. A walking reminder. Since white America refuses to see its past, they can't really see me too well, either. (Johnson 18)

Zane's point, then, is that while America's blindness to the violence in its past may condemn it to repeat that past, that blindness does prevent Americans from even perceiving the products of that past. As Zane says this, his reflection in the mirror is superimposed with images of that "southern tradition": first, a white man raping a black woman, followed directly by a waving American flag. Zane's disguise does not involve a significant amount of physical change. It is not even performative, the way ethnicity is presented in *Noir Anxiety* as a "performative utterance," where a character is from a certain ethnic group because he says he is (Oliver, Trigo 7). Zane does not need to tell people he is white for them to accept that he is, because "white folks . . . think they're just *normal*. That they are the *universal*, and that everyone else is an odd *deviation* from the norm" (Johnson 19). The assumption of a white default is part of the blindness that Zane mentions.<sup>9</sup> This lack of physical as well as performative markers of racial identity supports Zane's assertion that "race doesn't really exist . . . *race* is just a bunch of *rules* meant to keep us on the bottom" (Johnson 19). There are no markers to "betray" him; if Zane does not tell anyone that he is black, they will assume he is white. Just as in *The Song Is You*, any presence of racial markers mean that the person is an Other.

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<sup>9</sup> Sally Robinson, in the introduction to her book *Marked Men*, points out that most theory on identity politics begins from "the notion that *invisibility* is a necessary condition for the perpetuation of white and male dominance . . . . [It] evades the cultural marking that distances the subject from universalizing constructions of identity and narratives of experience" (1). Robinson's project is, in part, an attempt to draw white masculinity out of that state of invisibility and into dialogue with other theories of identity politics.

Of the characters who somehow “see” Zane (or Carl), only Mr. Huey, the KKK official, is not immediately presented as an Other. Ryder, the father of the young man Zane helps to escape Tupelo and important to the narrative for the transportation he provides Zane and Carl, is a black man living in the South. When he comments on Zane’s race, Zane’s first reaction is panic: “Have I become that *obvious*? Is my kink showing?” (Johnson 64). Zane’s worry is that his one physical marker of racial identity—his kinked hair—has somehow betrayed him. However, Ryder recognizes Zane as black because he knows Zane’s brother and can *see* the family resemblance. This, however, is not the full story; after all, the sheriff of Tupelo has supposedly spent at least a day in Alonzo’s presence, as well as knowing him before Alonzo’s arrest, and cannot recognize Zane as a Pinchback. Ryder’s ability to recognize Zane comes as much from his status as a marginalized character as it does from his familiarity with Zane’s family.

The second man to recognize Zane as black is a member of the Jefferson-White family, Seamus, one of the “crazy,” “backwater hillbillies” who believe that a race war is coming and they will be kings after it ends (Johnson 55). This group lives in the mountains in a town called “Shuttle’s Pass.” Zane comments upon seeing the town, “Well, I can see why the shuttle passed it” (Johnson 65). In Zane’s comment, “passing” becomes what happens to those deemed worthless. The town has been passed by—in other words, left behind and ignored. Again, this allows the residents of Shuttle’s Pass to form their own community protected from the intrusion of the outside world. Somehow, the “craziness” of Seamus Jefferson-White allows him to see what the “sane” people of Tupelo have missed. Ernest, Seamus’s “simple” brother, is also able to see past Zane’s

disguise and recognize him as a black man. Ernest is doubly marginalized; as a disabled man of low socioeconomic status, from a family looked down upon even by the criminal Michaela Mathers, Ernest is still able to see through the disguise that fooled Michaela and the rest of the townspeople of Tupelo.

Mr. Huey, another outsider, while not able to recognize Zane despite having seen his face before, recognizes Carl. Admittedly, the man who drives Mr. Huey from the rail station to Tupelo forewarns him about the other man from the “national office” that arrived that day (Johnson 47). Huey recognizes the “Incognegro” from his behavior, not his physical appearance; he does not realize that Carl is not Zane, and Carl’s self-sacrifice keeps Huey from recognizing his mistake. Huey, however, claims that he can always recognize a black man “when [he sees] one” (Johnson 75). There is nothing Carl can claim in his defense; since race has been determined to exist separate of physical or performative markers, the men are not pointing to facts in their accusations. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes in “Writing Race and the Difference It Makes,” race is “the ultimate trope of difference because it so very arbitrary in its application” (5). There are no concrete physical or behavioral criteria, and thus the difference depends solely on the act of labeling difference. Zane’s final revenge on Huey, in naming him as the “Incognegro,” takes advantage of the same system Huey used to condemn Carl.

Carl and Zane are not the only characters who rely on others’ failure of perception in order to “pass” in society. Francis Jefferson-White, the missing sheriff’s deputy, is revealed as the murdered woman, who was passing as a man in order to live the life she wanted. Gender passing in *Incognegro* relies on men seeing “what they want to see” (Johnson 64). Ryder, who recognizes Zane as passing for white, says that he has “seen

this deputy, he would have made one mean, *homely*-looking woman” (Johnson 97). Ryder does not expect that the “hunt[ing] and spit[ting]” deputy was actually female, and so can only perceive Francis as male (Johnson 81). He cannot understand why Francis would want to pass as a man, to which Zane ironically replies, “Right. *No* sense. Who would pretend to be a white man in *this* world? What could be the possible advantage of *that*?” (Johnson 98). Michaela Mathers, who discovers Francis’s sex after she murders the deputy, mocks Francis for attempting to pass as a man. Michaela herself wears men’s clothes but does not hide her gender; her mockery, then, seems to be of Francis’s attempt to live as a man and assimilate into society, rather than the process by which she did so (Johnson 121). Ultimately, Michaela is punished for her “crimes”—not just the murder of Francis Jefferson-White, but also for her very attempt to live outside of society’s bounds (Johnson 124).

### **City Space, Rural Threat**

From the beginning of *Incognegro*, the rural south is depicted as dangerous and threatening in contrast with the safety of Harlem. Cora asks Zane how he got “back to Harlem, safe,” implying not only that Zane himself was unharmed, but also that Harlem is the specific site where Zane would need to be in order to be secure (Johnson 11). Zane presents Harlem as the center of culture and the arts; there is “a movement happening right here in Harlem, a *renaissance*,” of the sort that is happening nowhere else in America (Johnson 13). Harlem is not just a place, according to its presentation in *Incognegro*, it is a community comparatively free of danger and racism. When Carl attacks the man on the train, Zane tells him that “America is not 135<sup>th</sup> street . . . You can’t

just *attack* white men when they say something racist” (Johnson 22). What is acceptable in Harlem is not condoned in the outside world, and Carl’s relative innocence and ignorance of the social mores of the rest of the United States—specifically the South—makes it dangerous for him to leave Harlem.

Unlike Robert Coover’s *Noir*, where the very architecture of the city is depicted as menacing and confusing, the Harlem of *Incognegro* is a welcoming, urbane area, with wide streets and friendly crowds (Johnson 14, 130). The beauty of the rural area of Tupelo is constantly undermined by the events that occur there. The forest is portrayed as dark and threatening, and even in the daylight there is always something unsettling about the surrounding natural scenery. When Zane’s brother Alonzo describes his discovery of Michaela Mathers’s body to Zane, he begins with an utterly false tale about a nature walk:

Alonzo: There I was on the hillside . . . minding my own, just walking through the woods on a little nature stroll—

Zane: *Stop*. Look, you like nature about as much as you like taking a bath. Cut the shit and tell me what’s going on so I can help you. (Johnson 30)

As Alonzo tells Zane his story, the artwork changes from an image of a blissful Alonzo strolling through a pastoral Eden to Alonzo, hunched over in worry, stalking in front of a still. The rural space in Tupelo is dangerous and undesirable; Alonzo would not be out in the woods without a pressing reason, usually economic. It is not nature that poses a threat, however, no matter how much Alonzo dislikes it.

The history of the South is tied closely to the spaces in which violent events occurred. The home of the Jefferson-Whites, though it is high in the mountains and supposedly untainted by the industrial presence of the city, is a compound over which vultures constantly circle (Johnson 79). As Zane points out, however, the strife and violence of men is unrelated to nature: “There’s so much killing, so much strife, going back, so much strife. But the nature’s got nothing to do with that. The nature, don’t *no* man own that” (Johnson 63). The idea of space is constructed by human beings and made threatening by their actions, not by an innate malevolence of the place itself.

This runs in direct contrast to the city in *Noir*, which is innately malignant. The city in *Incognegro*, furthermore, is benevolent and welcoming. Harlem is a community where “you can do *anything* . . . You can do whatever you *want* here. It ain’t like the *South*” (Johnson 128). When Alonzo refutes Zane’s enthusiasm by saying that Harlem is “just a bunch of *strangers* piling on top of each other,” Zane explains how the community nurtures itself through narrative (Johnson 128). By knowing people’s stories, by allowing them to create their own identities, a city “doesn’t *feel* so big anymore” (Johnson 129). Not only does this destroy the power of the imposed narrative used by the lynch mobs, but it also denies the abandonment anxiety of noir. With Harlem as a thriving, vibrant community populated by strangers, each of those strangers has a name, a face and a story, and has the potential to no longer be an anonymous, threatening presence.

One question raised by Zane’s romanticized view of Harlem has to do with the propensity in classic noir to exoticize the Other. Megan Abbott notes in *The Street Was Mine* that white writers had a tendency to write about the “appeal of ‘minority culture’”

in an attempt to undermine the “bourgeois institutions” of whiteness (Abbott, *Street* 92). The so-called primitivism of these cultures was seen as more honest than white culture: an interesting hypocrisy due to noir’s usual conflation of race with questionable morals. Zane, however, romanticizes Harlem because it is his home, and for all intents and purposes it actually is safer than the rural South in which he is not just a minority—he is an outlaw.

Zane Pinchback, as a journalist and a modified superhero, fights against the corruption enacted within the racist structures of the rural South. Although what he does is not necessarily illegal, Zane risks his life every time he attempts to uncover the truth. In Thomas Pynchon’s novel, *Inherent Vice*, corruption is similarly systemic, and has as much to do with the community in which it is enacted as it does with the space itself.

### Space, Light and Corruption in *Inherent Vice*

Ahead of them a white blur began to sharpen and grow, and slowly it resolved into the sails of a topmasted schooner, running along full-spread before a fresh breeze . . . . [Doc] angled in toward the port quarter of the schooner, and there was Shasta Fay, brought here, it seemed, under some kind of duress, out on deck, alone, gazing back at the way she'd come, the home she'd left . . . Doc tried calling her name but of course words out here were just words. (Pynchon 109-10)

Doc Sportello, the perpetually stoned private-eye-protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, floats above the Pacific Ocean with the Lemurian spirit guide Kamukea, desperately searching for clues to the whereabouts of his ex-old lady, Shasta Fay Hepworth. Of course, this isn't the real world: it's a hallucination brought on by some specially designed psychotropic chemicals administered by a man named Vehi Fairfield, spiritual guide and LSD enthusiast. *Inherent Vice*, the third novel in what many term Thomas Pynchon's "California Trilogy" (the first two being *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*), may begin with the classic noir trope: an old flame legs it back into the private eye's life, asking for his help protecting her new lover whose wife may or may not be plotting something nefarious. But Shasta Fay is not a regular femme fatale, and Doc Sportello certainly is no ordinary private dick. What follows is a complex series of missing saxophone players, murdered bikers and byzantine government plots, not to mention the conspiracy surrounding the "Golden Fang," which could be "a boat with a mysterious historic past . . . a consortium of horny Silver Lake dentists . . . [or] an Asian gang connected to drugs and money, Vietnam and China"—or maybe all three (Kellogg).

*Inherent Vice* is engaged not just with noir, but also with the period of 1970, complicating the sub-genre play for which Pynchon has been lauded. The tropes of noir—light and darkness, perception, meaningful space, even the mystery integral to the novel’s plot—are turned into devices through which Pynchon critiques the era.

Where space in *Incognegro* is divided between the threatening beauty of the rural South and the welcoming urban area of Harlem, Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* concerns itself with the politics of space: who it belongs to, what it should be used for, and what, exactly, it is. Much has been made in literary eco-criticism of the human-nature relationships in Pynchon’s novels, from the “Gaia thesis” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to the “relation of ecology to mysticoreligious moral imperative” in *Against the Day* (Coffman 92). One of the (many) threads running through *Inherent Vice* is the story of Mickey Wolfmann, a real-estate mogul whose sudden desire to build an anarchist’s dream city in the desert—Arrepentimiento, “Spanish for ‘sorry about that’”—leads to his disappearance and ultimate brainwashing (Pynchon 248). Space in *Inherent Vice*—whether it is the physical land of Arrepentimiento or the spiritual planes through which Doc travels during his drug-induced hallucinations—is linked closely with control, albeit an imposed, unnatural kind. The spaces of *Inherent Vice* are not juxtaposed against each other like Harlem and Tupelo in *Incognegro*, with one space being representative of all that is good in society and the other as a corrupted version of humanity. Instead, space in *Inherent Vice* represents the possibilities for either community or corruption, and often both at once.

Thomas Pynchon’s use of sub-genre has been noted before: Brian McHale called his method “mediated historiography” and described how Pynchon’s novels use “genre-

poaching” to demonstrate “the way a historical epoch represented itself to itself” (McHale 25). It has already been established that noir, as a sub-genre, has remained in the popular imagination since its inception. Psychedelic literature was similarly popular during the era in which *Inherent Vice* is set, with novels such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) defining the sub-genre. This complication of noir with the presence of another sub-genre (here the psychedelic novel), though usual for contemporary noir, no doubt accounts for the descriptions by some reviewers of Pynchon’s new “manically incoherent pseudo-noir hippie-mystery” (Anderson). By pairing noir and the psychedelic novel, Pynchon heightens the prominence of perception as a thematic concept within the novel, since Doc seems to glean as many clues from his drug-induced hallucinations as he does from real-world investigations.

This pairing of sub-genres, along with the classic Pynchonian critique, further repurposes some classic tropes of noir, most noticeably the mystery plot and the light imagery. Light is repurposed in *Inherent Vice*: instead of the traditional conflation of shadow with moral ambiguity, the most glaringly corrupt activities in Pynchon’s novel occur in daylight under the public eye. Sam Anderson of *New York Magazine* disparagingly termed the novel “one big classic Pynchon parable of conspiratorial corporate greed,” and as disdainful as he may be, his term is correct. *Inherent Vice* is a critique of greed, capitalism and official corruption, and noir is the perfect vehicle for that considering its origin in the years during and following the Great Depression, not to mention the McCarthy era. Yet the corrupt practices criticized in classic noir, which took place in the darkness of back alleys and sleazy dockside bars, are now enacted under the

sanction of the authorities in the garish light of day. The seedy underbelly of California, which was hidden in the 1940s, is proudly laid bare by 1970.

### **Space and Development**

When Shasta Fay first contacts Doc, in the opening pages of *Inherent Vice*, she only wants him to look into the scheme her boyfriend's wife might be concocting. The next thing Doc knows, Mickey Wolfmann and Shasta Fay are missing and he is waist-deep in some sort of conspiracy involving either a drug cartel or a group of dentists. The emergence of the Golden Fang as the dominant antagonistic presence in the novel pushes Wolfmann's disappearance to the side, and it becomes a dimly realized subplot with an unsatisfying conclusion. At the heart of that mystery, however, lies one of the main themes of the novel, not to mention Pynchon's entire career up to this point: the ongoing struggle between anarchism and capitalism.

Mickey Wolfmann, a real-estate mogul with ties to the Aryan Brotherhood, is in trouble "all because of this idea that came to him. All the money he ever made—he was working on a way to just give it back," apparently by building a city in the desert that would provide free housing to those in need (Pynchon 150). Mickey Wolfmann is closely associated with land development and the processes through which capitalism takes hold of physical space. His ties to the other characters are made through the physical objects that represent his wealth: Sloane's wedding ring features an enormous diamond setting, Riggs (Sloane's lover) works for Mickey creating the zonahedral domes for Arrepentimiento, and Shasta lives in an apartment in a fancy lowland neighborhood paid for by Mickey. All of this money comes from Mickey's "unpredictable" dealings

building “chipboard horrors” and massive residential complexes (Pynchon 8). Mickey’s desire for repentance grows out of his history as “Westside Hochdeutsch mafia,” a landscape developer who makes “Godzilla look like a conservationist” (Pynchon 7). By building Arrepentimiento and providing housing to a community of those who find themselves drawn to the zones, Mickey’s hope is to address the karmic imbalance he has accumulated:

I feel as if I’ve awakened from a dream of a crime for which I can never atone, an act I can never go back and choose not to commit. I can’t believe I spent my whole life making people pay for shelter, when ought to’ve been free. It’s just so obvious. (Pynchon 244)

His sudden desire to give his money back undermines the capitalist system that Mickey’s career has thus far been spent defending. For this, the agents from the FBI kidnap him for some sort of re-education program (Pynchon 244).

Arrepentimiento is Mickey’s imaginary city, where “anybody could go live there for free, didn’t matter who you were,” way out in the desert away from everything (Pynchon 248). Besides repentance—inherent in the name of the place—Mickey Wolfmann’s concept of a communal living space drastically undermines the corporate system in which he functions. In this iteration of Pynchon’s apocalyptic vision, this concept cannot be maintained. Arrepentimiento ends up as an empty space in the middle of the desert, with Riggs Warbling left alone in his specially designed zonahedral domes that somehow “can act as doorways to other dimensions . . . . All [he has] to do is step through that door over there, and [he’s] safe” (Pynchon 253). These alternate realities become accessible through altered states, from the meditation for which zones are

known to the altered states endowed by psychotropic drugs. Like the Chryskylodon Institute, where meditation classes are held in a space “twenty degrees colder” than the rest of the spa and filled with the sound of chanting acolytes, Arrepentimiento’s power depends heavily on the community which resides within it. Riggs’s nervousness at the flyovers that occur semi-regularly belies his confidence in the safety of the zome, since he knows that a community gives a space its power. There is no community in Arrepentimiento, only him.

Cities in traditional noir are threatening because they have been abandoned by those who are familiar to the hero: either his family (if he has one), his friends (if he has any) or, at the very least, by members of his own race. As we saw in *Incognegro*, a space is doubly threatening when its history of violence is tied closely to the difference between the hero and those who reside within that space. Cities are welcoming and safe because they contain tight-knit communities of “people like us.” In *Inherent Vice*, however, these spaces are just as subject to corruption. Coy Harlingen poses as a hippie protester as part of a counter-counter-culture squad, and even Doc is offered a job trading information with the police department. The Boards’ house in Topanga Canyon becomes malevolent because of the possibility that they have been corrupted by the capitalist sympathies of the Spotted Dicks, who turn into zombies before Doc’s eyes, although, admittedly, that might just be the weed (Pynchon 133).<sup>10</sup> In this specific iteration of noir, communities are wholly responsible for the malevolence of a space; it has no external agency.

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<sup>10</sup> Doc Sportello’s perception is often compromised by the psychotropic drugs he takes, to the point where it is almost impossible to distinguish the actual events from those he hallucinates, especially since even the most improbable of his hallucinations tend to have real-world ramifications.

## Light, Darkness and the Business of Corruption

These communities that create the threatening spaces in *inherent Vice* are in many cases closely tied to an authoritarian government or to the secretive cabal of the Golden Fang. After Doc fails to solve the mystery surrounding Mickey Wolfmann's disappearance, Doc finds himself caught up in the conspiracies in which Coy Harlingen, the sax player who—though rumored dead—desperately needs Doc's help. Doc's first meeting with Coy takes place in a dark and foggy parking lot outside of the Club Asiatique. In the parking lot, Doc sees Coy's beard shining with "a million separate little halos radiating all colors of the spectrum, and [understands] that regardless of who in this might help whom, Coy was going to require a light touch" (Pynchon 86). As Kathryn Hume notes in her essay "The Religious and Political Vision of *Against the Day*," "light is one of Pynchon's images for signaling spiritual breakthrough" (Hume 174). *Inherent Vice* continues this tradition, although light can just as easily signal a logical breakthrough, a moment where Doc comes to a realization concerning one or another of the cases that he is investigating. When Doc meets Coy in the parking lot, the lights of a trawling yacht betray the interest of the Golden Fang (perhaps the name of that very yacht). Coy points to the yacht out in the harbor, "but the fog coming in made everything deceptive," hiding not just Coy and Doc from the lights of the *Golden Fang*, but also hiding the boat from their perception (Pynchon 87). Meanwhile, the light that Doc perceives splitting into a prism through Coy's beard somehow signals to Doc how exactly he should approach Harlingen. The light, besides being the message itself, sends messages of its own.

The first time Doc meets Sloane Wolfmann, Mickey's economist/ex-showgirl wife, she gives him a tour of their home which includes the "flattering convergence of lights that made her look like some contract star . . . Jimmy Wong Howe did it for us years ago" (Pynchon 58). The artfully arranged artificial lighting that seems to come from nowhere and everywhere betrays Sloane as Mickey's femme fatale; Doc recognizes Howe as the man who did the lighting for the John Garfield movies (Pynchon 59). Traditional *film noir*'s use of lighting techniques was meant to denote moral ambiguity or danger, turning white characters "dark" to cast suspicion on their actions or words (Diawara 262). Light, as a trope, is inverted in *Inherent Vice*. Pynchon shifts the meaning of lightness and visibility from being a marker of a morally upright character to something far more questionable. The "street light through the kitchen window" illuminates Doc and Shasta's first meeting, where she asks him to help her protect Mickey while she figures out "how much loyalty" she owes him (Pynchon 1-2). Sloane Wolfmann is well lit, but is possibly part of the conspiracy to brainwash her husband. Doc and Coy are forced to make all their meetings in shadow, lest someone in the Golden Fang discover that Coy is leaking information. Riggs, holed up in the desert, is constantly harassed by the "deliberate, authorized buzzing" of jet-fighter flyovers (Pynchon 251). The spaces that are dimly lit, darkened scenes usually concern the attempts of the protagonists to fight the inhuman systems in which they are caught, while those that take place in the bright light of day are those which involve the most corrupt dealings. The inversion of the traditional use of light in noir relates to the qualification of morality from classic noir—which, for all its innovation, often espoused a deeply conservative ethics. This shift, then, is closely tied to the cultural shift from an

acceptance of the hippie ethic to the suspicion and hostility towards that movement following the Manson trials. The menacing specter of the Golden Fang embodies these concerns. As an apparently institutionalized center of the corruption within the novel, the Golden Fang represents the dangers of conformity and unbridled capitalism in the destruction it wreaks on the lives of Coy Harlingen and Doc himself.

The Chryskylodon Institute, a mental health spa in Ojai California, is located in a town known for its sunlight and its oranges (Pynchon 186). The Chryskylodon Institute, however, is just another front for the Golden Fang—its name, in fact, is a kenning of sorts, a compound term in Greek that literally means “gold fang” (Pynchon 185). Sunny southern California, then, becomes the set for the display of the Chryskylodon Institute’s unsettling business practices: the white wine<sup>11</sup> with so many unpronounceable ingredients they barely fit on the label of the bottle, the looming presence of a gorilla-like orderly wearing one of “Mickey Wolfmann’s own custom-made special” ties (the one with a naked Shasta Fay painted on it), and the “creepy gazebo where the “advanced therapy group” seems to be enacting some kind of ritual (Pynchon 187-90). The corruption of the Golden Fang has been institutionalized, and they have access to larger systems of power than the counterculture could ever consider.

### **Perception and Psychotropic Assistance**

The character of the private eye is heavily invested in sight. Doc Sportello, whose methods of sight include not just those readily available to the human being, but also the ability to glean clues from his drug-induced hallucinations, is the natural result of a

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<sup>11</sup> Reminiscent, perhaps, of the dandelion wine in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

combination of the hardboiled sub-genre and the psychedelic novel. His vagueness leads at times to intentionally misleading assumptions, however, which the reader is forced to sort from those that have actual bearing on the task at hand. Sportello's reaction to a new client's evocation of Wolfmann's name is "faint-headedness, drug induced no doubt," although the reader and, presumably, Sportello know that it has nothing to do with drugs (Pynchon 15). Doc's appreciation for psychotropic drugs allows for many humorous asides, but for the most part, the visions he experiences while high actually provide concrete insight into the convoluted cases he encounters.

The Golden Fang, as both the Chryskylodon Institute and the Golden Fang Enterprises, has access to and control over illegal drugs, the likes of which get Doc busted whenever he comes into contact with Bigfoot Bjornsen. Golden Fang Enterprises is located in a "strangely futuristic building . . . covered in gold leaf . . . in the old L.A. tradition of architectural whimsy . . . a six-story-high golden fang" (Pynchon 167-8). Doc finds the building while following a clue from a postcard sent to him by Shasta Fay—later revealed to have been sent after Shasta somehow sensed Doc's astral visit. The postcard sets off a memory of a drug trip and a conversation with an Ouija board that sends Doc and Shasta on a wild goose chase to an empty lot, later found to be the headquarters of Golden Fang Enterprises (Pynchon 163-7). This clue, though originally imparted via psychotropic assistance, leads to an actual connection with the Golden Fang.

Within the Golden Fang, Doc finds a high-end modern set of offices, disturbingly anonymous, with very little to distinguish them. When he looks in a mirror by the reception desk, "the face looking back did not seem to be his own" (Pynchon 168). The very building is unsettling, curved as it is and nearly empty. Dr. Blatnoyd, the dentist

whose office Doc visits, has a “Procedures Handbook” for dealing with, one assumes, nearly every possible situation. The entry for hippies reads: “[The hippie’s] childlike nature will usually respond positively to drugs, sex, and/or rock and roll, although in which order these are to be deployed must depend on conditions specific to the moment” (Pynchon 170). While this is patently true of Doc, the fact that Dr. Blatnoyd has a rulebook that tells him how to approach intruders, not to mention a handy supply of dope, leads one to the conclusion that perhaps he isn’t a dentist at all. Blatnoyd’s mysterious death does nothing to dispel this impression. His ties to the Golden Fang, already under suspicion, become more apparent through the manner of his death: puncture wounds from the canines of some sort of animal, if that animal possessed gold teeth (Pynchon 213).

Doc’s penultimate encounter with the Golden Fang, in the form of his hallucination brought on by a forced injection administered by Puck Beaverton, gives him the details on the mysterious circumstances of Dr. Blatnoyd’s murder. According to Doc’s hallucination, the Golden Fang, as the embodiment of “the unthinkable vengeance they turn to when one of them has grown insupportably troublesome, when all other sanction have failed,” murdered Dr. Blatnoyd with the teeth by which it was named, which accounts for the flecks of gold found in Blatnoyd’s wounds (Pynchon 318). Doc’s final interaction with the Golden Fang, in the shape of his former client Crocker Fenway, does not exactly verify that information. Fenway does confirm, however, that the Golden Fang was involved in Mickey Wolfmann’s disappearance, and ends up arranging for Coy Harlingen’s release and safety (Pynchon 350).

The novel ends with an image that is both poignant and optimistic, an image that allows the novel to end in a “state of indeterminacy” that is required for Pynchon’s

countercultures to remain in their idealized states (Mattesich 66). The convoy of vehicles, the fog, and the sense of something greater beyond the fog—a future, or perhaps only a dream—drive the novel’s narrative forward in a way that the unsatisfying conclusions to the mysterious subplots cannot. The sense of camaraderie and hope in the “temporary convoy” of the highway lends the ending an optimism which is fueled by Doc’s desire “for whatever would happen . . . For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead” (Pynchon 368). It is only optimism, however, and is therefore unfounded: it cannot be hope if the hope has already been fulfilled. What lies beyond the fog is still unknown to Doc, although we know, reading *Inherent Vice*, that Pynchon’s counterculture has disintegrated. It had already passed away by the time of *Vineland*.

*Inherent Vice* illustrates the cultural paradigm shift between the psychedelic sixties and the latter part of the twentieth century, when the community-based ethic espoused by the hippie movement waned in the face of the Charles Manson trials and the increased suspicion that trial generated towards the movement. Despite the knowledge of the end of that era, Pynchon’s novel is curiously optimistic, in much the same way that Johnson’s novel is: it ends with the hope that people can change, a hope that was hard to find in classic noir. *Noir* participates in this sense of optimism to an extent. Although Blanche has outsmarted Noir and tricked him into a partnership of sorts, there is the stated possibility of something more. *The Song Is You* is the only one of these novels whose easily discernible plotline may hide nothing but emptiness. Noir, Doc and Zane drove their own stories forward through the novel and past the end, whereas Hop seems perfectly content in his settled position. Hop’s jaded acceptance of his role as the man

who crafts false stories clashes with the supposed role of the hardboiled detective in his search for truth. His final acknowledgment of the presence of the waiting Merry Lake ultimately signals a future of sorts, although a less optimistic one than those projected by the other novels. Perhaps this is the true mark of contemporary fiction: an optimism that gestures towards something past the dust jacket, a future hidden behind the fog.

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