

“Yellow Peril”: Contradictions of Race in James Ellroy’s *Perfidia*

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Abstract

James Ellroy’s treatment of race continues to captivate and polarize both popular and academic opinion. Whilst some see the casual racism and often uncomfortable stereotypes in Ellroy’s work as a reflection of the author’s own political agenda, for others Ellroy’s work offers a complex deconstruction of both racial identity and white social power. Focusing on his novel *Perfidia*, this paper explores these contradictions and paradoxes in Ellroy’s representations of race, arguing that whilst the novel depicts and forcefully overemphasizes an historical moment fraught with a brand of physiognomic racism that persecutes individuals on the basis of biological difference, it simultaneously deconstructs such essentialist engenderings by foregrounding the performative dimensions of race as a category of identity. As a result, this paper argues that Ellroy’s novel “visibilizes” the socially and institutionally constructed nature of race, deconstructing and destabilizing the integrity and authority of white social power. Yet, this paper also suggests that through such an unyielding portrayal of white power, *Perfidia* only partly dislodges the authority and power of institutional whiteness, and can in fact be seen to validate the sustainment of such apparatus.

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Hostility towards Asian immigrants took several different forms. At one level, Japanese were stereotyped as being part of the “Yellow Peril”—an image in which hordes of Asians threatened to invade and conquer the United States.

Wendy Ng, *Japanese American Internment During World War II: A History and Reference Guide* (8)

The treatment of race in James Ellroy’s historical crime fiction continues to polarize both popular and academic opinion. His two collections of epic noir fiction—“The L.A. Quartet” and “The Underworld USA Trilogy”—offer a brutal vision of America’s Post-War criminal and political history, one where non-white races are frequently marginalized, victimized and invisibilized by the overwhelming force and subjugating practices of white social power.¹ Punctuated with a litany of ethnic slurs and racial invective, Ellroy’s engagement with, and representation of, racial politics in his fiction has consequently plagued lasting debates and perceptions of both him as a writer and his works. Whilst for some Ellroy’s use of “endless and uncomfortable racial epithets” and stereotypes “feel true to the times and the men who utter them,” for others these frequent and unsettling examples of racial prejudice and insensitivity

¹ The *L.A. Quartet* is comprised of *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992). The *Underworld USA* Trilogy is comprised of *American Tabloid* (1995), *The Cold Six Thousand* (2000), and *Blood’s a Rover* (2010).

can be seen as a straight reflection of the writer's own skewed racial politics (Lehane).²

Such deliberation over Ellroy's uncomfortable representation of minority groups has tended to overshadow many examinations and critical discussions of his work. For instance, in her review of one of Ellroy's early detective novels *The Big Nowhere* (1988), Sarah Schulman draws focus on what she describes as the "unusual quantity of derogatory descriptives that chiefly constitute the characters' vocabularies" within the novel. Whilst she concedes that Ellroy may be attempting to "expose" and deconstruct institutionalized "police bigotry," she argues that such an unrelenting pejorative representation of "blacks, Mexicans and Jews" serves to propagate rather than critique entrenched derogatory stereotypes. Schulman contends that if Ellroy wanted to be "true to the history of the 1950's," then his novel should have "produced black characters who have other social roles besides drug dealing, drug using and jazz playing" and "Jewish characters who had other traits besides being two faced and corrupt." Such accusations of an offensive lack of variety and nuance to Ellroy's representation of non-white characters have been leveled at his work on number of occasions. Perhaps the most scathing instance of such a critique comes from Mike Davis, who has frequently attacked Ellroy for what he perceives as the overtly racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic agenda energizing his work. Beyond criticizing Ellroy's fiction for "extinguishing the tensions" of the noir genre through its "forensic banality" and excessive portrayal of "perversity" and "gore" (Davis 45), Davis has also notoriously attacked Ellroy's political and authorial integrity, describing him as a "racist," a "fascist," and a "fraud" (qtd. in Frommer 39).

To some extent Davis can be forgiven for expressing these misgivings about Ellroy's work and views, particularly considering the outrageous and controversially contrarian persona that Ellroy has cultivated in interviews and public appearances. Ellroy is the self-proclaimed "white knight of the far right," and it is arguably his outlandish and uncompromisingly contentious "demon dog" persona rather than his fiction that has made him such a divisive figure in academic discourse. 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.³ As Steven Powell suggests, Ellroy's "manic behavior" and unapologetic espousal of "outrageous right wing views," often seem to problematize and "contradict his reputation as an acclaimed historical novelist," making it difficult for critics to "distinguish James Ellroy the man" from his self-styled "Demon Dog persona" (2).

Yet Ellroy seems to revel in the controversy generated by his provocative views and is unapologetic about representations of race within his novels. As he tells Walter Kirn in an interview for TheLipTV, "race shit sells" (Ellroy, "Real"). Despite such comments, in fairness to Ellroy there does seem a certain level of self-awareness and deliberate showmanship to his contentious engagement with issues such as race,

² Outside of discussions concerning Ellroy's location within the hardboiled tradition of L.A. crime fiction, much of the criticism surrounding his work to date has tended to focus on his engagement with identity politics (race, gender, sexuality, class). For a comprehensive overview of Ellroy's life and works, see Steven Powell's *James Ellroy: Demon Dog of Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016) and Jim Mancall's *James Ellroy: A Companion to Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

³ When giving public readings, Ellroy usually begins with variations on the following introduction: "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."

gender, and sexuality. Ellroy has admitted on many occasions, for instance, that his contrarian persona is just an “act” geared towards marketing and selling his books, and that in reality it is “about three percent” of who he really is (Ellroy, “Real”). Thus, to suggest that Ellroy’s novels are propagating a racist agenda, or that he is some kind of manic right wing pariah, would be to do the author an incredible disservice, and overlook the complexities of racial representation within his novels.

As Ellroy himself suggests, one of the traps that critics like Mike Davis seem to fall into when analyzing his work is the tendency to equate the casual racism and homophobia of Ellroy’s characters with his own views. In an interview with Charles Silet, Ellroy contends that the racism in his novels is deliberately placed to disrupt and destabilize the reader’s response to his characters:

I get ragged occasionally for being fascist, racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic—because my characters are. I think some people hate my characters because their fascism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism are in no way defining characteristics—they’re just causal attributes. These characters, who are meant to be empathized with, say “nigger,” “fag” and “kike,” and people don’t know how to respond to that. (qtd. in Silet 49)

This tension between empathizing with Ellroy’s characters and at the same time being unsettled and appalled by their abhorrent racial views, creates what Jim Mancall describes as a state of “cognitive dissonance” for the reader (166). As Mancall continues, Ellroy not only wants his readers to “wrestle with this sense of shock,” he also wants them to have an ambiguous response to his characters (166). The reduction of racism to a casual attribute is, for Ellroy, what generates such a profound sense of ambivalence amongst his readers and critics in regards to the representation of race within his novels, but is nonetheless integral, he argues, to his process of characterization. As Ellroy suggests, “I love these characters of mine. Thus I try not to condescend them, and I show their heroism coexisting with their dubious attributes out of another time” (qtd. in Silet 49).

Such an unyielding portrayal of “bad white men” could be part of what Megan Abbott describes as Ellroy’s “pointed demythologization” of post-war masculinity in his fiction, which she suggests deliberately targets “the misogyny, racism or homophobia at the heart of the tough guy figure” (194). Thus by amplifying racial prejudices and rhetoric to absurd proportions in his novels, Abbott implies that Ellroy in fact operates to deconstruct and destabilize these enduring archetypes of white male power. Abbott is one of many critics who have attempted to tackle the complex representations of race in Ellroy’s texts. In his reading of institutionalized “whiteness” in *American Tabloid* (1995) for instance, Tim Ryan suggests that Ellroy’s engagement with race is much more multifaceted than it first appears, contending that the text not only operates to make “whiteness visible” and “show how power operates,” but also to “deconstruct the discourses that naturalize that power” (273). Through Ellroy’s depiction of the unlawful and deplorable acts undertaken by white males, Ryan argues that the reader is confronted with, and made complicit in, the “savage exploitation, oppression and violence that such adventures entail” (277). Although Ryan does not go as far to suggest that Ellroy’s novel completely decentralizes white male power, he does argue that it is clear that Ellroy “understands race not as a biological absolute but as a category that is culturally constructed” (273). Ryan is ultimately still cautious not to entirely exonerate Ellroy from some of the uncomfortable and irreconcilable depictions of race in his work, arguing that despite its achievements, *American Tabloid* is still “far from immune to

the discourses that contribute to rather than challenge white invisibility, universality and power" (272). These paradoxes in Ryan's reading typify what Jim Mancall describes as the "vexing contradictions" that surround such issues in Ellroy's books (Mancall 3).

Focusing on his most recent novel *Perfidia* (2014), this essay will emphasize these very paradoxes and contradictions that underlie Ellroy's representation of race. Depicting the war fever and racial tensions that precipitated the real-life interment of thousands of Japanese American citizens in Los Angeles following the attack on Pearl Harbor, *Perfidia* represents Ellroy's most complex exploration of both race and national identity to date. Whilst I seek to contest claims that Ellroy's texts are myopic and indifferent in regards to issues surrounding racial identity, I will nonetheless argue that Ellroy's depiction of such issues is still permeated by potent incongruities and disparities. For instance, although *Perfidia* depicts and forcefully overemphasizes an historical moment fraught with a "brand of biological racism that uses a visual basis to exclude "non-whites" (Roxworthy 13), this paper will suggest that Ellroy simultaneously deconstructs such essentialist engenderings by foregrounding the performative dimensions of race as a category of identity. As a result, the novel "visibilizes" the socially and institutionally constructed nature of race, deconstructing and destabilizing the integrity and authority of white social power. Not only this, but through its exposure of the violence and corruption at the center of white characters and white institutions, *Perfidia* ultimately operates to subvert the logic that underpins Orientalist discourse, a logic that positions whiteness in opposition to the violence, criminality, and degeneracy of the uncivilized racial other. Yet that is not to suggest that Ellroy's representation of race in *Perfidia* is not at all problematic. As the ending to the text demonstrates, overall *Perfidia* only partly dislodges the authority and power of institutional whiteness and in some way can be seen to validate the sustainment of such apparatus. By focusing on a text that has so far received very little critical attention, this essay builds upon and expands previous readings of racial representation in Ellroy's work through a consideration of the discourses of racial performativity and racial passing.

The notion of racial performativity has been discussed extensively in critical discourse, and draws heavily upon Judith Butler's work on gender constitution. For instance, in her book *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity and Struggles Against Subjection*, Nadine Ehlers contends that if race is positioned and accepted as a form of "disciplinary practice"—i.e., something legitimized and codified through "dominant knowledges"—then it must also be identified as inherently "performative." Situating Butler's notion of gender performativity at the centre of her analysis, Ehlers argues that race is similarly performative because it also functions as a type of "act—or more precisely a series of repeated acts that brings into being what it names" (6). Thus rather than existing as an "ontological reality," Ehlers argues that race—like sex and gender—can be categorized a type of "discursive construct," a set of behaviors repeated and regulated over time (6).⁴

This alignment between racial identity and performativity does not by extension codify race as something that is consciously selected however, but rather acknowledges the complex social, scientific, and linguistic practices that visibilize and consolidate racial difference. As James C. Davis suggests,

⁴ This conception of race as a performative category of identity that is produced and operates via a set of interlocking disciplinary practices also aligns with Foucauldian conceptions of discursive and horizontally dispersed power. Of course, there is a tension here, as this conception of power sits slightly uneasily with the hierarchically constructed system of state power that we often see in Ellroy's texts. This is just another of the many contradictions and paradoxes that characterize Ellroy's work.

To call race performative is not to say that racial identity is voluntary (and to the extent that it is voluntary, such identificatory mobility has ordinarily accrued to the race that is culturally dominant). Nor is it to deny somatic differences. But it is to recognize that the peculiar salience and even visibility of certain somatic differences and the groups into which they are supposed to coalesce naturally are effects of legislation, scientific discourse, and social practices of societies structured by dominance. It is to recognize, further, that the maintenance of these groups requires not just an act—a single act of will or law, for example—but persistent activity. (142)

This recognition of the performative construction of racial identities accepts that racial identity is not a set of essential or fixed appearances or characteristics, but is instead the product of the continual operation and reinforcement of performances, practices, and hierarchies. Comparable to the way that gender identity “does not precede imitation but is rather the *effect* of the imitation of gender identity,” it is ultimately “through the performance of race that race comes into being” (Pitcher 43).

These notions of performance and performativity have been frequently utilized in critical discourse as a means of understanding and theorizing “racial passing,” the appropriation of the visible signs and performative acts of another racial group. Such performative approaches to racial passing are indicative of the increasing de-essentialization of race that characterizes discussions of identity and belonging in contemporary academic discourse (Glaser 98). As Catherine Rotenberg suggests, rather than attempting to solely situate passing in a strict “subversive/recuperative binary,” recent critical studies have looked to utilize passing as “point of entry” into larger questions about the processes and performances that constitute and consolidate identity categories (34). Through such a fluid movement between racial boundaries and classifications, racial passing can be seen to dislocate and dislodge the entrenched binary logic that characterizes hegemonic concepts of identity construction, thus further destabilizing the authority of ingrained systems of knowledge and dominance. As Jennifer Glaser suggests, the “discourse of passing emphasizes that race, like gender, only comes into existence in the ways in which we perform it and through discourses that constitute it” (98).⁵

It is these discourses of performativity and passing that are the center of Ellroy’s exploration of racial identity in *Perfidia*, and are most potently manifested through the character of Hideo Ashida. A Japanese American forensic chemist and closet homosexual working for the LAPD, Ashida’s performance of whiteness—as a means of eliding the LAPD’s discriminatory internment processes—not only reinforces the concept that race, in particular whiteness, is not innate but both performative and culturally constructed, but simultaneously subverts the “putatively stable and exclusive precincts of white racial identity and the social authority it delimits” (Osucha 137). In other words, the exclusivity of white power in *Perfidia*, and the essentialist rhetoric that the arbiters of such power employ, is undermined from within by Ashida’s ability to assume the “performative cues that signify whiteness” (Osucha 137).

⁵ Of course, some critics have pointed to the interpretive and political limitations of these discourses of passing and performativity. Rogers Brubaker, for instance, argues that such opportunities for “choice, change and unconventional performative enactment” still remain “unequally distributed in ways that reflect the continuing significance of ancestry” (145). Brubaker points to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, for instance, as a text that forcefully magnifies the “distinctive vulnerability of the black male body” (145).

Perfidia represents the first volume in Ellroy's planned "Second L.A. Quartet," and sees a return to Los Angeles as the spatial and psychic epicenter of his work. Serving as prequels to his previous historical novels, this new series of books will revisit characters—as significantly younger people—from both the original "Quartet" and the "Underworld USA Trilogy", as Ellroy looks to furnish his already epic fictional history of the United States with greater depth and detail, creating one continuous and dialogic, novelistic history. *Perfidia* is predominantly told from a limited third-person perspective, with each chapter focusing on, alongside Ashida, two other main characters: Captain William "Whiskey Bill" Parker, an alcoholic yet ruthlessly ambitious senior officer, who seeks to use the war as a means to facilitate his rise to the position of chief of police and thus forever purge the entrenched corruption percolating inside the LAPD; and sergeant Dudley Smith, an unethical, violent, and highly intelligent officer, who not only epitomizes the corruption and vice that Parker aims to eradicate, but who also seeks to profit from the hysteria and heightened racial animus catalyzed by the bombing of Pearl Harbor⁶. Although vicious enemies both vying for power and control, through their various actions, Smith and Parker come to equally embody the discriminatory practices and violent authority of white establishments and white power structures, ones that utilize racial bigotry as means of sustaining such power. These three perspectives are interspersed with diary entries from a fourth central character, bored dilettante and eventual "Fifth Column" infiltrator Kay Lake.

If Smith and Parker come to epitomize the prejudicial, monolithic workings of institutional whiteness over the course of the text, then to some extent, Hideo Ashida can be seen to provide what Eoin Tierney terms a more "sympathetic voice to racial victimhood" (Tierney, "Review"). Ellroy's positioning of Ashida as the central character in the text certainly signals a progressive step in terms of his representation of non-white characters, as prior to *Perfidia* Ellroy's texts have focused almost exclusively on the exploits of either white male police officers or government agents.⁷ Ashida is mentioned only in passing in *The Black Dahlia*, and Ellroy's decision to expand his backstory not only exemplifies his attempts to forge new connections between his previous novels, but can also be seen as demonstrative of his desire to rewrite his own literary history in an attempt to accommodate the previously lost or silenced voices of the subjugated "racial other":

Dwight Bleichert joining the department in flight from tougher main events, threatened with expulsion from the academy when his father's German-American Bund membership came to light, pressured into snitching the Japanese guys he grew up with to the Alien squad in order to secure his LAPD appointment.

Blanchard and Bleichert: a hero and a snitch.

Remembering Sam Murakami and Hideo Ashida manacled en route to Manzanar made it easy to simplify the two of us. (Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia* 11)

Perfidia sees Ashida move from such delimited margins to the narrative centre with these few terse words expanded not only to accommodate the full arc of Ashida's story, but also the broader context of Japanese American internment. In a deliberate

⁶ Dudley Smith is the arch-villain of Ellroy's original "Quartet," featuring in *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *White Jazz*. *Perfidia* is the first novel in which Ellroy has used Smith as a central character however.

⁷ The only slight exception to this rule is Marshall Bowen in *Blood's a Rover* (2010), a black police officer who becomes a relatively central character through first-person diary entries.

reverse, it is *Black Dahlia* protagonist Bucky Bleichert who is relegated to peripheral status within *Perfidia*, existing principally as a site of erotic desire for the secretly homosexual Ashida.

Perfidia takes place over the space of 23 days in December 1941, and unfolds in what Ellroy describes as “real time.” We are introduced to Ashida in the opening chapters of the text, as he and other LAPD officers investigate the latest in a string of armed robberies at a local drug store. Ashida’s positioning as racial “other,” as well as the entrenched bigotry of the city’s “white man’s police force” (Ellroy 300), is immediately and forcefully magnified in these early sections of the text through the casual racial epithets directed at Ashida by other members of the LAPD. This is most aptly exemplified via his interactions with Turner “Buzz” Meeks, who whilst racially abusing Ashida, simultaneously both praises him and intimates at his acceptance within this paradigm of institutional whiteness that the LAPD signifies:⁸

The rat squirmed by him. He brushed himself off and dropped out of the hole. He landed deftly. He saw Buzz Meeks eyeballing the narcotics shelves.

“Look at this kid.”

Ashida looked. Bingo—four bottle rows neatly arrayed. The fifth row—disarrayed. Vials of morphine paregoric—rifled, for sure.

“The pharmacist said he only stole phenobarbital.”

Meeks said, “Yeah, and I believe him. But the skinny pharmacy guy’s got the heebie-jeebies, and his shirt collars soaked through. My guess is he’s got a habit.”

“Yes. He took advantage of the robbery to steal a vial of the paregoric, he only took what the robber could have carried on his person, and what he could hide himself.”

Meeks winked. “You’re are so right, Charlie Chan.”

“I’m Japanese, sergeant. I know you can’t tell the difference, but I’m not a goddamn Chinaman.”

Meeks grinned. “You look like an American to me.”

Ashida went swoony. Praise made him flutter. (18-19)

Meeks’s use of pejorative racial stereotypes in this scene is symptomatic of a form of physiognomic racism that permeates *Perfidia*, whereby predominantly white characters continually essentialize racial identity based upon visible signs of biological difference. Yet, Meeks’s ignorance in regards to Ashida’s ethnicity simultaneously exemplifies Ellroy’s deconstruction and dismantling of the very logic that energizes such racial prejudices and organizations.

This dislocation of the association between skin color and racial identity is further exemplified when Meeks informs Ashida that he “look[s] like an American.” The word “American” here is loaded with ideological inflections, and therefore becomes inseparable from these issues of racial identity. In Ellroy’s novels, Americanness is almost without exception codified as male, white, and heterosexual, as has indeed been the case historically in regards to politicized perceptions of the “modal American” (Hamscha 83). In this sense, Americanness becomes synonymous with both whiteness and the discourses and institutional mechanisms that validate and maintain that power. Yet, paradoxically Meeks’s comments seem to infer that

⁸ Turner “Buzz” Meeks is a central character in *The Big Nowhere*. After stealing heroin from the mob at the finale of *The Big Nowhere*, Meeks is tracked down and murdered by the corrupt Dudley Smith and his LAPD “mob squad” at the beginning of *L.A. Confidential*.

Ashida is nonetheless accepted or “passing” as American despite his biologically determined racial “otherness.” The emphasis on visibility and appearance in Meeks’s comments is therefore significant here, as it suggests that Ashida’s ability to “look like an American” is not so much based on his skin color than on his ability to adopt the performative signs that indicate whiteness. In this case, it is what Meeks perceives as Ashida’s successful ability to perform the cues and practices of an LAPD officer—and therefore the institutional whiteness that such officers embody—that validates his appearance as “an American.” The point here is that these opening scenes potently prefigure Ellroy’s engagement with racial politics throughout *Perfidia*, as he “depicts race not as a matter of pigmentation but of a hierarchy of power” (Ryan 273). Thus race—in particular whiteness—emerges not as something that is essential or biologically absolute, but ultimately as an identity category that is both performative and “culturally constructed” (Ryan 273). As such, whilst the text depicts the unyielding exploitation of minority groups at the hands of multiple mechanisms of institutional racism, Ashida’s racial passing paradoxically challenges the “essentialism, stability and permanence” that drives such binary categorizations of race (Bollobas 184).

These instances of “racial passing” are intensified by the two major events that follow the Whalen’s drugstore robbery. The first concerns the violent murder of the Watanabes, a Japanese family of four whose dissected bodies and mutilated entrails are discovered strewn across the “blood-soaked, blood-immersed” living room floor of their suburban house (62). Although staged like a seppuku-style ritual suicide, certain inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies in the case evidence eventually point to a planned homicide. Although the murder is initially low priority for the LAPD—as exemplified when Detective Mike Breuning asks “who gives a shit who killed the fucking Watanabes?” (135)—the case is imbued with added significance after the second central event of the novel, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The LAPD consequently launches a staged yet widely publicized investigation into the murder, one driven less by the pursuit of social justice than by a design to accumulate evidence that proves the department is not driven by a racist agenda that seeks to victimize Japanese Americans in the wake of the bombing. This is engineered to protect the LAPD from potential public reprisals when the future plans for Japanese American internment are eventually disclosed and enforced. The lead investigator, the corrupt Dudley Smith, is consequently charged with steering the case towards a “Jap-on-Jap solution,” even if the evidence he accrues points to the contrary (249). As a symbol of the enforcement of white power, Smith understands that this individual must be a horrifying “pervert,” one who “must explicate the mad designs of the entire Jap race and thus justify a full-scale racial imprisonment” (249). Meanwhile, Ashida creates his own murder file on the Watanabe case, conducting a private, unsanctioned investigation that leads him to suspect an unknown white man in a purple sweater, the disclosure of which would extinguish the LAPD’s plans to justify interment on the basis of Orientalist discourse.

What follows over the course of *Perfidia* is a tumultuous maelstrom of war profiteering, criminality, and racial exploitation. At the zenith of this insanity is Dudley Smith’s crazed eugenics plans, where, in cooperation with Chinese plastic surgeon Dr. Lin Ching, he plans to charge Japanese American citizens extortionate medical fees to undergo reconstructive facial surgeries that would alter their physiognomy in order to make them appear Chinese. The logic behind Dudley’s plan is that this will enable disaffected and victimized Japanese American citizens to disguise themselves amongst Los Angeles’s slightly less persecuted Chinese community, whilst simultaneously allowing Dudley to profit from the widespread

and vehement racial animus saturating the city following the attack on Pearl Harbor. As Dudley describes, the plan not only seeks to exploit “the white man’s native bias towards the yellow man,” but also his ignorance and fundamental “inability to discern the differentiating aspects of Oriental physiognomy” (108). Despite Dudley seeing the latter as the strategy’s main strength, it ultimately transpires to be its biggest flaw. In the context of the novel, the “white man’s” inability to differentiate between the two races fundamentally renders such surgeries redundant, consequently exposing the inherent fallaciousness and vacuity of the entrenched physiognomic racism energizing such a plan. Herein lies one the fundamental contradictions of race in *Perfidia*, vividly exposing the difficulties that emerge when attempting to negotiate Ellroy’s complex depiction of racial politics. Whilst the text is permeated with endless derogatory racial stereotypes and essentialist rhetoric—language that at times is not only uncomfortable but that arguably seems to propagate and endorse such skewed and abhorrent designs—the failings of Dudley’s plan can also be seen as one of many examples in *Perfidia* where Ellroy vividly exposes and critiques the lunacy of such misguided forms of biological racism.

This theme resonates throughout the text, as Ellroy exposes the constructed nature of racial binaries. In chapter 70 for instance, Kay Lake ponders what she terms as the “lie that race defines human beings,” and in many ways—notwithstanding its complexities—*Perfidia* can be read as an actualization of this very statement through its varying attempts to deconstruct race as an essential identity trait (Ellroy 427). As alluded to, it is through Ashida that Ellroy provides his arguably most nuanced representation of racial identity to date. Despite his affiliation with the LAPD, Ashida is still equally exposed to both racial abuse and alienation following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Cries of “JAP” trail Ashida around the streets of Los Angeles, as he becomes another victim of the hysterical climate of “yellow peril” that grips the city (Ellroy 544). Despite Ashida’s optimism that his family will be protected from interment, his position in the LAPD—and by extension the safety of his family—becomes progressively threatened by this fervent racism and wartime hysteria. Visiting his brother Akira, the “boss” at the family’s local farm, Ashida outlines his belief that they will be protected from persecution by the department, an optimism that his brother does not share:

The wind kicked up dirt. Ashida got back in his car. Akira leaned on the driver’s door.

“We’re in shit, Hideo. The Goodman emperor pops his crock in Tokyo, and we’re paying for it in L.A.”

Ashida said, “I’m working on something. It could benefit the Department. If I benefit the Department, they’ll make efforts to benefit us.”

Akira laughed. “Really? You trust that calculation like you trust some chemical formula you got from a textbook? You’re the only Japanese on the Department. Do you think you’ll get civil service protection in all this?” (143)

Ashida’s plan to escape internment is fundamentally dependent on making himself an “indispensable” asset to the Los Angeles police department (144). Or, to put it another way, it is contingent on Ashida’s ability to appropriate the performative signs and actions of whiteness, to “racially pass” as white and by extension contribute to the facilitation, maintenance and protection of the mechanisms of white social power that seek to persecute him and others like him.

It is no coincidence then that Ashida immediately makes himself “essential” to Captain William “Whisky Bill” Parker, future chief of police and enduring symbol of

institutional whiteness (144). To assure the maintenance of his position in the LAPD and the protection of his family, Ashida locates secret LAPD listening posts and destroys any recordings and transcripts that contain inflammatory or incriminating remarks uttered by Parker. This protects Parker's position in the department and prevents the recordings being used by his rival Dudley Smith in a potential smear campaign. This incident is symptomatic of Ashida's performative mimicry of whiteness in the succeeding pages of the text, a process of passing that "invisibilizes" Ashida's racial otherness due to his complicity in preserving these processes and systems of power. It is pertinent then that Ashida's otherness is only magnified and attacked by Parker once from this point, in a moment when he fails—in Parker's eyes—to successfully appropriate the "visible signs and performative cues" that he associates with white authority (Osucha 137).

When interrogating Chinese gang lord Ace Kwan about information pertaining to his affiliation with Dudley Smith's eugenics plans, a frustrated and drunk Parker demands that Ashida physically assault Kwan to expedite the relaying of information. Communicating in Japanese, Kwan and Ashida impart messages of respect, prompting Ashida to refuse Parker's cries to "hit him" (Ellroy 342). It is only after this perceived betrayal that Ashida's racial difference is visibilized once again by Parker, as he uses a litany of derogatory epithets such "dirty yellow savages" and "Jap Coward" to reassert his position of racial authority and power (342). This moment is significant, as Ashida is not demoted from his position as "honorary white man" because of his biological difference (60), but because of his refusal to maintain a "performance of whiteness" that Parker demands (Foster 2).

Significantly, Parker's reaction here, combined with Ashida's racial passing throughout the text, can to some extent be seen as symptomatic of a palpable "crisis of whiteness" expounded in *Perfidia*. The liminal space Ashida occupies as a consequence of his doubled otherness (race and sexuality), combined with his ability to transgress racial boundaries and perform whiteness, ultimately threatens to destabilize the hierarchical structures and systems that maintain white power. In this sense, Ashida's racial passing magnifies both the performative and culturally constructed nature of race, and as a consequence, undermines not only the rigidly assumed delineations of whiteness, but also the very power and authority that they demand. Through this procedure of visibilizing whiteness as a "performative-discursive" process, *Perfidia* can thus be seen to go some way towards "denaturalizing" white racial identity by subverting and thus magnifying the inherent penetrability of binarized identity formations (Bollobas 184).

This disagreement with Parker ultimately causes Ashida to align himself more closely with the other enduring symbol of white power in *Perfidia*, Dudley Smith. It is through this affiliation with Smith that Ashida's performance of whiteness becomes increasingly exaggerated, further magnifying the tensions and contradictions that underlie Ellroy's representation of race. As mentioned, although Ashida certainly subverts and dislodges rigid identity categories through the boundary crossing that his racial passing permits, his increasing complicity in violent acts of white power can also arguably be seen to further propagate rather than overthrow these dominant mechanisms and discourses. Ashida's ultimate embracement of the violent and subjugating signs of whiteness is forcefully dramatized towards the finale of the text, when—similar to the scene in which Parker demands him to physically assault Ace Kwan—Ashida is forced to interrogate then beat Japanese prisoners at the behest of mob boss Carlos Madrano and Dudley Smith:

The Japs jabbered and rattled their cuff chains. They wore Fuji Shudoesque. Hideo hectored them. It went on and on. It got boring and vexing. It required no translation. The Japs weren't giving up shit.

Hideo looked at Dudley.

Dudley looked at Carlos.

Carlos passed Hideo the gloves.

They were palm-weighted and fascist fetishistic. Hideo slipped them on.

The japs rolled their eyes and giggled. *Punk, you ain't got the guts.*

Hideo hit them.

He windmilled lefts and rights. Their heads snapped at near right angles.

Teeth blew out. Severed scalps flew.

They dribbled teeth.

They coughed blood.

Their eyebrows flopped over their eyes.

They made garbled sounds and gave it all up. . . .

Dudley smiled. "Bright, bright penny. How gifted you are."

A fat Jap squirmed and spit blood at Hideo. He called up some English. He said, "You fairy."

Hideo grabbed Carlos Madrano's Luger and drew down on him. The other Japs froze. The whole tent froze.

Dudley watched his gears click. Yes/no, yes/no, yes/no.

Hideo lowered the gun.

Hideo said, "I'm an American." (646-47)

The lurid violence and stark brutality of this scene is characteristic of *Perfidia*'s ruthless and unyielding depiction of the deplorable acts committed "in the name of white American power" (Mancall 167). Hideo's carrying out of the interrogations and beatings signifies his complicity in these very acts, and therefore, by extension, operates as a performative assurance of his "Americanness." Of course, as mentioned, Americanness in Ellroy's texts is intimately bound up with notions of whiteness, or perhaps more specifically, with white, heterosexual masculinity. The positioning of Japanese prisoners as the target of Ashida's performance of white rage is therefore significant here, as it potently magnifies Ashida's disavowal of his otherness, not only in terms of racial identity but also sexuality. This is demonstrated by his response to being called "a fairy" by one of the Japanese prisoners, whereby he forcefully asserts "I'm American." Although this rejoinder appears to be a non sequitur, Ashida's oral pronouncement of his Americanness—combined with its physical actualization through such a violent performance of white masculinity—ultimately exemplifies his rejection of both his homosexual predilections and his racial otherness. This scene is therefore loaded with challenging ambiguities. Whilst on the one hand Ashida subverts and denaturalizes whiteness by vividly emphasizing its position not as a biological absolute but as a performative and constructed system of power, his sustained participation in the maintenance of this power simultaneously problematizes the subversive potentiality of these very acts.

Such contradictions and incongruities permeate *Perfidia*, and are perhaps most pertinently exemplified at the denouement of the narrative. After tracing the labyrinthine twists and false bottoms surrounding the Watanabe case, William Parker's investigation eventually leads him to James "Two Gun" Davis, the real-life former chief of the Los Angeles Police Department. Davis's reasons for murdering the family extend beyond personal motive, and instead connect to a broader conspiracy of greed and governmental corruption centered around a convergence

between Fifth Column sabotage and land development. Although Davis and other figures tangentially connected to both the LAPD and federal government were forewarned of the attack on Pearl Harbor, they deliberately buried the intel so that they could profit from the ensuing war fever and the inevitable persecution and internment of Japanese American citizens. One fork of this plan involved capitalizing on forced evictions, so that any Japanese American homes situated in prime development locations could be demolished to facilitate the building of a new super freeway. The murder of the Watanabes—a family deeply rooted in fifth column sabotage—resulted primarily from a fear that they would expose these plans and allegiances after, or even worse before, the bombing. Either way, Davis decided the Watanabes “had to go” (667). Crucially, the Watanabe family massacre forcefully emphasizes the profound convergence between projections of white power and capitalist modes of speculation in *Perfidia*. The mass media circulation of the gruesome details surrounding the murders becomes intimately connected to a broader conjunction between consumer desire, commodity fetishism, and land development, embodying Ellroy’s deeper preoccupation with “the new logic of urban spectacle” (Cohen 139).⁹

Referring to Parker as “civilized white man” in his confession (663), Davis’s exposure of the web of exploitation and greed percolating behind the city’s internment plans dramatizes the profound incompatibility between the terms “civilized” and “white man.” Parker—who had himself previously referred to Japanese Americans as “savages” and “cowards”—is in this moment faced with the savagery, violence, and depravity that constitutes the rotting foundation of the monolithic institutions of white social power that he purports to represent. As Andrew 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 (45).

Presenting the overwhelming degeneracy at the heart of these structures of power, this moment or revelation destabilizes the logic that energizes Orientalist discourse, one that has historically situated whiteness as superior to that of the uncivilized, deviant racial other. Nonetheless, the extent of the avarice and corruption saturating these institutions is ultimately what protects Davis from criminal indictments. Threatening to reveal the whole web of racketeering and exploitation that would “fuck the LAPD so hard up the ass they’d hear the screams in Tokyo and Berlin,” Davis knows that Parker must bury the case to protect the future of the department (670). As Davis smugly asserts, “I killed four Japs the day before Pearl Harbor, and burning me for it costs more than it’s worth. I’m sitting here fat and sassy, because I’ve got history on my side” (670). As is often the case with Ellroy’s novels, ultimate justice remains elusive, not only because Davis has “history on his side,” but also the monolithic mechanisms of white social power.

⁹ This connection between the spectacular commodification of eviscerated bodies and the post-war redevelopment of Los Angeles is explored by Josh Cohen in his book *Spectacular Allegories*. In his discussion of *The Black Dahlia*, Cohen argues that the brutalized image of Elizabeth Short’s eviscerated remains emerges as one of many “spectacular facades” that characterize Ellroy’s depiction of the city, an object of “desire and mass veneration” that conceals an underworld of urban power, political corruption, and sexual violence (Cohen 139).

Like Ellroy's previous novels, *Perfidia* offers a bleak and violent vision of American history, one not only driven by ruthless corporate interest and corrupt systems of governance, but one that is also codified as both rigidly white and rigidly masculine. As Tim Ryan puts it in his reading of *American Tabloid*, Ellroy "graphically displays the lengths to which white men are prepared to go to maintain power, and he pulls no punches in depicting their dismissive and exploitative attitudes towards people of color and women" (278). *Perfidia* certainly does not deviate for this pattern, and is equally unapologetic in its representation of an era fraught with racial discrimination and prejudices. Although at times *Perfidia* can make uncomfortable reading, Ellroy nonetheless works hard to offer a more complex and nuanced representation of race than might first appear. Kay Lake's rumination over "the lie that race defines human beings" certainly seems to reverberate throughout the text, as Ellroy can, to a certain extent, be seen to enforce the notion that "there is no internal truth to race" (Ehlers 6). This is most aptly embodied through the character of Hideo Ashida, whose racial passing dramatizes the constructed rather than biological parameters of racial identity. Yet more than this, *Perfidia* presents allegiances across racial boundaries unlike anything in Ellroy's novels before. Whether in the form of Dudley Smith's friendship with Chinese gang lord Ace Kwan, or Hideo Ashida's begrudging partnership with William Parker, Ellroy offers his most panoramic and inclusive depiction of racial identity and racial politics to date.

Yet, overall it is still difficult to suggest that Ellroy goes all the way towards subverting or decentering the dominance and power of racial hierarchies in *Perfidia*. The bleakness that characterizes the finale of the novel, whereby corruption and murder go unpunished, does little to suggest that there will be any possibility of resistance against these overwhelming mechanisms and discourses of white power in his future novels. Thus whilst Ellroy certainly destabilizes white power through his vivid depiction of exploitation and violence, at the same time his emphasis on "bad white men may actually risk further cementing this power rather than deconstructing it" (Ryan 279). Additionally, Ellroy's unyielding focus on white power often comes at the cost of pushing minority groups or people of color to the margins of the narrative, leaving those most forcefully affected by processes such as internment and racial prejudice largely voiceless in his history of Los Angeles. Such debates over Ellroy's representation of race will continue to rage, and whilst *Perfidia* is arguably Ellroy's most complex engagement with these issues to date, overall it does little to reconcile the contradictions and paradoxes that seem to characterize his engagement with racial politics inside, and outside, of his fiction.

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