There Are No Good Guys

Los Angeles in James Ellroy's LA Quartet

Bachelor Thesis Literatuurwetenschap

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Introduction

The *LA Quartet* of James Ellroy (1948) consists of four books. The first, *The Black Dahlia* (1987)[1], can be considered a stand-alone novel, while the later three books, *The Big Nowhere* (1988)*, L.A. Confidential* (1990), and finally *White Jazz* (1992), function more or less as a trilogy, sharing one arch enemy: Dudley Smith. They are all set in Los Angeles: nicknamed the 'City of Angels' and 'the Great Wrong Place'.

It is my intention to first set the scene by describing some characteristics of typical Los Angeles literature, eventually focusing on Los Angeles crime fiction. By then examining some characteristics of James Ellroy's Los Angeles in the four novels of the *LA Quartet*, and comparing these to two other crime novels set in Los Angeles, I hope to further define Ellroy's L.A.. Finally, through a thorough investigation of the motives of the *Quartet*'s protagonists, I will argue that Los Angeles in Ellroy's novels is a place with its own rules about justice. As the books' collective moniker implies, they should say something about Los Angeles, in the very least about Ellroy's Los Angeles. The question is: does Ellroy's L.A. comply with the reigning ideas about Los Angeles literature, and where do the two differ?

In my argument I will make extensive use of three studies of Los Angeles (literature): Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990), David Fine's *Imagining Los Angeles* (2000), and William McClung's *Landscapes of Desire* (2000). The arguments of these three scholars will help form my definition of Los Angeles literature, more specifically the crime fiction written about L.A..

For my crime fiction comparisons, I will use two other crime novels set in Los Angeles to investigate if and how Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet* is representative of contemporary Los Angeles (crime) fiction. Michael Connelly's police procedural *The Black Echo* (1991) and Robert Crais's private eye novel *L.A. Requiem* (1999) were chosen for this purpose, the former because it is the first of a series with a detective named Hieronymus Bosch and Los Angeles is paralleled with the Dutch painter's hellish visions, the latter because to my mind no writing on L.A. crime fiction can exist without the inclusion of a Los Angeles private eye.

Any discussion of the 'literature of a place', as I aim to do for Los Angeles, implies that there is such a thing. Michael Kowalewski defines this so-called 'regional writing' as follows: "descriptions that create a three-dimensional sense of memory and life." He adds: "the best American regional writing tends to be less about a place than *of* it, with a writer's central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given

[1] Whenever I quote from the four novels of the Quartet in this paper, I will use abbreviations. *The Black Dahlia* is TBD, *The Big Nowhere*, TBN, *L.A. Confidential*, LAC and finally *White Jazz*, WJ. Connelly's and Crais' novels will be abbreviated TBE and LAR, for *The Black Echo* and *L.A. Requiem*, respectively.

location". (Kowalewski 7) With a wink to the double meaning of 'nervous system' in the case of James Elllroy's novels, it is from this argument I would like to build mine.

Los Angeles Literature

Both Mike Davis and David Fine root their literary histories of Los Angeles deeply in the 'booster myth', meaning that Los Angeles, at the start of the 20th century, was 'sold' to new developers by a group of people interested in its development and the possibilities of the region. The idea of Southern California as a perfect place to live was quite deliberately formed and made: 'boosted' in print: "Southern California as the promised land of a millenarian Anglo-Saxon racial odyssey" (Davis 20). Led by a "syndicate of developers, bankers and transport magnates [...] set out to sell Los Angeles – as no city had ever been sold – to the restless but affluent babbitry of the Middle West. […] For more than a quarter century, an unprecedented mass migration […] transferred their savings and small fortunes into Southern California real estate." (Davis 25)

David Fine expands on this idea, writing that a Southern California myth, rooted in a Spanish Catholic past that had never truly existed, was created by the boosters. "[That] history here is a fiction, a deliberate construct to serve real estate interests." (Fine 29) I will be returning to the importance of real estate in James Ellroy's literature later, but for now the idea of Los Angeles as a place that was marketed and sold has to be kept firmly in the back of the mind. The fact that one of the more important reasons for the influx of many new inhabitants in the city has its origins in fiction and myth-making seems to me an important element of the city's (literary) history, mainly because it speaks to the expectations with which people entered the city.

With the development of the movie industry in Los Angeles – Hollywood – years later, many more people would come to the city full of hopes and dreams, many of which would not come to fruition. The prime example of such failures in this paper will of course be the murder of Elizabeth Short, The Black Dahlia, who symbolizes many of the city's characteristics.

A direct result of the Booster-myth created about the Los Angeles basin is that there was a great influx of people from outside the city. David Fine writes that this is the starting point of any discussion of Los Angeles literature: the fact that all the writers, until the most recent decades, were outsiders. (Fine 15) In his article *Los Angeles as a Literary Region* (2003), Fine defines regional writing as "the product of writers born in, nurtured by, and strongly attached to the regions about which they write." (Fine 397) For the sake of this thesis then, it is important to note that Los Angeles literature is classically the writing of outsiders, and yet, Ellroy is not one. Fine adds: "The distanced perspective of the outsider, marked by a sense of dislocation and

estrangement, is the central and essential feature of the fiction of Los Angeles, distinguishing it from fiction about other American places." (Fine 15-6)

A consequence of the aforementioned 'outsider status' is that the newcomers to Los Angeles, as David Fine argues: "came into an expansive landscape that appeared to them to have no discernible center, no reigning architectural style, and no sense of regional past, [nothing] to convince them that they had, in fact, arrived in a *place*" (Fine 16) This results, according to Fine, in a fiction which is obsessed with themes of "unreality, masquerade and deception" (16), and with the home the writers had left in the back of their minds, Los Angeles offered "images of instability, fragility, unreality" (16). To this experience must be added the fact that many of the writers coming to Los Angeles during the first few decades came to the city to work in Hollywood, pre-eminently a place of masquerade and unreality, perhaps even deception. Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and William Faulkner, to name just a few, were all under contract to the studio system at one point, sometimes even adapting each other's work. Chandler, for example, co-wrote[2] the screenplay for *Double Indemnity* (1944), adapting James M. Cain's novel of the same name.

As mentioned, part of the unreal nature of Los Angeles (literature) is its concern with architecture. William McClung argues "two contradictory visions of Los Angeles. […] An acquired Arcadia, a found natural paradise; and an invented Utopia, an empty space inviting development." (McClung, xvi) This development of the city, by the same people that fostered the Booster-myth, is a large part of Los Angeles literature. Firstly, there is that lack of a uniform architectural style. The novels of the *Quartet* are full of examples: whenever a house is mentioned, the style in which it is built is almost invariably named, sometimes to arguably comical effect: "The address was a Spanish castle apartment house: white-washed cement shaped into ornamental turrets, balconies topped by sun-weathered awnings." (TBD 204) In this one quote we have the imported European influence, the incongruous and unreal aggregation of a castle, apartment and house in one.

To summarize, Los Angeles literature should, according to the literature *about* Los Angeles, be a place of distinct characteristics. The fact that Los Angeles itself was sold to newcomers by the Boosters and because of that has an inherent lack of authenticity to it is its starting point. The outsiders that started to write in and about the city, flooding the city in the years after, created a vision of their own, at the same time importing their outside experiences and shaping a new vision of Los Angeles set against the experience of the new city. The city's heterogeneous

[2] With Billy Wilder.

architectural styles add to this idea of not really being in one place, as David Fine argues, alongside its unreal nature.

Because James Ellroy is not from outside of Los Angeles, one would expect a difference between his writing and the 'classic' writing of writers not native to Los Angeles. This is one of the reasons that make Ellroy's fiction so useful for this investigation. Moreover, Ellroy's own history is very much connected to the city's history.

Much has been written on James Ellroy's personal connection to the Elizabeth Short case and his fictional rendering of this real-life murder in *The Black Dahlia*. Ellroy's mother was murdered in 1958, and in Ellroy's mind, the two murdered women became more or less identical, as he writes in the foreword to Jack Webb's *The Badge* (1958), the book that according to Ellroy himself gave him everything he needed in the way of inspiration. (ix) "There's the Black Dahlia murder. […] Betty Short claims me. She merges with Geneva Hilliker Ellroy." (x) While it is tempting to use biographical details to argue the connection between the novels, especially *The Black Dahlia,* and the city, as both women were murdered in Los Angeles - the one a famous L.A. myth, the other reality made myth in Ellroy's autobiographical *My Dark Places* (1996) and *The Hilliker Curse* (2006) - it is to my mind more fruitful to use the novels themselves. As Fine also argues that writers are "not only shaped by, but shape the land about which they write" (398), one would expect Ellroy to do just that: shape Los Angeles according to his own vision of the city *as an insider*, with an experience that rivals the narratives of his novels. One would also expect this vision to be decidedly different from the 'outsider vision'.

Ellroy's Los Angeles[3]

In stark contrast to the overtly positive – and fabricated – Booster-myth literature stands the dark *noir* fiction of the 1930s and 40s. In the words of Mike Davis, the authors of these novels "repainted the image of Los Angeles as a deracinated urban hell" (Davis 37), capturing in decidedly negative terms the expansion of the city and the influx and influence of outsiders. "Noir was like a transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of the Booster's arcadia into a sinister equivalent" (Davis 38). The advent of noir fiction brings us to crime, and crime fiction. As Ellroy's novels are most definitely crime novels, thematically linked and a continuation of the noir genre, this is where we take a turn towards the dark.

[3] Parts of this chapter were written for an essay in the course 'The Aesthetics of Detection', taught by David Pascoe at UU in late 2013/early 2014: "Criminal Landscapes, Los Angeles in the crime fiction of Raymond Chandler and James Ellroy", by Jasper Gielkens.

It is doubtful if one can write on Los Angeles crime fiction without, albeit shortly, mentioning Raymond Chandler. Chandler, himself not originally from Los Angeles (he was born in Chicago), wrote almost all his fiction in Los Angeles, where the stories al also mostly set. "With an eye to the growth and change the city underwent from the time of his arrival, Chandler invested its physical and architectural landscape in novel after novel with moral and symbolic meaning." (Fine, 402) This suggests the strong connection between the city, its inhabitants and the narrative and stresses the fact that the city is not only the canvas for the story, but that its descriptions add deeper meaning, often in the way places, characters or (social) settings are symbols for the city. As I will argue, especially in the use of the city's architecture, Ellroy does something similar.

Although Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe is arguably a 'white knight', solving crimes with a better working moral compass than Ellroy's protagonists, Los Angeles in Ellroy's fiction works in a similarly symbolical way. The use of jazz in the novels is an example of this. From *The Big Nowhere* on, jazz comes back time and again as a *leitmotif* for evil. Detective Danny Upshaw listens to increasingly dissonant jazz in his car, which serves as a prolepsis to the novel's killer Coleman's work in a jazz combo and his own downfall. Similarly, one of the plot points of *White Jazz* has protagonist Dave Klein following the trail of a jazz musician – a possible killer – and the insane junkie son of the family he is investigating, Tommy Kafesjian, plays dissonant scales on his saxophone while the police search his home.

Philip Marlowe moves among the rich and famous in his crime-solving, for example in *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953), were the rich Sternwood family and the rich inhabitants of aptly named Idle Valley, respectively, are the sources of the crimes. Similarly, Ellroy's detective protagonists also move among the rich, but their crimes are often thrown committed in the poorer parts of the city. The bodies are found not among the rich and in their neighborhoods, but often on skid row, as in *The Big Nowhere*, were the novel starts with a brutally mutilated corpse found in an empty lot, filled with "booze empties, sodden lumber and paper debris" (TBN 5).

In Raymond Chandler's novels, "the rich […] have moved high up into the hills, into large, pretentious houses […] surrounded by high walls that isolate and insulate them from crimes committed in the past and on the flatbed below." (Fine, 402) In James Ellroy's novels, this happens also, but in the *Quartet* Ellroy complicates this, making some of his protagonists part of that rich legacy. The prime example is *L.A. Confidential*'s Ed Exley, whose father is a real estate magnate. The next chapter expands this idea.

Ellroy's "attention to clinical detail in the descriptions of mutilation and violence" (D'Haen 101) and "the same kind of clinical attention […] to the physical description of the city of Los Angeles" (101) add greatly to the plausibility of the novels. From *L.A. Confidential* on, the narrative is interspersed with newspaper articles and pieces from gossip rags such as 'Hush Hush', which serve to fill in the gaps between the narratives of the protagonists. The inclusion of these articles, which often feature real life happenings, such as the arrest of gangster Mickey Cohen on account of tax evasion in 1950, in *L.A. Confidential*, add greatly to the sense that the reader is immersed in the history of the city. Also, in choosing the Black Dahlia murder case as a starting point for the *Quartet*, Ellroy's fiction is intricately connected to the city of Los Angeles, making the novels as much part of the city's history as say, *Sunset Blvd*, or *Chinatown*[4].

Arguably, no discussion of James Ellroy's fiction is complete without mentioning the language used in his novels. While the language of the *Quartet* starts of as mostly straightforward – aside from its complicated plot – in *The Black Dahlia*, Ellroy's use of language becomes more and more frantic in the later novels. In *L.A. Confidential*, the sentences have become telegrammatic: "No sleep – Vincennes'deposition wouldn't let him. The wake-up call he didn't need: a reporter at 6:00 AM Radio News riding over: reopening speculation, a *mano a mano* with his father – the freeway system near done, the Nite Owl hero now a villain. Parking lot pickets – Commie types demanding justice" (LAC 347). By *White Jazz*, the narrative has become as nervous as its protagonist Dave Klein: "My priority: sort Junior and Johnny out, ease Junior off Glenda. Ghost Chaser. Glenda. Results. Time before the trick sweep – tail her." (WJ 105)

Besides paralleling the frantic language with a frantic protagonist and extremely complicated plot, it seems as if Ellroy uses this language as another symptom of the city. By the fourth book of the *Quartet*, he – and with him, the reader – is so involved and familiar with the madness of the city that his protagonists need only a few words to convey their feelings. With the language, the city becomes a whirlwind of violence, conspiracy and death and seems at some times amphetamine-fuelled. The complete immersion of the novels' protagonists in dark and twisted Los Angeles becomes complete.

Ellroy's 'Heroes'

[4] Chinatown is a fictional rendering of the Owens Valley water scam, as mentioned in the introduction: another real life occurrence that shaped Los Angeles' history.

David Fine writes that “crime fiction is one place that foregrounds history. What makes the tough-guy detective stories of Chandler and Macdonald and later John Gregory Dunne[5], James Ellroy, Michael Connelly and *Chinatown* screenwriter Robert Towne, so central to the local tradition is that they focus on crimes committed and buried in past time, which the private eye or the police detective forces into present consciousness.” (Fine 17) In a documentary[6] on his work, Ellroy says that the detective is the “great fictional character of 20th century literature.” It is no wonder then, that the detective is his protagonist of choice.

William McClung argues that “the literature of Los Angeles is exceptionally committed to the material culture of the city, finding in its body, so to speak, the causes, equivalents, and consequences of human behavior.”(McClung, 46) If we may take this to mean that not only the inhabitants have shaped the city, but also that the people inhabiting Ellroy’s Los Angeles behave in some way been informed by the city, we would expect find some characteristics of the city in Ellroy’s protagonists, who are (or have been) invariably part of the LAPD.

Bucky Bleichert in *The Black Dahlia;* Danny Upshaw, Mal Considine, Buzz Meeks in *The Big Nowhere*; Ed Exley, Jack Vincennes and Bud White in *L.A. Confidential*; and finally Dave Klein in *White Jazz* all share two characteristics: their obsession with and weakness for women and their need to administer personal justice. This is a recurring theme in the history of crime fiction in Los Angeles. As David Fine argues: “Hard-boiled fiction owes a lot to the western story with its resourceful lone-wolf hero who obeys a personal code that places him in opposition to conventional law enforcement – often enough part of the corruption” (Fine 86) Examining the protagonists of the four novels, I would like to demonstrate this.

Bucky Bleichert, who narrates *The Black Dahlia*, is the son of a German immigrant with ties to the German American Bund, an American nazi organisation. The narrative implies early corruption: “Do you know what you cost me, you fuck? I could have gone to the cops clean, but they found out my father was a fucking subversive. They made me snitch off Sammy and Ashidas, and Sammy died at Manzanar[7].” (TBD 25) Because his father is old and confused, Bleichert decides to bet on his own loss at a boxing match in which he faces Lee Blanchard, his future partner in the LAPD. From the start of the novel, Bleichert is shown as willing to corrupt himself in order to achieve his goals. He is somewhat redeemed by the fact that he does this for his father: even

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[5] Who wrote his own fictional account of the Black Dahlia murder: *True Confessions* (1978)

[6] *James Ellroy’s Feast of Death*, BBC Arena, 2001.

[7] A mid-Californian concentration camp where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during WWII following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

though his methods are debatable, his intentions are good. He is also redeemed by the fact that he loses the boxing match against Blanchard without taking "a dive for the money" (TBD 24).

Following the boxing match, Bleichert and Blanchard partner up, soon after which the horribly mutilated body of Elizabeth Short, The Black Dahlia, is found. In the rest of the novel, first Blanchard, and then Bleichert lose themselves trying to find the girl's killer. Bleichert's willingness to work outside of the law, even though he is formally part of the large team assigned to the Black Dahlia murder recurs time and again. In effect, it is the fact that Bleichert decides to withhold evidence from the LAPD that shapes the rest of the novel. During his investigation, Bleichert meets Madeleine Sprague, the daughter of real estate 'magnate' Emmett Sprague and falls for her, not in the least part because Madeleine dresses up like The Black Dahlia to pick up men in bars.

By this time, Bleichert's obsession with Elizabeth Short has turned sexual: "I took out my Betty Short mugs, superimposed the Sprague girl's face over them and came away with a common, everyday resemblance. Then I saw myself peeling off her sharkskin suit and knew I didn't care one way or the other." (TBD 110) Bleichert sees in Madeleine the only way to possess the dead Elizabeth Short and for this reason decides to withhold from the investigation the fact that Madeline and Elizabeth Short knew each other. As the narrative progresses, Lee Blanchard, who shares Bleichert's obsession with Elizabeth Short, disappears. Bleichert learns that Blanchard has discovered Bleichert's withholding of evidence and has taken this secret to his grave.

Again, in Blanchard's actions, we see no adherence to any law-informed sense of justice. Because Blanchard is Bleichert's friend, he dies protecting his friend and Blanchard's platonic girlfriend Kay, whom Bleichert eventually marries. Kay is another woman who in the mind of Bleichert has fused with Elizabeth Short. While his relationship with Madeleine is fuelled by sexual desire, the bond with Kay is arguably more wholesome. In his dealings with the two women, we find Bleichert's ambiguous nature. Madeleine and Kay together represent two sides of Elizabeth Short: Madeleine representing the promiscuous Betty and Kay representing her innocence, worth rescuing and redeeming through finding the killer. Bleichert is torn between the two women and is attracted to both the light and the dark the two women represent.

When Bleichert finally learns who that killer is (or rather, that there are two killers), he finally decides that justice is in his hands: "Heading toward the fourth pad just after midnight was when I got the idea – or the idea got me. Kill him. No public glory, no public disgrace – private justice." (TBD 295) After Bleichert kills Georgie Tilden, the mutilated friend of Emmett Sprague (and Madeleine's father), he burns the killer's house, along with all evidence pertaining to Tilden's depravity. He is helped by Russ Millard, arguably the only LAPD officer in the novel who seems

incorruptible[8]. In a last feat of moral corruption, Bleichert decides not to bring to justice Ramona Sprague, Madeleine's mother and Elizabeth Short's other killer.

Realizing this will cause the end of his career, Bleichert decides Madeleine should be punished instead, this being punishment enough for Ramona. Together they make up a story about a love triangle between Blanchard, Bleichert and Madeleine, leaving Madeleine in prison, and Bleichert to reunite with Kay, even though the novel ends on an uncertain note about their future together.

While *The Black Dahlia* has a single protagonist in Bucky Bleichert, *The Big Nowhere* features three. There is young Danny Upshaw, a rookie in the LAPD Sheriff's department who investigates a homosexual murder in the novel. Mal Considine is an ambitious District Attorney willing to corrupt himself to gain custody of his adopted son. Turner 'Buzz' Meeks is an ex-cop who works for Howard Hughes as Head of Security at [Howard] Hughes Aircraft, having additional tasks as Hughes' pimp.

The narrative centers on the aforementioned homosexual murder and a plot to rid the city's movie unions of communist influences, for which all of the protagonists are recruited by the *L.A. Quartet*'s later three books' arch enemy Dudley Smith, to whom I will return later. In Danny Upshaw, we see echoes of *The Black Dahlia*'s Bleichert. Investigating another brutally mutilated body, Upshaw is also motivated by a personal sense of justice, although much of his reticence in sharing the results of his investigation with the LAPD is motivated by the fact that he is sexually aroused by the homosexual nature of the murder he investigates. When Dudley Smith finally finds this out and steals the investigation files Upshaw has hidden in his house, Upshaw commits suicide, rather than face humiliation.

In another parallel with Bleichert, Upshaw in his final moments seems to accept his fate, and forgive the murderer for his obsession: "He thought of his killer, thought that he murdered because someone made him what he himself was. He held the knife up and forgave him." (TBN 368) Upshaw seems to accept the murderer as a product of his environment, more specifically an incestuous, homosexual relationship with his father.

Both Considine and Meeks have obsessions of their own, informing their decision making in the novel. Considine is ambitious, but his wish to further his career is guided by his wish to formally adopt his son, whose mother he has brought home from the war in Europe. Considine finally dies in a fight with the killer of Upshaw's murderer, redeeming his actions, at least in the context of the novel. The only protagonist to survive – until the first chapter of *L.A.*

[8] Millard is nicknamed 'the padre' by Bleichert, arguably making him the only character in *The Black Dahlia* with a moral centre by invoking Christianity.

Confidential – is Buzz Meeks. His actions are motivated by his love for a woman named Audrey, one of infamous criminal boss Mickey Cohen's girlfriends. Meeks' association with both Howard Hughes and Mickey Cohen makes him the most corrupt protagonist of the novel, and yet he is also redeemed by his own personal sense of justice. At the end of the novel, he decides to burn the evidence of Dudley Smith's falsified investigation and to leave Audrey, because he is sure his own downfall will mean hers, too. Like Bleichert, and like Upshaw and Considine, Meeks takes responsibility for his own actions and acts according to his own sense of what is right and wrong.

Like *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* features three narrators. Its immensely complicated plot features a vice cop with a checkered past, Jack Vincennes, who has in the past murdered an innocent couple while under the influence of alcohol and Benzedrine. Clean and sober until halfway through the novel, Vincennes becomes obsessed with a prostitution ring named Fleur-de-Lis that has hookers dressed up as movie stars, one of the many subplots of the book.

One of those hookers, Lynn, who resembles Veronica Lake serves as an object of obsession for the two other protagonists: Bud White and Ed Exley. These two echo Blanchard (White) and Bleichert (Exley) from *The Black Dahlia*. Besides the obvious connection between the names Blanchard, Bleichert and White – the connection being the color white, obviously – they are until three quarters of the narrative bitter enemies, and in love with the same woman. White is loyal to Dudley Smith and hates Exley's ambitious and 'straight' character – Exley having testified against fellow officers in a brutality case with which the novel starts.

As the narrative progresses, Exley becomes more and more convinced of the appropriateness of the *Quartet*'s recurring theme of personal justice as set against his original idea of 'absolute justice', which he owes to his equally ruthless father. At the heart of Exley's character is deceit: he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions in the war, but his bravery turns out to have been a lie. This cunning makes Exley an interesting protagonist. He is the one cop in Ellroy's *Quartet* who seems to move within the boundaries of the law, and yet he is arguably the least likable. When Exley finally decides to team up with White and Vincennes to bring down Dudley Smith, he realizes his earlier mistake: "Ed squeezed his father's hands. 'Absolute justice. Remember that?'" (LAC 364) From this point on, Exley becomes what we can now convincingly call a 'typical' Ellroy protagonist (at least in these four novels): placing his own sense of justice above that of the law.

Returning to the single-narrator mode in *White Jazz*, Ellroy presents Dave Klein as arguably the *LA Quartet*'s most inherently criminal protagonist. The novel starts with a shootout in a "bookie mill" (WJ 11) where Klein tampers with a crime scene and at the end of the second chapter he

throws a witness out of a window. Klein is corrupt to the bone, and in the narrative has to juggle his real estate holdings – "Enforcer take bought slum pads" (WJ 26) - , incestuous feelings for his sister Meg and his junkie partner Junior Stemmons while investigating a robbery at the insane Kafesjian family, whose *pater familias* is an LAPD sanctioned drug dealer.

This most frantically plotted novel of the *Quartet* reads, mostly because of the constant stream-of-consciousness narrative, as the last desperate attempt at redemption by an evil man whose actions in the past have come back to bite him. As Klein mentions to Glenda, his actress girlfriend – signed to Howard Hughes' studio: "It's dues time, I can feel it." (WJ 236) As we have seen before, Klein's corrupted nature is changed in the novel by a case, and a woman. And yet, despite the quest for redemption Klein undertakes, in the end it is himself, and his own sense of justice he holds most dear. In the latter parts of the novel, he agrees to testify against fellow corrupt officers in the Vice department, but eventually decides to run in order to save Glenda, who, as the narrative shows is a murderess herself. Klein sacrifices himself for the innocence of a woman, meaning that in the end, as we have seen before, there is no justice done in the eye of the law, only in the mind of the protagonists.

As these numerous examples of the *Quartet*'s protagonists show, it is very difficult to find predominant redeeming features in the characters of these men. It is as if there is no way of being good in Ellroy's Los Angeles. All of the *Quartet*'s narrators can in some way be held accountable for bad, even evil, actions. What they all share, as I hope to have shown, is their own, personal sense of justice and their need to administer it, often moving far beyond the boundaries of the law: bending it to their purpose and even willing to kill to set things straight according to their own standards. They also seem very much aware that they are morally corrupted, often accepting of their own fates, even if that means death. One can offer up *The Big Nowhere*'s Danny Upshaw and Mal Considine as prime examples.

As the corruption moves within the establishment and up through the higher levels of the LAPD, one gets the sense that in order to some good in Los Angeles, one must fight fire with fire and adhere to one's own sense of what is right and wrong. The cases these men investigate are always solved, but not in the eyes of the law. The knowledge of the crimes remains with the detective or are taken to the grave – in Upshaw's case, for example. Even the later three books' villain Dudley Smith remains in a sense only partly punished: although paralyzed, he is "still half lucid, still a charmer" (WJ 353) at the end of *White Jazz*. And when Dave Klein says he will return to Los Angeles after many years: "I'm going to make […] Dudley fill in every moment of his life – to eclipse my guilt with the sheer weight of his evil. I'm going to kill him in the name of our victims" (WJ 354), he seems to be speaking for every one of the protagonists of the four novels.

Theo D'haen argues that it is the 'absolute justice' of *L.A. Confidential* that "sullies everything" (D'haen 101). I agree. In Ellroy's Los Angeles, there is no all encompassing sense of justice. It is justice meted out by flawed men, often with their own obsession or ambition at its heart.

The other common denominator between the protagonists is their obsession with women (or men, in Upshaw's case), dead or alive. In some cases, as in *The Big Nowhere*'s Buzz Meeks and *White Jazz*'s Dave Klein, women are the source of their turn from bad to good. They serve as inspirations for the men who want to redeem themselves for the only thing they hold dear. 'Cherchez la femme', *The Black Dahlia*'s motto is one of the most enduring themes in the *LA Quartet*, and in its double meaning: the love for women as both a prominent force for the good and the reason for much of the 'bad' the protagonists do, it can be seen as defining for Ellroy's universe: Los Angeles. As Ellroy himself has said: "Whenever someone asks me what the *LA Quartet* books are about, I say: Bad men in love with strong women." (Rich, 2009)

Unreal estates

Writing about the history of Los Angeles in his prologue to his true crime book about the Homicide Special squad of the LAPD, Miles Corvin says: "By 1900, L.A. was a cow town of about 100.000 people, unable to grow because of its limited water supply. The event that precipitated the city's population explosion and transformed it into a major metropolis was itself a crime: civic leaders hornswoggled farmers in the Owens Valley, 233 miles away, and siphoned off their water, enriching a handful of prominent men who had devised a real estate scam." (Corwin 4)

James Ellroy's novels are very aware of the fact that the city only exists because of a crime, and in its narratives we find several examples that indicate this. Both *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz* feature a climax revolving around the building of new, important parts of the city: the removing of the 'land' from the Hollywoodland sign (which involves the destruction of badly built real estate by one of the novel's antagonists) and the building of the new Los Angeles Dodgers stadium (which involves the removal of an entire Latino community from Elysian Park) respectively. As I will argue, the idea of Los Angeles as a battle ground of its sunny climate and the extreme expansion of the city, which obviously destroys the natural paradise, is an integral part of Ellroy's Los Angeles.

In parts of the plot of *The Black Dahlia* we find the two aforementioned characteristics of William McClung's Arcadia and Utopia united, specifically in the character of Scottish immigrant Emmett Sprague. His real estate development serves both as backdrop to the murder of Elizabeth Short, and as an encroachment on the 'natural paradise' in the city. As cities expand, new houses and properties must naturally consume nature; more and more of the natural resources are eaten up by real estate. Sprague has made his fortune building badly built real estate, which in itself could be read as a commentary on the development of Los Angeles. Sprague is also a violent man. He knows that Georgie Tilden (who Bucky finds out is one of the killers of Elizabeth Short is actually Madeleine's father. To keep up the appearance that he is in fact Madeleine's father, he disfigures Georgie's face with a knife beyond recognition. Arguably, they are the same crimes, both violations of an 'innocent' space.

Nowhere in these novels is the link between the city and the narrative more apparent than in the final chapters of *The Black Dahlia*. Throughout the novel, many mentions are made of the destruction of part of the Hollywoodland sign. The sign was, in real life as in the novel, originally placed to promote real estate development for the 'Hollywoodland' area of Los Angeles. The destruction of the sign happens concurrently with the destruction of some shacks (built and owned by Emmett Sprague) next to the sign. By sheer luck, Bucky's fellow detective Harry Sears finds the shack Elizabeth Short was murdered in. (TBD 284) As Bucky follows Sears to the shack, they walk past the revised sign: "When the letter 'A' crashed to the dirt, they struck up 'Hooray for Hollywood'" (TBD 285) Bucky's obsession with the Dahlia and her killer has led to this point in the story. He is about to find out who killed Elizabeth Short.

The concurrent removal of the word "land" from the Hollywoodland sign signals an end of an era and a new beginning, which echoes Bucky's quest very closely. Here we see the story linked to a historical place, integral to the idea of Los Angeles, play a part in and shape the narrative. The removal of the sign becomes not just a happening, but a necessary step to forward the story. It also works on a symbolic level, and is used by Ellroy to enlarge the moment.

The solving of the murder of Elizabeth Short becomes, even if only fictional, as much part of the history of Los Angeles as the famous Hollywood sign. Hollywood and its myths are naturally a large part of the identity of Los Angeles and its lure is the reason Betty Short is in Los Angeles in the first place. In this respect, Hollywood serves a synechdoche for Los Angeles as a place of hope and dreams, but also for the crushing of them.

Echoing the end of *The Black Dahlia*, *White Jazz*'s ending follows a similar pattern: Dave Klein's quest for redemption climaxes concurrently with the building of the new Los Angeles

Dodgers stadium in the Chavez Ravine. In a feat of dense aggregation of Los Angeles properties, the city has hired a famous Latino boxer to help evict the poor Latino community, offering them money to vacate the spot where the new stadium is being built. Ellroy manages to bring together plot and psychology in a place exemplary for Los Angeles corruption: "'What's Ruiz doing?' He looked over. 'Expiation of guilt or some such concept. Can you blame him? All this for a baseball stadium?'"(WJ 260)

L.A.Confidential's Ed Exley's father is another corrupt figure in real estate, and also has a dark past, similar to *The Black Dahlia*'s Emmett Sprague. Preston Exley is an ex-cop, who has evolved into an important Los Angeles contractor, having built Dream-A-Dreamland (surely a reference to Disney Land) and during the novel is completing his largest project yet: a large freeway construction linking "ocean to foothills." (LAC 362) In another pairing of plot and symbolism, Ellroy sets an important conversation between father and son at a model of the new construction: "Ed looked at the model. Hypnotic: L.A. grown huge, Exley Construction containing it." (LAC 364) The containment here works in two ways, one is the fact that Preston Exley is containing his son, and tries to limit his investigating efforts in order to prevent him from finding out his own involvement, another, more important to my argument, is that the construction effectually is keeping the city trapped, the freeways constraining the city as prison bars. The city was and is being built by bad men, acting out evil plots, using real estate and construction to assert their power.

Other Visions of Criminal Los Angeles

With the characteristics of James Ellroy's Los Angeles in the *LA Quartet* in mind: a frantic, very dark place, the novels' protagonists' dark and twisted quests, the symbolism and the attention to detail and to language, it is useful to set these ideas against other examples of contemporary crime fiction.

Michael Connelly's *The Black Echo*'s (1991) protagonist Hieronymus 'Harry' Bosch is intricately connected to the crimes committed in the novel. A Vietnam veteran Bosch knew from that war is found murdered in a tunnel near the Hollywood Reservoir, and in uncovering the connection between the crime, the criminals and himself, Bosch has to quite literally move inside the

underbelly of Los Angeles[9]. Throughout the narrative, descriptions and comments on the (nature of the) city are interspersed. These comments are mainly condemning of the city, but stress the ambiguity of Los Angeles, linking the plot to the dialectic between light and dark in L.A.

These comments are mostly made by the protagonist, instead of offered more implicitly through the narrative, as Ellroy does. Examples of these comments abound, in some cases explicitly stressing McClung's ambiguousness between Arcadia and Utopia as mentioned in the introduction: "Sunsets did that here. Made you forget it was the smog that made their colors so brilliant, that behind every pretty picture there could be an ugly story." (TBE 73) This quote also echoes David Fine's descriptions of L.A. in terms of of unreality and deception. Bosch is a classic Los Angeles fictional detective in the sense that he is intertextually aware of this fact. Bosch feels a lone wolf in the context of the city: "I am the loner, he thought. I am the nighthawk." (TBE 247) Here, Bosch is commenting on a Edward Hopper painting, 'The Nighthawk', in which the "darkness clashed with the pastels" (247): another comment on Los Angeles' ambiguous nature of which we have found many examples in the novels discussed.

In another passage, Bosch seems aware of his place in the context of being a detective: "Alcohol and jazz, he thought as he swallowed. Sleeping with your clothes on. You're a cliché cop, Bosch." (TBE 206) As we have seen in Ellroy's novels, jazz is again apparently a part of being a (Los Angeles) detective. Jazz, with its improvisation over tightly set structures arguably being a description of the genre of detective fiction. The lone wolf detective must improvise in a chaotic environment to solve the crimes committed: he must move outside of the rules to satisfy his own sense of justice.

Robert Crais' *LA Requiem* (1999) features protagonists Elvis Cole and Joe Pike. Cole is a Vietnam veteran and now a private detective, and his partner Joe Pike an ex-LAPD officer who now owns a gun shop. *LA Requiem* is full of characteristics we can now comfortably call Los Angeles crime fiction staples, such as a crime that is intricately connected to the detective's – Joe Pike – history which needs to be uncovered, a doppelganger echoing Hollywood masquerade and the ambiguous nature of Los Angeles[10]. As the title implies, the novel is at times almost melancholic about the city, as Elvis Cole tells us: "The L.A. skies are so bright with light that only the most brilliant stars are visible, and those are faint and murky. I used to joke that it was this absence that caused so many people to lose their bearings." (LAR 119) But, even though Cole sees and lives

[9] The narrative is interspersed with flashbacks to the Vietnam war, in which Bosch, together with the murdered veteran are 'tunnel rats': soldiers who went into Vietcong tunnels to kill enemy soldiers. The climax of the novel takes place in a tunnel beneath Los Angeles.

[10] In the novel, one of Joe Pike's ex-girlfriends is murdered. The murderer is found out to be connected to Joe Pike's time with the LAPD, in which he killed his own partner. This murderer has changed his appearance to look like Joe Pike while killing, in order to frame him.

through dark and deadly Los Angeles: “I love L.A. It’s a great, sprawling, spread-to-hell city that protects us by its sheer size.” (LAR 389)

Both Connelly’s and Crais’ novels seem very much aware of the fact that they are set in Los Angeles and are Los Angeles crime stories. Both feature detectives that explicitly comment on the nature of Los Angeles and their part in its history, both as Los Angeles detectives and fictional characters that move within a certain environment. These novels are less frantically plotted than Ellroy’s novels and much more aware of the aforementioned intertextuality. The ambiguous nature of Los Angeles discussed earlier is very much present in both novels, both in the plots and in the explicit comments by the protagonists. It is the place of endings, of death, but also a place that is hard not to love, as we saw Elvis Cole mention. In fact, Crais ends his novel on this idea: “L.A. isn’t the end; it’s the beginning.” (LAR 391) Even though the city is invariably dark in its nature, there is always the promise of light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusion

If James Ellroy’s novels lack one thing compared to the other novels discussed, it is their lack of this just mentioned light. Ellroy’s novels are dark, frantic and twisted, almost without a possibility of redemption. This is perhaps the reason that some critics have difficulty with the work. As Mike Davis puts it, the *LA Quartet* is, “depending on one’s viewpoint […] the culmination of the genre [noir, JG], or its *reduction ab adsurdum*.” (Davis 45) The novels are so full of Los Angeles’ criminal darkness, that there is absolutely no place for any happiness. The only way to be happy in Los Angeles is, paradoxically, to *not* be there, as we see in *L.A. Confidential*, as Bud White, the only one of Ellroy’s protagonist who really ‘gets the girl in the end’ leaves Los Angeles to pursue happiness with ex-prostitute and Veronica Lake lookalike Lynn. In this absence of light compared to the dark, Ellroy’s fiction sets itself apart from many other novels and stories about the city. The novels lack a counterbalance to the darkness, there is no happiness, no redemption apart from the protagonists’ own sense of justice and no let-up in the plots, which are as twisted as the city itself. Los Angeles history lives within the pages of Ellroy’s novels: within their plots and protagonists.

Coming back to the “images of instability, fragility, unreality” (Fine 16) mentioned in the introduction, I would argue that while one cannot convincingly call Ellroy’s fiction fragile – perhaps only in the skewed romanticism of its protagonists – we can definitely mark the other two characteristics as present in Ellroy’s Los Angeles and in the other novels discussed. This

makes the novels confusing, especially Ellroy's: Los Angeles is shown to be too dark and too frantic to live comfortably. The protagonists just have to live with that fact: they are a product of their environment and by their actions complicit in the nature of the city. The city is filled with dark and twisted characters, both informed by and instrumental in forming the city. With respect to Connelly's and Crais' novels we see ambiguity to the city in the comments of their protagonists, we see nothing of the sort in Ellroy's. As David Fine argues finally about Ellroy's fiction: "there are no good guys." (Fine 149)

If there is any sort of conclusion to Ellroy's fiction, it is this: no light, only darkness, and no good guys. That may arguably also be its weak point. Even so, I argue that although Ellroy's fiction sets itself apart from that characteristic of Los Angeles (crime) fiction, enough remains to be definitely representative of the city. Coming back to Kowalewski's argument from the introduction: "a writer's central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location" (Kowalewski 7), one can comfortably describe Ellroy's fiction as being regional, and from Los Angeles. With Ellroy's presence in the literature *about* the city's literature as well, one can also say that Ellroy's fiction has in fact shaped Los Angeles fiction, and the endurance of the city's myths. By his use of real-life occurrences, although spectacularly fictionalized, one feels so immersed in the city's history to almost think one can understand the city. But, as we have seen in Ellroy's novels: the city is not there to be understood. It is a city of dark myth with no moral centre, and its inhabitants can only live by their own rules and their own sense of justice.

The classic film about Los Angeles' history: *Chinatown*, ends with someone telling Jake Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, that there is no understanding Los Angeles, as even Los Angeles natives do not speak the language there: 'Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown.' After studying the novels discussed, I conclude that James Ellroy believes Los Angeles *can* be understood, but only if one accepts its darkness and insanity.

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