

# Noir into history

## James Ellroy's *Blood's a Rover*

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'... history, the billiondollar speedup'

John Dos Passos, *USA*, 1938

*Blood's a Rover* (2009) is the final volume of James Ellroy's 'Underworld USA' trilogy, which includes *American Tabloid* (1995) and *The Cold Six Thousand* (2001).<sup>1</sup> It is one of a recent glut of long, serially formatted works of crime-detective fiction, others of which have also been trilogies – for example, Steig Larsson's extraordinarily popular, but disappointingly conventional, 'Millennium' trilogy; David Peace's 'Red Riding' quartet, filmed for television as a trilogy; and Andrew Leu and Alan Mak's outstanding three-part film *Infernal Affairs*, rehashed by Martin Scorsese as *The Departed*. Most, however, have been television series, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* made by HBO are among the best known. Crime-detective fiction, *noir*, is now a transnationalized culture-industrial form as well as an important site of avant-gardist literary experimentation – witness, for example, recent novels by such writers as Ricardo Piglia in Argentina (*Money to Burn*, 1999) and Giuseppe Genna in Italy (*In the Name of Ishmael*, 2001), not to mention Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009), Dennis Johnson's *Nobody Move* (2009) and Robert Coover's *Noir* (2010) in the USA itself. Ellroy's work now belongs in this experimental space too. This would suggest, paradoxically, that the ubiquity of crime-detective fiction is part of a vaster cultural process of hegemonization: not because all narrative fiction today is *noir*, but because so much is touched by its fictional procedures.<sup>2</sup>

For its part, Ellroy's trilogy shares the radical and totalizing artistic intent of David Simon and Edward Burns's television series *The Wire*, but eschews its anthropological and realist compositional procedures for a graphic modernist gestics, which is at times jazz-like, and at others cartoonish. Read contrastively in terms of content, however, *The Cold Six Thousand* and *Blood's a Rover*, in particular, reveal an important historical and political absence in *The Wire*: the lack of any political resonance of the radical black nationalist politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the bleak

neoliberalized local environments it portrays (the world of the 'corner boys') – the lack, that is, of a black community politics. Motivated instead by a nostalgia for a lost world of industrial work and trade-union labour organization, *The Wire* seems to empty out historically and politically the 'black' community experience it nevertheless insists upon representing. There is the church, there is boxing – forms of surrogate welfare – there are a number of more or less corrupt local black politicians, and then there is Omar (the outlaw urban cowboy) – arguably an individual stand-in for an anti-racist and anti-capitalist local politics whose memory has all but been erased.<sup>3</sup>

### Pre-histories

One reason for this difference is that, unlike *The Wire*, Ellroy's 'Underworld USA' extends the procedures of crime fiction historically into the recent past. Each of its constituent parts is thus also a historical novel. Together they present a particular version of 'the Sixties' – at first negatively, and then more positively – as a transitional decade whose 'world historical' moment is precisely the emergence of 'black' reform-and-revolution and whose key figures are, on the one hand, Martin Luther King (in *The Cold Six Thousand*) and, on the other, the Black Panther Party (in *Blood's a Rover*). The perspective the novels offer on this process, however, is not a community one (a history 'from below'), but rather a statist one (a history 'from above'). In this respect, 'Underworld USA' is Hegelian: it is state-centred (the state is both the condition and the shaper of history's course for Hegel),<sup>4</sup> and its principal characters are more or less subaltern 'enforcers' of various kinds, intent on containing and erasing reform-and-revolution (both 'black' and otherwise). Ellroy's state, in other words, is coded as 'white' and insists on violently maintaining its imaginary whiteness.<sup>5</sup> Appropriately, what Hegel would have referred to as the history of 'freedom' that is embodied in successive states (and this is certainly a view the US state propagates of itself), Adorno re-baptized the history of

‘big guns’.<sup>6</sup> Central figures in ‘Underworld USA’, in this regard, are the arms-and-entertainment industry magnate Howard Hughes (referred to as ‘Drac’) and J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI. Together, they form a capital–state alliance invested in the manufacture of forms of ‘fascination’ (that is, the capturing, ideological coding and capitalization of visual attention), on the one hand, and investigative surveillance, or spying (that is, its repressive instrumentalization), on the other – historical forms of vision that, with the Hollywood margins of Los Angeles at its centre, have been fundamental to the obsessions and anxieties explored in all of Ellroy’s fictions: the dream factory as psychopathology and nightmare.

According to Lukács, the best historical novels narrate the past as prehistories of the present. Written between 1995 and 2009 – that is, during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations – how might ‘Underworld USA’ be conceived as such? Ellroy does not resort to the Lukácsian realist compositional strategy of the ‘necessary anachronism’ in his novel.<sup>7</sup> The connections are made, however, but more or less directly. For example, the traces of the present in which *Blood’s a Rover* is written are reflexively registered in references to a ‘now’ of narrative recomposition (2009) in the epilogue that brings the stories told to an end (where it is stated that ‘History stopped at that moment thirty-seven years ago’ – that is, in early 1972). Similarly, at the trilogy’s beginning, in the prologue to *American Tabloid*, the narrator addresses the reader – of 1995 and after – explicitly to make a comparison between Jack Kennedy and Bill Clinton: ‘He called a slick line and wore a world-class haircut. He was Bill Clinton minus pervasive media scrutiny and a few rolls of flab.’<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the past narrated is explicitly framed by the present of narration (as well as by the history and experience of subsequent media technologies).

Closer to the Lukácsian strategy of ‘necessary anachronism’ is Ellroy’s account of the so-called ‘drugs wars’, a key feature of the foreign policy of both Clinton and Bush and waged especially in the US empire’s ‘backyard’, Latin America and the Caribbean – as portrayed in Don Winslow’s outstanding political thriller *The Power of the Dog* (2005). In Ellroy’s work, however, going back to his ‘Los Angeles Quartet’ (1987–92), the war on drugs is rather a continuation of a wider national biopolitical strategy of racist urban ghettoization. For Ellroy the drugs war is mainly con-

cerned with the production of drugs consumption – that is, of a ‘captured’ market that can be policed as well as strategically deployed (when, for example, containing potential ‘black’ revolution). It is, in other words, a modality of internal colonization: a spatial ‘fix’ of a racialized sort.<sup>9</sup> In its overarching historical narrative of *imperium*, ‘Underworld USA’ thus constitutes the contemporary drugs war as the ghetto’s future horizon. (This is explicitly the case in *Blood’s a Rover*’s island of Hispaniola ‘casino’ adventure, for example.)



‘Underworld USA’ narrates the ways in which, after the Cuban Revolution (1959) and the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs fiasco (1961), the waning US empire contains reform and revolution in a continuous strategic deployment of low-intensity warfare against its own citizenry (as well as overseas, in Vietnam and Cuba). A number of the central characters in the trilogy orchestrate this. It includes the assassination of the Kennedy brothers and, more particularly (in *The Cold Six Thousand*), Martin Luther King – clearly, from the perspective of the trilogy, the era’s most important political figure, its ‘world historical’ individual, so to speak. As in Don DeLillo’s novel *Libra* (1988), an important influence for Ellroy, the fetish of the unified state is represented as a myth, as its various constituent parts – government, executive, repressive security apparatuses – feed on, combat and plot against each other, as well as the general populace. The racism of the ‘white’ state fuels this ongoing situation. (Loïc Wacquant has recently pointed out that after slavery and the ghetto, the prison has become the central institution for the ‘confine[ment] ... and control [of] African-Americans in the history of the United States’ – a fact that is borne out in *The Wire*.) In Ellroy’s trilogy of novels the USA is portrayed as living through a *permanent* process of what Althusser called ‘political primitive accumulation’.<sup>10</sup>

*Blood's a Rover* is, however, a surprising addition to the previous volumes of 'Underworld USA', principally because of the uncharacteristically sentimental swerve to the political left it traces – uncharacteristic because of the apparent absence of any ethical content to Ellroy's novels whatsoever, despite their evident moralism – through the 'wounded attachments' of its reactionary main characters and points of narrative focalization, the 'enforcers' Wayne Tedrow Jr. and Dwight Holly as well as their 'peeper' underling Don Crutchfield, serial killers all.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, we eventually discover that 'Crutch' is also the novel's archivist, composer and narrator. As it dramatizes each of their left turns, *Blood's a Rover* thus retrospectively reconfigures the historical perspective of the trilogy as a whole, hinting at a dramatic (and affective) development of a political kind: as it unfolds, and as it represents the guilt-ridden torsions that its central characters undergo, a new story emerges: a plot to assassinate J. Edgar Hoover himself. Might this be – the trilogy suggests – a necessary condition for Obama's election as president in 2009, the year the *narration* of 'Underworld USA' concludes?

Like its two predecessors, *Blood's a Rover* is a multi-levelled *noir* of extremely complex emplotment that weaves together a number of stories whilst reconstructing the course of US political history after the assassination of Martin Luther King. As he peeps and stalks, Crutch passes through riots in many US cities. Here, I will attempt to describe and analyse four of its narrative threads, all colour-coded. The first (above) is a *white* thread, which tells the story of the dominant 'white' imaginary as embodied in the US state apparatus and defended by Hoover, Hughes and their subalterns (until, that is, they rebel). The second is a *green* thread, and refers to a transnational political economy of sorts that is centred on the illegal circulation of emeralds ('green stones') across the USA and the Caribbean. The third is a *black* thread, and refers to 'black' revolution and reform (and its violent containment). It also inflects the writing – the letters – of the novel, its style and compositional procedures. The final thread is *red*. It refers to the affective left turn the narrative takes as the symbolic mastery of Hughes and Hoover wanes and the importance of a woman of the left (a 'red Goddess'), Joan Klein, emerges to counter-hegemonize all stories (and assault the 'white' state). Of the many ways to think through the levels of the text, one is through gender: the main characters of the novel are male (Wayne, Dwight, Crutch, Reginald), many of the secondary ones female (Joan, Karen, Mary Beth, Celia). But in terms of the political development of the narrative, the latter are

the most important. Needless to say, all storylines cut across and are stitched into the others – the work is a vast montage – such that, for example, the story of the green emeralds is also, at times, a story of 'white' finance capitalism (that is, state-backed and illegal), at others, of revolution (both 'red' and 'black').

### Green: Hispaniola counterpoint

*Blood's a Rover* is a historical novel that takes the form of crime–detective fiction. How does this work? The novel opens – in the first of its two prologues, under the title 'Then' – 'Suddenly' (the first word of the novel), with a heist that occurs in early 1964, narrated film style: a robbery of emeralds (and cash) is immediately covered up through the murder and disfiguring of its perpetrators by one of the gangsters. It thus begins with an enigma: who? why? The desire to solve it follows. The key subjects of this desire are, first, the racist local cop Scotty Bennett; second, a young witness to the crime, Marshall Bowen, who becomes an undercover infiltrator of radical black militant groups for the FBI enforcer Dwight Holly (who has a direct line to both Hoover and Richard Nixon); and third, and most importantly, the young private eye, local peeping Tom and narrator, Crutch. The second prologue, under the title 'Now', then expresses in first person what Derrida might refer to as Crutch's 'archive fever' – that is, the process of historical archivization and investigation as pathologies of the scopic drive:

America: I window-peeped four years of our History... I followed people. I bugged and tapped and caught big events in ellipses. I remained unknown. My surveillance linked the Then to the Now in a never-before-revealed manner. I was there... Massive paper trails provide verification. This book derives from stolen public files... Scripture-pure veracity and scandal-rag content. That conjunction gives it its sizzle.<sup>12</sup>

The text of the novel then recommences, beginning in June 1968 and ending in May 1972, to narrate how the crime is solved; that is, it situates the 'suddenness' of the robbery of the emeralds in a conjuncturally more complex, temporally longer and geographically wider history. In this sense, the novel has the narrative structure of a classical work of detective fiction: it tells the story of the reconstruction of the history of the (criminal) event that is its occasion.<sup>13</sup> Ellroy's is, therefore, not only a historical novel that takes the form of a crime–detective fiction, it is also (that is, simultaneously) a *meta*-historical novel whose very reflexivity takes the generic form of crime–detection. From 'peeper' to historian: this also means that the

novel is a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of Crutch's political education into history and narration. *Bildung* formally mediates detection and history such that the acquisition of knowledge that is associated with detection – an allegorical rendering of the social category of the intellectual, according to Jameson – becomes, in the novel's narrative content, the formation of a political subject (of the enunciation of) history.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, 'sizzle' is all that Crutch ever wanted. He 'tailed cheating spouses' for a living, 'kicked in doors and took photos of the fools balling. It was a high-risk, high-yuks job with female-skin potential... He wanted to groove the job forever.' Addicted to peeping, the job combines his night and daytime activities. Crutch comes across the story of the emeralds by accident, pulled into history by his desire as he tracks down a woman who, it turns out, is 'a Commie. She's some kind of left-wing transient with more names than half the world.' She is 'Gretchen Farr/Celia Reyes'.<sup>15</sup> Janus-faced, as the names suggest, she looks two ways, crossing the USA and the Dominican Republic in counterpoint, mapping out the political geography and economy of the text whilst bringing Crutch into the purview of Wayne Tedrow Jr and Dwight Holly – the other two main characters of the novel – and their spheres of operation: the first, an enforcer-chemist for Hughes and the Mafia; the second, Hoover's principal enforcer-agent provocateur. Both were involved in the covert COINTELPRO operation against Martin Luther King (and first appear in *The Cold Six Thousand*).<sup>16</sup>

Farr/Reyes belongs to a Dominican revolutionary organization, the 14th of June Revolutionary Movement. She is also Mafia boss Sam Giancana's lover (or 'squeeze') and has convinced him and 'the boys' (that is, the other leading Mafia godfathers, Carlos Marcelo and Santo Trafficante) that the Dominican Republic is the right place to invest in casinos now that Cuba has been lost to communism.<sup>17</sup> Santo Domingo, the country's capital city, might replace Havana as a place – offshore – both to launder and to accumulate 'entertainment' capital (based on a particular combinations of so-called 'immaterial' and 'affective' labour in which the moment of 'spectacle' is crucial). Tedrow is also a Mafia plant, instructed, on the one hand, to convince Hughes to finance the Dominican investment programme and, on the other, to launder both Teamster trade-union funds and other illegal gains through the black community in Los Angeles (via a taxicab business and a local investment bank – the People's Bank of South Los Angeles). These are the kinds of illegal activities that constitute the economic background for the whole of 'Underground USA'.

Apart from hitman and chemist, Tedrow is thus also an accountant, at the violent centre of the Hughes–Mafia regime of accumulation.<sup>18</sup> Tedrow employs Crutch to assist, murderously, on the ground – in both Los Angeles and Santo Domingo<sup>19</sup> – where, it turns out, the latter can also pursue his own desire: the emerald case. In counterpoint to these operations, Farr/Reyes also brings him close to her older political associate Joan Klein, the revolutionary 'knife-scar woman', with whom he becomes infatuated. He spots them first in an embrace, and stubbornly stalks and spies on them. At the same time, he discovers the body of a dead woman in a house near Klein and Reyes's hideout: a porno movie set become, in Crutch's mind, a 'Horror house'. The body has been dismembered:

The severed arm/the missing hand/the brown skin,  
pure female. The geometric tattoo on the biceps.  
The deep gouge through and beside it. The crumbled  
green stones embedded bone-deep.<sup>20</sup>

Crutch tracks the cuts and scars (from the 'tattoo woman' to Klein) and makes the 'emerald' connections (mistakenly, it turns out),<sup>21</sup> whilst the tattoo hieroglyph eventually introduces him to Haitian voodoo – conceived in the novel mainly as a form of popular (even *guerrilla*) medicine and/or chemistry – in which Crutch learns to make potions, poisons, drugs of various kinds. Like Tedrow, he becomes an expert chemist, 'black' knowledge he will deploy against the 'white' state in the Hoover hit.

The figuring of counterpoint in 'Gretchen Farr/Celia Reyes' is thus important for an understanding of *Blood's a Rover*. This is not only because it is a narrative strategy that folds individual stories into a transnationalized economic and political geography – the US empire – but because Crutch, the eventual narrator, like Tedrow and Holly, also looks across this space in two directions at once: a murderous anti-communist and drugs dealer, working for illegal capital, he is also a voodoo apprentice and student of Frantz Fanon. Eventually, under the influence of Joan (his revolutionary 'mother'), and following in the footsteps of Tedrow and Holly (his cruel 'fathers'), he turns against the 'entertainment' capital he works for. In this respect, Crutch is a 'voodoo child'.

Joan Klein's account of the history of the green emeralds is crucial to the process of Crutch's *Bildung* and his political transformation into a subject of history, as it is to the compositional structure of the novel.<sup>22</sup> It provides the narrative thread that unifies all counterpoints and stories as well as the political logic for the turn against Hoover and the 'white' state. Joan's



family was in the business of selling emeralds, but the emeralds they sold were *quaquero* emeralds, produced in pirate mines in Columbia. Over the years, the profits were used by the Klein family to finance left-wing causes in Latin America and beyond, and during the US Depression emeralds helped sustain impoverished families: ‘Green fire was the flame of magic and revolution’ (voodoo and politics once again).<sup>23</sup> Hoover discovered the family’s emerald stash and took it. Joan’s grandfather suffered a heart attack and died. Hoover financed military coups instead and enhanced his anti-communist myth both nationally and overseas. He then sold the emerald stash to a Paraguayan dictator. Joan, meanwhile, had become involved in financing left-wing causes through robbing banks and shipping heroin. With Celia they organized revolution in the Dominican Republic, but were betrayed by the ‘tattoo woman’. In the mid-1960s, Papa Doc Duvalier in Haiti and Joaquín Belaguer in the Dominican Republic decided to buy the emeralds. The shipping was to pass through Los Angeles. Joan found out and organized the heist, and the stones and cash were deposited in a local black community bank, the People’s Bank of South Los Angeles, run by Lionel Thornton. It is at this point that *Blood’s a Rover* begins. As Joan says: ‘The green stones formed a circuit back to Isidore Klein [her grandfather] and his struggle.’ As Crutch says: ‘The length of her tale matched the breadth of his surveillance.’ And they finally embrace.<sup>24</sup>

It is Joan’s story that provides the novel with the formal requirement that crime–detective fiction

demands: the history of the event (the heist) that opens the text and explains its course. Arguably, however, it is either the weakest point of the work or its most formally symptomatic: as Joan ‘confesses’ to Crutch the history of the illegal production and subsequent circulation of the emeralds, from colonial Colombia to the present of her narrative, contextualizing it and her hatred for Hoover, her discourse reveals that the work’s formal requirement, as detective fiction, in fact becomes – meta-historically – the mirror of its own impossibility as a historical novel. The history told traces an internal limit of the novel: it cannot be incorporated as dramatic content but only as a formal *generic* condition. Refusing any historical relation or connection to the two previous volumes of the ‘Underworld USA’ trilogy, Joan’s story–confession rather foregrounds *Blood’s a Rover’s* autonomy and difference. This involves another generic – sentimental and gendered – twist to its hybrid composition.

The novel is composed in chapter runs of three, each dedicated to a character – Tedrow, Holly, Crutch – which are then repeated over the course of the novel, until Tedrow dies. Scotty Bennett takes over Tedrow’s place, but then he and Holly are killed towards the end of Part Five. At this point, from the beginning of the final Part Six (called ‘Comrade Joan’) – which is also the moment of Joan’s ‘confession’ – Crutch’s chapters are counterpointed with hers (in coupledness). In other words, Joan, becomes not only narratively dominant but also compositionally significant. Once detection has generically concluded in confession, the final ‘document’ in Crutch’s historical and investigative *Bildung* affectively binds him to what is revealed to be Joan’s personal political vendetta, and initiates what becomes a (post-detection) ‘criminal’-historical *romance* involving the assassination of Hoover.

### **Black: writing reform-and-revolution**

In his reading of Peter Weiss’s trilogy *The Aesthetics of Revolution*, “‘A Monument to Radical Instants’”, Fredric Jameson develops Lukács’s formal account of the historical novel in ways that are directly relevant to Ellroy’s ‘Underworld USA’ trilogy of historical *noirs*. Weiss’s novel is also about revolution and its containment, but in the context of fascism and Stalinism. It concentrates on the experience of young militants before, during and after the Second World War in Europe. Jameson suggests that Weiss’s work challenges some of Lukács’s analytical categories, some of which need updating. New ones also need to be deployed, such as Jameson’s own notion of ‘cognitive mapping’, so as to explore Weiss’s use of space and

place, especially insides (where many of its formally important discussions of art and politics take place) and outsides, in a context of harsh repression; as is also the case for Ellroy's own probing of the geopolitics of US empire ('spatial fixes'). But Jameson also invents a category to understand the heightened discourse of Weiss's novel in which a militant collective is represented in the decentred language of its own present. He refers to this as a 'dialogical agon'.<sup>25</sup> Here, I would like to give this idea an Ellroyian twist, and suggest that it may be appropriate to understand the language of *Blood's a Rover* as a *performative gestic*.

As mentioned above, Ellroy's trilogy is state-centred, but this does not mean that it is centred on particular rulers – these are mentioned, and even appear as characters (some are assassinated), but minor ones. Executive power of that kind, as in the novels discussed by Lukács and Jameson, remains in the background. In the prologue to *American Tabloid*, the first volume of 'Underground USA', Ellroy is explicit in this regard, making his work a polemical intervention into extant versions of the 1960s:

It's time to dislodge [Kennedy's] urn and cast light on a few men... rogue cops and shakedown artists... wiretappers and soldiers of fortune and faggot lounge entertainers. Had one second of their lives deviated off course, American history would not exist as we know it. It's time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars. It's time to embrace bad men... Here's to them.<sup>26</sup>

Ellroy's trilogy thus presents readers with a *populist* version of statism, writing its fictional history from the perspective of the subaltern front-line employees of the repressive state apparatus and those they press into service – for example, the doomed young film star Sal Mineo or the boxer Sonny Liston. Crutch is such a character-narrator. Commenting on the lowly bourgeois characters of the novels of the conservative Walter Scott, Lukács, again turning to Hegel, refers to them as 'maintaining individuals' – the stuff of civil (or bourgeois) society. As noted above, the principal characters of 'Underworld USA' are certainly such stuff, but of political society, specifically of the 'white state'. Lukács also called these characters 'mediocre heroes', insisting they have formal and compositional consequences that define the historical novel form.

The language of Ellroy's novels, however, is not simply written in that of its subaltern killers such as Crutch – even though he is ostensibly the narrator – and others of his ilk. Tedrow and Holly, the main characters of two of the trilogy's novels, are more like managers, in personal contact with – and so mediat-

ing readers' perspectives on – real, executive power: Hoover, Hughes, Nixon, 'the boys', and so on. Tedrow is the son of a wealthy Klansman (whom he murders at the end of *The Cold Six Thousand*). He and Holly are almost like brothers. These mediocre heroes are indeed maintaining individuals: what they maintain is the existing order, against reform and revolution, inside the state (the assassination of Kennedy) and out (the assassination of King). In *Blood's a Rover*, this means getting Nixon elected and the Mafia/Hughes casino deal arranged (Tedrow), and especially tracking and subverting 'black revolution' in Los Angeles occasioned by the rise of the Black Panther Party (Holly).<sup>27</sup>

Building on the well-known COINTELPRO operations against the Black Panther Party by the FBI, Ellroy has Holly parodically call his operation 'BAAAAAAD BROTHER'. The discourse of the novel, its writing, thus registers the power of its object – a changing history, a changing language – as it negates it (here in a mock FBI report), producing a caricature or stereotype. Ellroy's use of anxious parody here gives a sense of his work with language and form.<sup>28</sup> Even Hoover and Nixon humorously take on such speech acts, the language of the supposed black 'other', as registered in telephone-conversation transcripts: 'Lay it on me, brother... Tell it like it is, because I'm cool with it...' (Hoover to Holly); 'Tell it like it is...' (Nixon to Holly).<sup>29</sup>

The first word of Chapter 44 (Los Angeles 10/22/68) is: 'NEGROFICATION', written in capitals and underscored as if a newspaper headline.<sup>30</sup> It is an imperative – Marsh Bowen, Holly's undercover informant, needs to sharpen his 'black' image and militant Black Power performance (he is a black ex-cop) – but it also reads as a warning and/or, more neutrally, as signage with regard to a particular state of affairs. It is all of these, simultaneously. 'Negrofication' is what happens politically to the mediocre heroes/maintainers of the 'white' state as they turn against it. Holly's simulation of the requirements of black protest, its culture and anti-racist critique, convince Bowen that he actually really means it. Tedrow's guilt at his history of killing black men, inherited from his father, including his participation in the assassination of Martin Luther King, sends him, first, into the arms of Mary Beth, a black trade-union organizer and widow of another of his victims; and, second, to his suicide-death in Haiti whilst looking for her son, Reginald. In the Dominican Republic he blows up the casino construction sites ('fixed' entertainment capital) that belong to 'the boys', like a one-man guerrilla unit. He also siphons off Mafia profits for Celia and Joan's revolutionary activities. Meanwhile, Holly

– following Tedrow’s death, increasingly aware of the waning mental powers of Hoover in his old age (he warns Nixon of the problem), and having organized the Watergate break-in with Howard Hunt – decides to arrange the FBI director’s assassination.

Just as it describes the left turns of Crutch, Tedrow and Holly, the sign ‘negrofication’ also refers to a tradition of writing in the USA that goes back to Mark Twain: the ventriloquization of the ‘black’ voice. As the musical culture of jazz hits literature, the strategy definitively takes off with the ‘beat’ writers in the 1950s. Their work ‘speaks’ jazz and its world. This is also evident in Ellroy’s work in the writing of *White Jazz* (1992), the final volume of the ‘Los Angeles Quartet’ – formally still his most important novel.



Like *White Jazz*, *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand*, *Blood’s a Rover* is written in short, almost brutal sentences, continuous brief bursts of language that in their grammatical structure are anti-discursive and repetitive. Almost any passage from the text illustrates this point. Here is one that represents Tedrow at work:

He had L.A. work and Vegas work. The Boys kept suites in the Count’s [Hughes’s] hotels. Nixon was prez now. He overturned LBJ’s anti-trust injunctions fast. The Boys sold Drac the Landmark Hotel and two thousand prime Vegas acres. Drac’s new fixation was atomic waste. Underground tests scared him shitless. He called Wayne in to explain nuclear fission. Drac believed that A-bomb rays enhanced the black sex drive... He met with Lionel Thornton again. They discussed money transfers and the final wash of assets. It was tense. Thornton sat him face-to-face with the Dr. King portrait. Some world-clash thing resulted.<sup>31</sup>

Property, the circulation of capital: racism, guilt and anxiety. But also a rigorous and insistent deployment of language, which has been described as telegraphic, but which is at once poetic – in its distribution – and musical, picking up on the open rhythms of bebop and

free jazz. In other words: improvisation conceived as ‘controlled freedom’.<sup>32</sup> The lack of connectives and subordinate clauses opening up each sentence to the one that follows inhibits the developmental unfolding of discourse and narrative, interrupting, puncturing and denaturalizing it, to produce what reads at times like a repetitive but insistent rhythmic series of notes, riffs and/or shorthand. This is Ellroy’s constructivist principle at work, throughout the trilogy, over more than 1,500 pages. It asks readers to make connections between ‘shots’, like in an extensive Eisensteinian historical montage, as it passes through other semiotic systems (the media it deploys – for example, film and television) and incorporating codes, speech acts and sociolects, including the hate speech of the racists it represents and performs: ‘The spooks yelled spook-outrage slogans and spooked on back to.’<sup>33</sup> Moved by jazz, *Blood’s a Rover* both ‘says’ racism and ‘shows’ racism, repeating the language of the ‘white state’ whilst, however, also overcoming it – turning against it and becoming semi-autonomous – in its very composition. The novel is both agonistic and dialogical: the ‘other’ ever-present and yet determining. This is what makes Ellroy’s writing a (modernized) form of what Brecht refers to as a dramatic ‘gestics’: it performs social attitude(s) whilst moving to musical rhythms.<sup>34</sup>

The key aspect of Jameson’s conception of the ‘dialogical agon’ in Weiss’s novel, however, is that it succeeds in dramatically conserving the arguments and conflicts of a particular past in its language – as in Ellroy’s ‘sixties’ – whilst simultaneously radically depersonalizing its narrative discourse. Weiss’s mode of composition of his historical novel transcends the representation of typical individuated lives whilst, nevertheless, still being recognizable as a work set in a past that is readable as a present. The language and composition of *Blood’s a Rover* effects such a depersonalization of its narrative too. However, it does so not, as in Weiss’s novel, by *representing* a militant collectivity dialogically through its arguments, but by de-individualizing the ‘voices’ of its characters and making them all versions of its anonymous third-person riff – because, in effect, the narrative neither belongs to nor expresses Crutch’s personality either (since he too appears as its object, in the third person). It is as if the discourse of the novel has turned against its mediocre heroes as individuated individuals of political society just as they have turned against the ‘white’ state that employs them. As the above passage makes clear, the narrative takes the form of free indirect discourse. Whilst breaking down the distinctions between third and first persons, however, it refuses to rest with any

of the latter either. Paradoxically polyphonic, the free-indirect style appropriates all subjectivity to itself: all characters, including their thoughts and experiences are given indirectly, in the same spectral voice that ‘speaks’ them. The narrative discourse of the novel is, in other words, a ‘jazzed-up’ and open version of what Jameson refers to as

the enigmatic third person of modern literature, more mysterious ... than any of its first-person characters, inasmuch as we can see and observe them, but must ourselves be confined to looking out through the gaze of this narrative one, which then takes on something of the unknowability of Kant’s noumenal subject, always adding ‘the I to all its acts of consciousness,’ while itself remaining unknowable and inaccessible.<sup>35</sup>

In *Blood’s a Rover*, however, although unnameable and de-individuated, this ‘unknowable’ third person – the ‘other’ of its surveillance and repression – is historically accessible. The novel is written in and to the rhythms of ‘black’ reform and revolution.

## Red conclusion

There are two plots to assassinate Hoover in *Blood’s a Rover*. The first is from Dwight Holly, Hoover’s principal ‘enforcer’ and investigator–subverter of the Black Tribe Alliance and the Mau-Mau Liberation Front. Holly, however, remains the most enigmatic of the novel’s characters. Like Tedrow and Crutch, he also turns against the state, and, like Crutch, his turn is mediated by a relationship with Joan Klein that focuses – like repeated close-ups – on her scarified arm. Read psychoanalytically, they are excited not only by the outlaw past the scar suggests, but by the ever-present threat to the symbolic order it also promises. And they identify, perhaps also seeing in (or on) her the mark of their own subordination. This means that there is also a little bit of both damaged men inside Joan, which facilitates their political turn against the ‘white’ state. Joan’s scar is the visual site of their wounded attachments. Holly is not captured by Joan’s confession-narrative of the emeralds. Nor does he know about Hoover’s part in her life. Moreover, he had already been ‘seduced’ by the Left: his partner (and, it turns out, the mother of his children) is Karen, an old friend and political sympathizer of Joan’s – who is happy to share Holly with her. But Holly decides to assassinate Hoover anyway, independently, moved by a mixture of other attachments, including anti-racist guilt. Having already sought and won the confidence of Nixon – himself wary of Hoover’s power – it may also be that the death of Hoover would suit his reformist

agenda, ensconcing him further in the higher echelons of the state, next to the new president. On seeing Hoover, however, Holly decides that the director is no longer in control, that he has lost his mind, and that he now belongs to the past.

With Holly’s death, the novel changes its genre and compositional format, as noted above. But before Holly is killed he commits a last act of cruel *jouissance* (as if a superego in action): he wounds Crutch in such a way that he cannot but turn. That is, he ‘gifts’ his replacement with deep scars of his own. Holly visits Crutch in the Dominican Republic, where Tedrow has just blown up the half-built casinos. He finds Crutch there, amassing files and reading Fanon and tomes on voodoo medicine, and he carves the revolutionary date, 14 June, deep into Crutch’s back. In other words, he cuts Joan into him. Crutch is then captured by Joan’s story, and follows its generic – romance – logic through to the end, plotting Hoover’s assassination on the night of Labour Day (1 May), 1972.<sup>36</sup> He burns the director’s personal archive with voodoo chemicals; but the syringe containing the lethal voodoo poison breaks. When Hoover appears, however, Crutch holds out his hand and shows him an emerald: Hoover has a heart attack – like Isidore Klein, Joan’s grandfather – and dies.

*Blood’s a Rover* brings the ‘Underworld USA’ trilogy to an end, and in so doing traces the end of a particular era. Interestingly, the demise of both of its key overarching historical figures, Howard Hughes and J. Edgar Hoover, present throughout all three volumes of the work, chimes with a key world-historical shift. In *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Perry Anderson suggests that the 1970s – in the USA, the time of Nixon – marks the moment of the extinction of the bourgeoisie as a class ‘possessed of self-consciousness and morale’, which is replaced by new forms of capitalist administration and command.<sup>37</sup> Hoover, perhaps a typical representative of the state as a management committee of the bourgeoisie, already belonged to the past for Holly, and was now politically irrelevant. Similarly, Hughes’s waning presence in *Blood’s a Rover* is also interesting: a capitalist vampire who has become vampirized himself, he is plugged into new forms of capital, and only kept alive in a darkened anonymous hotel room in Las Vegas to finance the ventures of others. In such a context, if for Lukács the novel form is the epic of a ‘fallen’ bourgeois world, perhaps Ellroy’s trilogy marks – and *narrates* – the appearance of a new epic form, one that belongs to a post-bourgeois world of administered capitalism.



## Notes

1. James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*, Arrow Books, London, 1995; *The Cold Six Thousand*, Arrow Books, London, 2002, *Blood's a Rover*, Windmill Books, London, 2009.
2. For example, a shared concern with the function and significance of the 'archive'. Fredric Jameson has suggested that detective fiction is the form taken by realism in a highly mediated and mediatized postmodern world. See 'Totality as Conspiracy', in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Indiana University Press and BFI, Bloomington and Indianapolis and London, 1992, pp. 7–84.
3. Lukács might say that this is where *The Wire* falls out of realist narration into naturalist description. See his 'Narrate or Describe', in *Writer and Critic*, trans. A. Kahn, Merlin Press, London, pp. 110–48; and my 'The Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on *The Wire*', *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 25–34.
4. For Hegel, 'it is the state which first presents subject-matter that is not only *adapted* to the prose of history, but involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being ... and this produces a record as well as interest concerned with intelligent, definite ... lasting transactions and occurrences', *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Dover, New York, 1956, p. 61.
5. On 'whiteness' as 'the very "center" of the dominant criteria for national prestige, decision-making, authority and intellectual leadership', see Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics*, 2nd edn, Verso, London and New York, 2009, p. 185.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1993, p. 87.
7. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1981, p. 68.
8. *Blood's a Rover*, p. 639; *American Tabloid*, p. 5.
9. For 'spatio-temporal fix', see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.
10. Loïc Wacquant, 'From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the "Race Question" in the US', *New Left Review* 13, January–February 2002, pp. 41–59; Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (1994), trans. Gregory Elliot, Verso, London, 1999, p. 105.
11. For 'wounded attachments', see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1995, pp. 52–76.
12. *Blood's a Rover*, p. 9; Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. E. Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996.
13. See Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', in *The Poetics of Prose* (1971), trans. R. Howard, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1977.
14. In this regard, Ellroy has used his own biography – in his youth also a peeping Tom, a sniffer and US Nazi Party member – as material for the invention of Crutch. For the detective as a representation of the intellectual, see Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 38.
15. *Blood's a Rover*, pp. 24, 56, 67.
16. Tedrow was a pointer for one of the possible shooters. Looking through his binoculars 'Wayne saw the impact. Wayne saw the neck spray. Wayne saw King drop.' *The Cold Six Thousand*, p. 638.
17. Marcelo says: 'We want some pliable, anti-communist *el jefe* type who'll do what we want'; *Blood's a Rover*, p. 21. They find him in Joaquín Belaguer, president of the Dominican Republic between 1966 and 1978 (and again between 1986 and 1996), for whom see Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History*, Markus Weiner, Princeton NJ, 1998.
18. 'Drac wanted to own Clark County, Nevada. The Boys wanted to sell him their share at usurious rates. Feed the cash funnel. Scour the Teamster Pension Fund books for loan defaulters. Usurp their businesses. Grab them, sell them and feed the cash funnel. Castro kicked the Boys out of Cuba. Find a new Latin hot spot, entrench and rebuild.' *Blood's a Rover*, p. 82.
19. Ellroy has evidently done his homework: in the Dominican Republic, Tedrow's anti-communist crew (including Crutch) are assisted by a death squad called 'La Banda'. See Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, p. 392.
20. *Blood's a Rover*, p. 69.
21. 'Crutch flipped pages. This voodoo shit was a gas. Spooks were capering and bopping around in chicken-feather hats. Woouoo, then there's this... Geometric patterns. Crosshatched. Like the tattoo on the dead woman in Horror House.' *Blood's a Rover*, p. 203. Crutch believes that Klein and Reyes had the 'tattoo woman' killed for betraying their revolutionary group. In fact, she was murdered on the set of a porn movie by a dealer in Haitian exotica.
22. The colour of the emeralds, green, takes on symbolic value throughout the novel. Holly is shot by Bennett in a lime-green bar – 'Green walls tumbled...' (p. 575), and Celia Reyes is found by Crutch in Haiti living in a lime-green house (p. 611).
23. The novel expresses two views with regard to voodoo: '[v]oodoo was barbarous capitalism cloaked in magic' (*Blood's a Rover*, p. 590); but it also has revolutionary potential, as deployed by Tedrow and Reginald.
24. *Blood's a Rover*, pp. 583, 589, 560.
25. Fredric Jameson, "'A Monument to Radical Instants'", in *The Modernist Papers*, Verso, London and New York, 2007, pp. 380–419.
26. *American Tabloid*, p. 5.
27. See J. Lazaerow and Y. Williams, eds, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2006; in particular, Roz Payne, 'WACing Off: Gossip, Sex, Race, and Politics in the World of FBI Special Case Agent William A. Cohendet', pp. 158–80, for the kind of archival material that Ellroy uses.
28. See Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 66–84.
29. *Blood's a Rover*, pp. 383–4.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 225. The compositional importance of the daily newspaper needs stressing, as does the language of the 'yellow press'.
31. *Blood's a Rover*, pp. 277–8.
32. Herbie Hancock, referring to the Miles Davis Group, in Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, p. 10.
33. *Blood's a Rover*, p. 99: Crutch driving through riots.
34. See *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett, A&C Black, London, 1964.
35. Jameson, "'A Monument'", p. 394.
36. See A. Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, Corgi, London, 1994.
37. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, p. 85.