

Wolverines, Werewolves and Demon Dogs: Animality, Criminality and Classification in  
James Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet*

Nathan Ashman

James Ellroy is an eccentric and divisive popular novelist. Since the publication of his first novel *Brown's Requiem* in 1981, Ellroy's outré "Demon Dog" persona and his highly stylised, often pornographically violent crime novels have continued to polarise both public and academic opinion. Frequently profane and unbridled by political correctness, Ellroy's public appearances are regularly punctuated by a barrage of racial invective, casual homophobia and spouts of wild dog barking, creating a profound tension between his brash and unpredictable public identity and the considered meticulousness of his art. Indeed, Ellroy typically opens his readings with the following refrain: "Good evening, peepers, prowlers, pederasts, panty sniffers, punks and pimps. I'm James Ellroy, the demon dog, the foul owl with the death growl, the white knight of the far right and the slick trick with the donkey dick".<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Ellroy's "Demon Dog" persona has tended to overshadow the reception and appraisal of his work, with many critics perceiving the stark presentations of race, sexuality and gender in Ellroy's texts as a straight reiteration of the writer's own skewed far-right agenda. Whilst Ellroy's personal politics remain a point of contention, such stark articulations of "animalistic" behaviour are a central facet of Ellroy's self-styled and hyperbolised public identity and are symptomatic of a broader preoccupation with animality, criminality and sexual/racial classification in his work.

Representations of beastliness and monstrosity—both literal and figurative—are a recurrent feature of Ellroy's work and represent the culmination of a longstanding fascination with animals that Ellroy himself traces back to his early obsession with "animal stories".<sup>2</sup>

Initially providing an outlet for what he describes as a “wrenchingly tender and near-obsessive” love of animals, Ellroy eventually boycotted these narratives due to their propensity to depict suffering, cruelty and death.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which this has influenced Ellroy’s subsequent, often warped, depiction of animalism in his fiction is contestable. Although Ellroy’s longstanding tenderness towards animals is well documented, his texts are punctuated with various instances of animal cruelty and bestiality, acts which become symptomatic of a more pervasive culture of monstrous violence, sexual savagery and atavistic desires. Such ambivalence seems to be symptomatic of Ellroy’s relationship with, and codification of, animals more broadly. Indeed, when questioned about the instances of animal mutilation in his texts by the critic Steven Powell, Ellroy replied: “I dig animals. I also dig a good steak. I love animals. I wouldn’t go shoot one, but I’ll sure as shit eat the piece of steak you put on my plate”.<sup>4</sup>

This sense of contradiction is no more evident than in Ellroy’s *L.A. Quartet*, a four-volume criminal and political history set against the backdrop of Post-War Los Angeles’s urban expansion.<sup>5</sup> In these texts, Ellroy depicts a vivid tapestry of literal and symbolic animality. From the savage brutality of “Wolverine Killer” Coleman Healy in *The Big Nowhere* (1988) to the warped, ornithological mutilations of child murderer Loren Atherton in *LA Confidential* (1990), Ellroy’s novels trace a potent convergence between animality and deviancy. This convergence becomes forcefully energised by rigid racial, sexual and political classifications, as manifestations of animality are repeatedly articulated via stark depictions of homosexuality, communism and “blackness”. Depictions of race and homosexuality in particular are underlined by an essentialist rhetoric that aligns the predilection for violence and deviancy with certain predisposed and atavistic traits, both physiognomic and genetic. In both cases, the language of animality and classification becomes intimately bound up with “images of corruption and infection”.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this conjunction between animality and human discourses of otherness is by no means a new strand in the writing and analysis of detective texts, or indeed, literary criticism more broadly. Since the brutal murder of Madame L'Esplanade and her daughter at the hands of a vicious escaped orangutan in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", fictional depictions of criminality have been recurrently energised by shifting anxieties regarding animality, identity and typology. As Christopher Pittard suggests, the "identification of criminality with physiology" was the basis of "late nineteenth century criminology" and operated to reduce the act of detection to "one of diagnosis".<sup>7</sup> Pittard refers specifically to the influence of criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, whose work on the association between physiognomy and criminality harnessed broader cultural anxieties regarding questions of degeneration in the wake of emerging theories on evolution. Ronald Thomas sees these contexts as firmly rooted in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*, arguing that Holmes is able to solve the case by "recognizing the culprits foreignness in the traces of the criminal body left at the scene of the crime".<sup>8</sup> For Thomas, this is indicative of recurrent patterns of association between criminality and racial inscription in the Holmes narratives and late nineteenth-century crime fiction more broadly.

Historically then, these codifications of criminality in detective fiction have become implicitly inscribed by discourses of race and degeneracy. This is no truer than in the hardboiled American crime novel, where "other" races and "deviant sexualities" are frequently contained and delimited by monolithic mechanisms of white male power. Often centred around a brutal contestation of urban space that sees "otherness" pushed to the margins, Liam Kennedy argues that the hardboiled genre has "responded to a 'dark Africanist presence' by adopting a parasitic relationship to blackness".<sup>9</sup> This does not apply exclusively to depictions of race; the hardboiled novel has a long tradition of producing comparable engenderings of homosexuality, with a pointed emphasis on questions of masculinity and

authenticity. One need only look at Chandler's depiction of Carroll Lundgren in *The Big Sleep* to gauge the manoeuvrings of white heterosexual power underpinning such narratives. After Marlowe is punched by Lundgren, he disdainfully remarks: "It was meant to be a hard punch, but a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like".<sup>10</sup>

Through their parallel representations of deviancy and social classification, ostensibly Ellroy's texts can be seen to conform to a tradition of hardboiled detective fiction that operates to reinscribe the dominance and authority of white heterosexual masculinity within hierarchical structures of social power. As Josh Meyer suggests, in Ellroy's work, depictions of criminality are "largely expressed through contesting articulations of blackness, Jewishness, gangsterism, homosexuality and other allegorical renditions of type".<sup>11</sup> Such accusations of a lack of variety and nuance to Ellroy's representation of black and/or "minority" characters have been levelled at his work on number of occasions and remain a consistent point of contention in much criticism regarding Ellroy's work. Yet, although Ellroy's use of derogatory and often uncomfortable stereotypes would, on the surface, seem to reinscribe these disparities of power long established in the genre, this essay will argue that Ellroy's depictions of atavism, criminality and deviancy are in fact more complex than they first appear. Through its exposure of the brutality and corruption at the centre of white characters and white institutions, the *L.A. Quartet* ultimately operates to subvert the logic that underpins such oppressive discursive practices, destabilising the paradigm that positions whiteness in opposition to the violence, animality and degeneracy of the atavistic "other".

Whilst this will comprise one strand of my analysis of animality in this essay, it still only goes some way towards understanding Ellroy's preoccupation with, and representation of, literal and symbolic animals. Indeed, despite Ellroy's subversion of the association between animality and "otherness" identified above, such an argument still risks compressing the vast complexity and variety of animal life into a generic category of "animality". The

timely emergence of animal studies in recent years has recognised the importance of moving beyond what Derrida would term as the “asininity” of the animal, interrogating instead the history and materiality of human–animal relationships to produce a new discourse that acknowledges animals as autonomous beings distinct from anthropogenic experience.<sup>12</sup> For Paul Waldau, one of the greatest opportunities derives from outlining and confronting the “powerful but dysfunctional form of human centeredness” or “human exceptionalism” that continues to dominate “much thinking in certain circles”.<sup>13</sup> The pervasiveness of such an attitude not only continues to prevent an examination of the skewed hierarchy that has defined human–animal relations in the past, but also overlooks the “obvious limitations we, as humans, have in grasping the features of some other animals’ lives”.<sup>14</sup>

In the study of literary animals, Phillip Armstrong equally emphasises the importance of moving “beyond reading animals as screens for the reflection of human interests and meaning”, of transgressing this form of mirroring that has historically, he argues, been the dominant way of “treating cultural representations of animals”.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, Armstrong argues that the analysis of literature must not attend merely to “what animals mean to humans, but to what they mean themselves; that is, to the ways in which animals might have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings” (3). Of course, the possibility of producing a greater knowledge of “non-human” agency through the reading of texts necessitates a reconceptualisation of our very understanding of what agency means. As Armstrong suggests, the mere suggestion of a form of animal cognition distinct from “the human” immediately “invites allegations of anthropomorphism” (3). Yet, this very convergence between agency and rational thought—or, the delimitation of agency as the province of the human—is borne out of a “humanist” enlightenment philosophy “within which these traits came to define the human as such” (3). Thus, our understanding of what anthropomorphism means is predicated on a humanist conceptualisation of agency. The need

to understand agency outside of, or beyond, notions of rationality and consciousness is central to the constriction of what Armstrong identifies as a “mode of analysis that does not reduce the animal to a blank screen for the projection of human meaning” (3).

The second half of this essay will therefore endeavour to analyse the literal representation of animals in Ellroy’s work, with a particular focus on his depiction of wolverines in *The Big Nowhere*. Whilst the political dynamics of animality as a generic symbol of otherness and deviancy are, on the whole, further solidified by the role actual animals play in Ellroy’s work, the text also establishes a parity between the entrapped and exploited wolverines and the similarly disfranchised and abused serial killer Coleman Healy. Despite both Healy’s and the wolverines’ correspondingly “mindless” expressions of violence, the real villain of Ellroy’s work is a ruthless and detached post war industrial culture that transforms both animal and human life into useable commodities. Animals in particular are frequently situated as victims of monstrous human behaviours over the course of the Quartet, raising broader questions about the stability of the human/animal binary. In the same way that Ellroy’s work ultimately operates to destabilise the logic that underpins the oppressive practices of racist white cops, the hyperbolic human violence that unfolds similarly destabilises and deconstructs one of the key aspects of hierarchical species difference; namely the separation between the civilized and the savage.

“Werewolf Murder”: Identity, Monstrosity and “Otherness” in *The Black Dahlia*

*The Black Dahlia* is the opening text of the *L.A. Quartet* and prefigures the explicit intersections between animalism and varying taxonomies of deviancy that permeate Ellroy’s succeeding volumes. The text centres around the real life, unsolved 1947 murder of aspiring actress Elizabeth Short, whose eviscerated remains were discovered stripped and abandoned

on a vacant lot on South Norton Avenue, Los Angeles. The case holds a longstanding fascination for Ellroy, one that is intimately bound up with the unsolved murder of his own mother Geneva Hilliker. In his memoir *My Dark Places*, Ellroy describes how the “Black Dahlia” case operated a symbolic substitute for his mother’s death, one that allowed him to construct “strong, narrative based fantasies” in which he rescued Elizabeth Short. Ellroy describes how these vivid imaginings would invariably involve him rescuing Betty “and becom[ing] her lover”, or “tracking down her killer and executing” him in passionate revenge.<sup>16</sup>

At the thematic epicentre of Ellroy’s novel is the gruesome iconography of Elizabeth Short’s brutalised body, chiefly its spectacular commodification via the mass media. Following the discovery of her remains, Short becomes the focus of intense media scrutiny and circulation, the gruesome details of her evisceration regurgitated and fetishised for commercial, and in the case of District Attorney Ellis Loew, political gain. The inexplicable and brutal nature of the murder makes it a breeding ground for crazed fantasies of monstrosity, foregrounding the *L.A. Quartet*’s deeper anxieties regarding violent crime and forms of “otherness”. This becomes explicitly articulated via the media’s focus on the fantasy “werewolf” killer, a symbol of demonic violence that becomes implicitly bound up with the text’s codifications of race and degeneracy.<sup>17</sup> The symbol of the “werewolf psychopath” becomes expressive of the text’s deeper racial divisions, particularly the continued conflation of blackness with criminality and other monstrous behaviours. This is made apparent in the early stages of the text, when protagonist Detective “Bucky” Bleichert’s search for rampaging rapist Junior Nash leads him into contact with degenerate and violent “nigger youth gangs” (57). Known associates of Junior Nash, these gangs come to the attention of the LAPD due their predilection for violence and animal cruelty, particularly the torturing and then disposal of “chopped-up dead cats into the cemeteries of Santa Monica and Gower”

(57). The conjunction is unambiguous here, as articulations of animalism become literally manifested in brutal acts of violence perpetrated against animals, a pattern that continues throughout the *L.A. Quartet*. Such representations are frequently energised by a sense of paranoia born out of a perceived threat posed by demonic and deviant races and sexualities.

Crucially, Ellroy's Los Angeles is a space brutally schematised by categories of identity, particularly race. This is forcefully emphasised in an extract from *The Black Dahlia*. Whilst out on patrol, Bucky Bleichert's description of the physical and ethnic topography of the "Newton Street Division" provides a clear indication of how race operates in the *L.A. Quartet*:

Newton Street Division was southeast of downtown LA, 95 percent slums, 95 percent negroes, all trouble. There were bottle gangs and crap games on every corner; liquor stores, hair straightening parlours and poolrooms on ever block, code three calls to the station twenty-four hours a day. The local winos drank "Green Lizard"—cologne cut with Old Monterey white port, and the standard pop for a whore was one dollar, a buck and a quarter if you used "her place"—the abandoned cars in the auto graveyard at 56<sup>th</sup> central.<sup>18</sup>

Depicting an impoverished and dilapidated social space permeated with instances of gambling, prostitution and degeneracy, it is race that becomes the constituting factor in such stark portrayals of social disunity. A mode of "categorisation that affirms and reinforces existing social and economic inequalities", blackness emerges as what Andrew Pepper describes as a "signifier of mindless savagery and ultimate worthlessness which operates within 'official' linguistic structures to secure and legitimise white hegemony".<sup>19</sup> Pepper points to the various mechanisms of institutional racism in the *L.A. Quartet* as a central facet

in the perpetuation of these paradigms of power. It is no surprise then that Bucky's unrelentingly violent policing of the various criminal factions of Newton Street earns him respect and notoriety within the division. Bucky's brutal patrolling of impoverished black communities is justified precisely because of an institutionalized logic that positions criminality and blackness as indivisible. Such a logic is emphasized when Bucky ruthlessly breaks up a "rigged card game" with his baton, an action that is justified by his assertion that "some people don't respond to civility".<sup>20</sup> The implication here is explicit and reasserts a perception of blackness as an "uncivilised animalistic force", one that represents a threat to the hegemony of white male power.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, the conclusion to the *Black Dahlia* operates to destabilise these assumptions about criminality and deviancy and, in the process, highlights the complexities and paradoxes of identity that underlie Ellroy's work. Far from being the work of a perverse and deranged werewolf killer, Elizabeth Short's death is ultimately connected to the affluent and politically reputable Sprague family, whose outward projection of respectability masks a warped history of incest, depravity and exploitation. From the rotting foundations upholding the properties from which Emmet Sprague made his millions, to the brutal depletion of Elizabeth Short's body at the hands Ramona Sprague and her deranged lover George Tilden, this poisonous family are a warped and hyperbolised projection of the violence and derangement percolating behind various white institutions of power. As Pepper suggests, the "luridly bigoted tendencies" of Ellroy's white cops combined with the degeneracy and psychosexual deviancy of his power-hungry politicians and dysfunctional white entrepreneurs, ultimately function to erode the logic that whiteness is any more civilized than the (often racially other) criminal classes they seek to control.<sup>22</sup>

By presenting the devastating corruption at the centre of these mechanisms of power, this moment of revelation disrupts and threatens the logic that energises the orientalist

discourse that has historically positioned whiteness as superior to that of the uncivilized, deviant racial other. Whilst on the one hand Ellroy seems to propagate a brand of misogynistic and violent, institutionalised whiteness—one that has come to typify the hardboiled novel historically—his unremitting portrayal of the savagery and violence of white characters simultaneously destabilises entrenched paradigms of otherness that exclusively situate black and homosexual characters as violent and deviant. As Tim Ryan suggests, Ellroy’s work not only operates to make “whiteness visible” and “show how power operates”, but also to “deconstruct the discourses that naturalize that power”. Thus, through a lurid confrontation with the criminal and appalling acts undertaken by white males, the reader is confronted with, and made complicit in, the “savage exploitation, oppression and violence that such adventures entail”.<sup>23</sup>

Although ultimately a myth, the “werewolf killer” actualises these patterns of moral panic regarding the threat of an uncivilised, devouring other, whilst also prefiguring the persistence of animal–human hybrids that will continue to punctuate Ellroy’s work; the most disturbing example of which are the mutilated victims of serial killer Loren Atherton in *L.A. Confidential*. Dubbed a “monster” and “Dr Frankenstein” by newspapers following a string of child abductions and murders, paedophile Loren Atherton’s modus operandi involves “killing and building hybrid children”.<sup>24</sup> Not only does Atherton splice limbs and other body parts from victim to victim, he also mutilates birds and then attaches the wings to complete his “creations”. Combined, both the fantasy “werewolf killer” and Atherton’s monstrous mutilations can most obviously—as mentioned—be seen to reinscribe the “familiar suppositions” about the “desiring and unregulated body” that underscore many “essentialist views of categories of difference”.<sup>25</sup> In other words, both superficially reinscribe the “animal” as a generic signifier for violent cravings and transgressive acts. Yet, it is also possible to see these hybrid articulations as indicative of a broader crisis of identity permeating the *L.A.*

*Quartet*, not simply regarding questions of gender, sexuality and race, but also in relation to the human subject more broadly. The hyperbolic “inhuman” violence perpetrated by humans in Ellroy’s texts—often even against animals themselves—operates to destabilise human–animal binaries, whilst simultaneously threatening our very “definitions of the human itself”.<sup>26</sup>

#### The “Wolverine Monster”: Destabilising the Human–Animal binary

The tensions and contradictions surrounding classifications of identity, criminality and monstrosity reach their apotheosis in the second volume of the *L.A. Quartet*, *The Big Nowhere*, as do these broader tensions regarding the animal/human. The text converges around two principle plot lines. The first of these follows the implementation of a new federal task force, one that seeks to investigate rumours of communist activity and governmental subversion within the Hollywood unions. This runs concurrent with the L.A. Sheriff Department’s investigation into a string of violent, homosexual sex murders, after the mutilated body of local Jazz musician Marty Goines is discovered dumped on a weed-strewn vacant lot. The first victim of the predatory killer dubbed the “Wolverine Monster”—due to the perpetrator’s predilection for biting victims whilst wearing dentures with wolverine teeth attached—the brutal, animalistic violence inflicted upon Goines’s body prefigures a pattern of conjunction between homosexuality and monstrosity that permeates *The Big Nowhere*. On arriving at the crime scene, Detective Danny Upshaw is confronted by a mutilated body covered with:

...six ovals measured to within three centimetres of each other. They all bore teethmark outlines too shredded to cut a cast from—and all were too large to have been made by a human mouth biting straight down.

The killer used an animal or animals in the post-mortem abuse of his victim.<sup>27</sup>

This depiction of extreme violence inflicted upon gay men operates as a hyperbolised portrayal of “queer” sub cultures more generally, a logic that perceives “homosexuals as foreign, subhuman, monstrous and animalistic”.<sup>28</sup> Such violence is rendered as the logical culmination of a form of deviant and dangerous sexuality and subsequently functions as an extreme manifestation of a broader pattern of exchange between atavistic behaviours and homosexual identity.

The murder of Goines is the first in a number of “queer slashes”, extreme and violent murders that are nonetheless a low priority for the LAPD due to the perceived deviancy of the victims.<sup>29</sup> The wolverine killer thus emerges as a hyperbolised manifestation of a form of sexual “otherness”, one that is rigidly codified as predatory, dangerous and violent and thus a threat to established hierarchies of control. The wolverine killer is eventually revealed as Coleman Healy, the disaffected and illegitimate son of blacklisted actor Reynold Loftis, who in turn is one of the key figures under scrutiny in the grand jury investigation into communist activities in Hollywood. After witnessing the murder of Jose Diaz at the hands of arch villain Dudley Smith, Healy’s past becomes intimately entrenched in larger criminal manoeuvrings linking the LAPD to organised crime. The subsequent cover up of the infamous “Sleepy Lagoon Murder” drives Healy into the arms of the father who previously rejected him.<sup>30</sup> Reynolds employs plastic surgeon Terry Lux to alter Coleman’s appearance so that it resembles his own, allowing his son to elide the violent repercussions of Dudley Smith. The surgery precipitates a perverse, incestuous affair between father and son. The narcissistic

Loftis becomes “so enthralled by his on-screen image”, that he uses his estranged son to enact a “fantasy love affair with himself”.<sup>31</sup> After Healy is eventually rejected by his father, Lux alters his face again, transforming him unrecognisably from his previous look. Disaffected and seeking revenge, Healy disguises himself as Loftis and carries out a string of sex killings to implicate his father in the murders. In doing so he “emulates the violence of the wolverines—creatures whose ferocious savagery he has come to admire”.<sup>32</sup>

Healy’s obsession with the wolverine has a long and disturbing genealogy, one that can be traced back to his love of an old Victrola record called “Wolverine Blues”. Disaffected after being rejected by the army, Healy develops a violent and sexual obsession with animals, one that culminates in his discovery of “strange-o” Thomas Cormier’s wolverine enclosure. After a period of secretly visiting and feeding the animals, one-night Healy is seized by “an incredible urge to pet and hold one”, only to fall victim to a violent attack.<sup>33</sup> In the ensuing struggle, Healy kills and then skins the wolverine, consuming its raw flesh and making dentures out of its teeth. In an effort to understand the brutal savagery of Healy’s murders, detective Danny Upshaw visits Cormier’s wolverine enclosure, an encounter that rigidly frames Healy’s violence as an expression of something “animalistic” and “other”:

Danny found a good sun angle—light square on a middle pen; he squatted down and looked, his nose to the wire. Inside, a long creature paced, turning in circles, snapping at the walls. Its teeth glinted; its claws scraped the floor; it looked like a coiled muscle that would not stop coiling until it killed and slept in satiation—or died. Danny watched, feeling the beast’s power, feeling HIM feeling it. Cormier talked. “*Gulo luscus* is two things; smart and intractable. I’ve known them to develop a taste for deer, hide in trees and toss nice edible bark down to lure them over, then jump down and rip the deer’s jugular clean to the windpipe. Once they get a whiff of blood, they

will not stop persisting. I've heard wolverines stalking cougars wounded in mating battles. They'll jab them from behind, take nips out and run away, a little meat here and there until the cougar nearly bleeds to death. When the poor fellow's dead, *Gulo* attacks frontally, claws the cougar's eyes out of his head and eats them like gumballs".<sup>34</sup>

Ellroy's depiction of the wolverines further expounds the aforementioned political undercurrents of animality as a broad signifier of various forms of transgressive, threatening "otherness". With their almost cartoonish glinting teeth and scraping claws, this generalised animality typifies what John Miller describes as an "anthropocentric" rendering of "the animal", one that "strategically exaggerates the role of violence in animal behaviour".<sup>35</sup> Such savage animality, as incarnated by the wolverines, becomes a means of framing Coleman's brutal and sexualised violence as something decidedly atavistic and "non-human". For Paul Shepard, the exaggerated, bloodthirsty viciousness of Ellroy's wolverines is indicative of the way in which animals repeatedly operate as "handles for abstractions" in the traditions of storytelling, a way to comfortably re-orientate and embody that which is unknown or inexplicable.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the abstraction of Healy's hyperbolic violence is re-routed into the figure of the wolverine, ultimately validating the Quartet's continued convergence of animality with various forms of monstrous "otherness".

Yet, whilst *The Big Nowhere* seemingly frames such murderous aggression as intrinsic to animal nature, both Healy and the Wolverines are similarly victims of a violently stratified and brutally alienating post-boosterism Los Angeles, one driven by an individualistic, capitalist agenda that indiscriminately commodifies and oppresses. As with the exploitation and confinement of the wolverines at the hands of Cormier, Healy's so-called animal savagery is the consequence of a comparable form of pervasive and institutionally

entrenched human brutality that saturates not only *The Big Nowhere*, but the *L.A. Quartet* more broadly. From police corruption to the warped aspirations of Hollywood film, Jim Mancall argues that Healy is “ultimately powerless before the violence he has suffered at the hands of others; someone made him”.<sup>37</sup> Thus, rather than reading the wolverines as emblematic of an intrinsic animality, it becomes possible to see their subjugation and abuse—at the hands of Healy and Cormier—as a direct consequence of a more extensive and pernicious system of human violence, a system that ultimately complicates the rigid human/animal binary the text seems to purport. As much “victim as victimizer”, Healy emerges—according to Mancall—as another one of Ellroy’s hybrids, a “fragmented personality, part human and part animal”.<sup>38</sup> Like his codifications of homosexuality and race, Ellroy’s framing of animality is fuelled by challenging contradictions. Whilst the *L.A. Quartet* seems to proliferate a generic concept of animality that aligns transgressive identities and behaviours with the atavistic and non-human, the extent of the human violence that saturates Ellroy’s Los Angeles operates to destabilise the inviolability of the human subject, particularly the opposition between civilized/uncivilised. In *The Big Nowhere* in particular, the “natural” violence of the wolverines is projected against the backdrop of unfathomable human corruption and cruelty that manifests itself on an institutional level.

These larger questions that the text raises concerning identity and the definition of the human subject are played out on a microcosmic scale via Detective Danny Upshaw’s homosexual crisis. In *The Big Nowhere*, institutional anxieties regarding the threat of homosexuality are continually “played out” via what Josh Meyer describes as “a series of symbolic associations”, particularly between homosexuality, communism, incest, animalism and crime.<sup>39</sup> For Meyer, this becomes specifically expressed via the theme of “contagion”, the discourses of which punctuate the text on multiple levels. As Upshaw’s investigation into the sex killings draws him deeper into the homosexual subculture of the city, he is

progressively forced to confront his own repressed sexuality. His immersion in, identification with, and attraction to this “deviant” sexual underworld is intimately bound up with a broader narrative logic of contamination. Upshaw’s inability to suppress his secret becomes most explicitly and forcefully expressed through his use of the “Man Camera”. Described as an investigative tool developed by criminologist Hans Maslick, the technique involves recreating crime scenes cinematically by “screening details from the perpetrator’s point of view” using actual camera angles and shots. Through this psychological projection, the investigator’s eyes become a “lens capable of zooming in and zooming out, freezing close ups, and selecting background motifs to interpret crime scene evidence in an aesthetic light”.<sup>40</sup> The “Man Camera” is theoretically designed to function as an objective, documentation device, an extension of Upshaw’s obsession with forensic methodology and scientific observation. Yet, as Upshaw is drawn deeper into the homosexual subculture of the city, he begins to experience “Man Camera malfunctions”, losing control of the device and consequently his vision:

Danny pressed his face to the window and looked in.

That close he got distortion blur, Man Camera malfunctions. He pulled back so that his eyes could capture a larger frame, saw tuxedos entwined in movement, cheek-to-cheek tangos, all male. The faces were up against each other so that they couldn’t be distinguished individually; Danny zoomed out, in, out, in, until he was pressed into the window glass with pins and needles localised between his legs, his eyes honing for mid-shots, close-ups, faces.

More blur, blips of arms, legs, a cart being pushed and a man in white carrying a punch bowl. Out, in, out, better focus, no faces, then Tim and Coleman the alto together, swaying to hard jazz.<sup>41</sup>

Upshaw's ontological crisis becomes increasingly channelled through these pulsing Man Camera blips, a disorienting interplay of fantasy, reality and memory merged with the pornographic violence of crime scenes. Ungoverned, the Man Camera invokes flashes of eviscerated innards, dismembered penises and other mutilations in "wraparound technicolour", projecting Upshaw's warped and tormented identification with sexual violence. Here Upshaw's loss of visual agency becomes symptomatic of his impotent attempts to exert "a masculine vision".<sup>42</sup> This veritable crisis of the male gaze signifies a crisis of masculine authority more generally and emerges as a direct consequence of Upshaw's inability to reconcile his own latent homosexual desires. The embedded logic of contagion, one that Meyer argues is central to *The Big Nowhere's* narrative patterns, is certainly palpable in Upshaw's contact with, and ultimate identification with, the text's homosexual subculture. Upshaw becomes progressively "infected" by his proximity and exposure to this underworld, suffering disorientation, panic attacks and nightmare hallucinations. His experience voyeurising the gay orgy conjures forth a number of warped visions that reinforce the text's inscription of homosexuality with attendant ideas of violence and monstrosity. Disturbing, kaleidoscopic projections obstruct Upshaw's objective perception, transforming the spaces of the city into a gory, violent nightmare and passing civilians into deformed "gargoyles".<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, Upshaw's infection by the "queer" subculture of the city and subsequent loss of masculine visual agency leads to his demise. Fearful that his fantasies and desires will be exposed to the public, Upshaw eventually commits suicide, slitting his throat with a serrated-edged carving knife.

Upshaw's fractured subjectivity ultimately becomes reflective of the broader crisis of the "human subject" in the *L.A. Quartet*. For all the savagery and brutality that becomes associated with literal and figurative animals, once again it is ultimately the monolithic

mechanisms of power—ones energised by an ideology of white superiority—that become most implicated in the text’s criminal conspiracies. From the crazed containment plans of the murderous Dudley Smith to the deceitful political strategies of district attorney Ellis Loew, Ellroy’s work problematises assumptions concerning animality and “otherness”. As Jim Mancall suggests, *The Big Nowhere* exposes the fact that “grand ideologies such as democracy and liberty are mobilized by those in power so as to protect their own advantages and that these terms often hide violence, exploitation and conspiracy”.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, the hypocrisy of the racism, homophobia and general discriminatory practices of the police become brutally visible.

Ellroy’s texts project a brutal vision of post-war Los Angeles, one in which animality superficially becomes tied not only to criminality, but to various marginalised cultures, groups and individuals. Yet, Ellroy’s work continues to be wrought by challenging contradictions. In the same way that Ellroy’s exposure of the violence and corruption at the centre of white characters and white institutions subverts the logic that conflates “otherness” with violence and deviancy, the level of human perversion evident in the *Quartet* undermines and weakens the logic that underlies the human–animal binary. That is not to say that Ellroy goes all the way towards dislodging these entrenched hierarchies. Despite the nuances explored in this essay, the continued persecution and marginalisation of the “other”, combined with the lack of retribution for those associated with the mechanisms of white social power, makes it difficult to suggest that Ellroy entirely shatters such inequalities. In fact, such an unyielding portrayal of “bad white men” and could in fact be seen to glorify and thus further cement such entrenched binaries of power, including the human-animal duality.<sup>45</sup> In either case, Ellroy’s work offers a multifaceted and complex interrogation of racial, sexual and animal politics and will no doubt continue to polarise academic and popular opinion.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mancall, *Companion*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> This use of animals extends beyond Ellroy's in fiction. In his 2011 television show "City of Demons", Ellroy was accompanied on screen by a CGI animated bull terrier called Barko, the "corrupt police dog".

<sup>3</sup> Ellroy, "The Choirboys", 350.

<sup>4</sup> Powell, "Coda", 173.

<sup>5</sup> The *L.A. Quartet* is comprised of *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990) and *White Jazz* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Pittard, *Purity and Contamination*, 110.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, *Detective Fiction*, 220.

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 5 quoted in Kennedy, "Black Noir", 224.

<sup>10</sup> Chandler, *Big Sleep*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, "Scarlett Fever", 41.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *The Animal*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> Waldau, *Animal Studies*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Waldau, *Animal Studies*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, *What Animals Mean*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ellroy, *Dark Places*, 111.

<sup>17</sup> Ellroy, *Black Dahlia*, 92.

<sup>18</sup> Ellroy, *Black Dahlia*, 299.

<sup>19</sup> Pepper, *Contemporary American*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ellroy, *Black Dahlia*, 302.

<sup>21</sup> Ghaill, *Understanding Masculinities*, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Pepper, *Contemporary American*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Ryan, "Shiny Bleach Job", 273.

<sup>24</sup> Ellroy, *L.A. Confidential*, 266.

<sup>25</sup> McKay & Miller, *Werewolves*, 5.

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<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, *What Animals Mean*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Plummer, *One of the Boys*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 370.

<sup>30</sup> The death of José Gallardo Díaz—the so called “Sleepy Lagoon Murder”—is one of many instances of “true crime” that Ellroy seamlessly integrates into his fictional reimagining of Post-War Los Angeles. Ultimately blamed on a group of Mexican-American youths, these convictions are often perceived as the catalyst for the ensuing “Zoot Suit Riots” of 1943 (as fictionalised in *The Black Dahlia*). Following much protestation about the LAPD’s handling of the case—particularly the lack of evidence used to indict the youths—the convictions were eventually repealed in 1944.

<sup>31</sup> Sunderland, “Revisiting Paranoia”.

<sup>32</sup> Mancall, *Companion*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 456–61.

<sup>34</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 354–355.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, *Empire*, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Mancall, *Companion*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Mancall, *Companion*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer, “Scarlett Fever”, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 168.

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, *Spectacular Allegories*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> Ellroy, *Big Nowhere*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Mancall, *Companion*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Abbott, *The Street was Mine*, 194.