

Nostalgic Masculinity: Homosocial Desire and Homosexual Panic in James Ellroy's *This Storm*

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**Abstract:** The second volume in James Ellroy's 'Second LA Quartet', *This Storm* (2019) offers a complex miscellany of war profiteering, fifth column sabotage, and institutional corruption, all of which is starkly projected against the sobering backdrop of the internment of Japanese-Americans. Whilst presenting Ellroy's most diverse assemblage of characters to date, the narrative is, nonetheless, principally centred on the intersecting bonds between men. Although the prevalence of destructive masculine authority in Ellroy's works has been widely discussed, what has often been overlooked are the specifically 'homosocial' dimensions of these relationships. Whilst these homosocial bonds are frequently energised and solidified by homophobic violence (both physical and rhetorical), this paper will argue that they are simultaneously wrought by 'homosexual panic'; the anxiety deriving from the indeterminate boundaries between homosocial and homosexual desire. This panic is expressed most profoundly in *This Storm* in the form of corrupt policeman Dudley Smith. Haunted by a repressed homosexual encounter, Smith's paranoid behaviour and increasingly punitive violence derives from his inability to establish clear boundaries between his intense homosocial bonds and latent homosexual desires. Thus, whilst Ellroy's 'nostalgic masculinity' attempts to circumscribe the dimensions and inviolability of male identity, the paranoia and violence that underscores the various machinations of Ellroy's crooked cops ultimately exposes the fragility of such constructions.

**Key Words:** James Ellroy, Masculinity, Homosocial, Panic, Homosexual

The punitive brutality that underlies James Ellroy's codifications of masculinity has long been a cause of critical contention. His two volumes of epic noir fiction – the 'LA Quartet' and the 'Underworld U.S.A. Trilogy' – present a frenzied and paranoid vision of American post-war history, one radically schematised by gendered, racial and sexual violence.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the author's claims that the central thematic preoccupation of his work is 'bad men in love with strong women' (Luce), these novels typically centre on the intense and intersecting bonds between men. From rogue cops to soldiers of fortune, Ellroy's work is marked by what Michael Albrecht describes as 'nostalgic masculinity', the 'desire for a less complicated time in which gendered assumptions of masculinity were more firmly entrenched' (57). This nostalgic masculinity is not only manifested in the brutal yet 'heroic' acts of Ellroy's male protagonists, but in the attendant demonization of all that threatens to

destabilise this construction. This is most forcefully revealed via the rhetorical convergence between homosexuality, psychopathy and perversion, as well as the brutal acts committed to contain and erase this threat.

Whilst the prevalence of heterosexual masculine authority in Ellroy's works has been widely discussed, what has often been overlooked are the specifically 'homosocial' dimensions of these relationships – that is, the 'the social bonds between persons of the same sex' (Sedgwick 1985: 1). Within these intense male dynamics, what is frequently evident in Ellroy's writings is the deeply fragile and unstable association between 'sanctioned' homosocial bonds and what is perceived as unacceptable, perverse homosexuality. Whilst 'legitimised' homosocial relationships are recurrently energised and solidified by horrific homophobic violence (both physical and rhetorical), this paper will argue that they are simultaneously shaped by what Eve Sedgwick defines as 'homosexual panic', or the anxiety deriving from the indeterminate boundaries between homosocial and homosexual desire. Far from depicting a stable and demarcated structuring of gender and sexuality, Ellroy's novels project a paranoid masculine world, one 'structured by a coercive terror experienced by/as a never entirely secure heterosexual masculinity' (Becker 21).

### **'Between Men': Homosocial Bonding and Homophobia in Ellroy's Fiction**

The extent to which James Ellroy's work can be positioned as either a validation or 'pointed critique' of a particularly 'nostalgic vision of heroic masculinity' has tended to divide critical opinion (Baker x). Indeed, the discriminatory and disciplinary acts of Ellroy's various patriarchal institutions of power would appear, superficially, to function as a reinscription of a traditional notion of 'masculine authority' (Mancall 144). Yet many critics have challenged the perception of Ellroy's work as a strategic validation of homophobic, misogynistic and racial violence, arguing that he offers a more complex and multifaceted critique of corrosive

male power than may initially appear. Pointing to a variety of instances in the ‘LA Quartet’ in which father figures – both literal and symbolic – manipulate, abuse and disenfranchise their sons, Lee Horsley, for instance, identifies ‘traumatized masculinity’ as the ‘defining trait’ of Ellroy’s work. Despite the recurrent junction between ‘otherness’ and deviancy that permeates these narratives, Horsley argues that the texts’ ‘most disturbing criminal transgressions and pathological impulses’ are often ‘those generated within a regime of masculine political and economic power’ (148). In other words, in exposing the corruption at the heart of institutional masculinity, Ellroy presents us not with a testimony to the inviolability of patriarchal power, but an illumination of the ‘failures of the whole legitimizing framework of masculine authority’ (148). Andrew Pepper similarly identifies a dialectic of ‘political ambiguity’ in Ellroy’s work, arguing that the author’s attempts to glamorise the ‘nakedly self-serving actions of his ‘dirty white cops’ as ideologically motivated inevitably crumble to reveal a dog eat dog world where conservative values count for nothing’. Thus as far as Ellroy’s work can be perceived as a reinscription of the ‘dominant social position of the straight, white male’, Pepper asserts that it can be just as persuasively located as a pointed ‘left-wing critique of right-wing politics’ (30).

Whilst convincing to some extent, such readings risk diverting critical focus from what nonetheless remains a violently demarcated form of heterosexual masculinity in Ellroy’s work. Notwithstanding the macho violence and heroism that typifies his male archetypes, Ellroy’s codifications of homosexuality are repeatedly linked with monstrosity, deviance and shame.<sup>2</sup> Jim Mancall, for instance, points to a number of ‘deranged’ homosexual killers that feature in Ellroy’s work – such as Martin Plunkett from *Killer on the Road* (1986) and Teddy Verplanck from *Blood on the Moon* (1984)– as being symptomatic of a repeated conjunction between deviant sexuality, psychopathy and violence (104). This is nowhere more evident than in the second volume of the ‘LA Quartet’, *The Big Nowhere*, in

which the crazed serial killer Coleman Healy – having suffered adolescent abuse at the hands of his father – enacts his disaffected rage on the homosexual subculture of the city through a number of perverse mutilations and murders. Charged with investigating the crimes, Detective Deputy Danny Upshaw’s struggles to conceal his own repressed homosexuality are rendered all the more problematic by his increasing identification with the homosexual ‘underworld’ he is attempting to police. Upshaw’s tortured subjectivity becomes manifested in his use of the ‘Man Camera’, a forensic technique that allows the investigator to examine crime scenes whilst ‘screening details from the perpetrators point of view’ (Ellroy 94). Although theoretically an objective, documentary technique, Upshaw’s increasing immersion in the murders causes him to experience disorientating ‘man camera malfunctions’, losing control of the device and his vision. Ungoverned, Upshaw’s ‘Man Camera’ steadily begins to conjure repressed homosexual memories, merging them with images of eviscerated innards, ‘big bruised penises’ and other mutilations in ‘wraparound technicolour’ (111). Not only does Upshaw’s inability to control the camera – as a symbol of heterosexual male power – point to an interrelationship between emasculation, irrationality and homosexual desire, but the merging of violent, sexual imagery also continues a pattern of confluence between sadism and transgressive sexualities. Upshaw’s attempts to solve the murders perpetrated by Healy are progressively complicated by his simultaneous attempts to conceal his own private fantasies and prevent them from being ‘uncovered by the penetrative gaze’ of the LAPD (Ashman, *Voyeur Fiction* 41). Ultimately he chooses suicide over exposure, slitting his throat with a serrated carving knife.

The treatment of homosexuality in *The Big Nowhere* speaks to a framework of ‘homosexual panic’ that structures Ellroy’s narratives on a broader scale, a framework borne out of the intense *homosocial* relationships that configure the symbolic, disciplinary landscape of an imagineered post-war Los Angeles. My use of the term ‘homosexual panic’

here refers to a particular ‘double bind’ that characterises the male bonds in Ellroy’s work, a bind that Eve Sedgwick first identified as central to categorisations of gender and sexuality in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature and culture. In her seminal text *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that the ‘paths of male entitlement’, especially in the nineteenth century, necessitated the forging of ‘intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds’. The consequence of this was an ‘endemic and ineradicable state of what [Sedgwick calls] male homosexual panic’, one that ultimately emerged as the ‘normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement’ (Sedgwick 182). Plainly put, whilst ascension through the male dominated social hierarchy demanded one to forge what Ron Becker describes as ‘new kinds of homosocial relationships and desires’, it was simultaneously organised around the prohibition and condemnation of any behaviours, associations or desires that could be deemed homosexual (20). For Sedgwick, the ultimate consequence of ‘accession’ to this double bind was, ‘first, the acute *manipulability*, through the fear of one’s own “homosexuality,” of acculturated men; and second, a reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces’ (186). Homosexual panic thus emerged as the primary instrument of power through which male gender and sexual identity was delimited and regulated.

Whilst Sedgwick offers a specific and historicised reading of homosexual panic, these ambivalent boundaries between acceptable male bonding and prohibited yet ‘remarkably cognate’ homosexuality are traceable in the complex machinery of masculinity that forms James Ellroy’s fiction (*Epistemology* 186). Indeed, his world of cops, politicians and gangsters is structured by an analogous tension between sanctioned homosocial relationships and unsanctioned, often perverse representations of homosexuality. And, similarly, the boundary between these two binaries is continually exposed as unstable and ultimately arbitrary, prompting escalating patterns of paranoid behaviour and punitive violence in an

attempt to reinscribe said binaries. Rodney Taveira is the only critic to date to have similarly pointed to these patterns of homosocial desire within Ellroy's work. Unpacking the 'tripartite focalising structure' of the love rivalries at the centre of *LA Confidential* (1990), Taveira argues that the text is arguably a 'homosocial love story' between competing cops Ed Exley and Bud White, one that is 'mediated' by the female member of the triangle, Lynne Bracken ("Interview with" 367). For Taveira, this is indicative of a number of comparable 'Troikas' that can be mapped across Ellroy's fiction, whereby desire between men becomes permissible when circulated through a woman ("Divine Violence" 142). The Bleichert/Blanchard/Lake troika in *The Black Dahlia* and the aforementioned Exley/White/Bracken triumvirate in *LA Confidential*, for instance, are recognisable examples of these dynamics at play. What Taveira is referring to here, even if it is not stated specifically, is Sedgwick's triangle of desire, an erotic rivalry in which 'the woman is relegated to a subordinate position, a minor character involved with each of two men obsessed with one another' (Nicol 98). In such 'Girardian' rivalries, Sedgwick argues that the bond that connects the two rivals is as 'intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved', the upshot being that the 'bonds of rivalry and love, differently as they experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent' (*Between Men* 21). Whilst Taveira certainly goes some way towards recognising the unstable relationship between authorized and forbidden male desire in Ellroy's works, he does not acknowledge the pervasive climate of homosexual panic that energises these intense homosocial bonds.<sup>3</sup> Through the totemic, disciplinary machinery of various institutions of patriarchal power – the LAPD, government, crime syndicates – the policing of homosexual desire operates on both a public ('outward') and private ('internal') level and is bolstered by a climate of punitive and transmissible homophobia that circumscribes the delimited strictures within which masculinity can function (Becker 21).

### **Panic on the Streets of LA: Masculinity and Desire in *This Storm***

This climate of ‘homosexual panic’ is nowhere more evident than in Ellroy’s most recent novel, *This Storm* (2019), a direct sequel to *Perfidia* (2014) and the second instalment in Ellroy’s planned ‘Second LA Quartet’. Unfolding in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, *This Storm* offers a complex miscellany of war profiteering, fifth column sabotage, and institutional corruption, all of which is starkly projected against the sobering backdrop of Japanese-American internment. Typically of ‘Ellrovian’ structuring, the text is predominantly narrated from a limited third person perspective, with each chapter alternating between four central characters (Powell 137): Sergeant Elmer V. Jackson, an LAPD cop and brothel shareholder who becomes fixated on solving a mysterious 1931 ‘gold heist’ that may be linked to the disappearance of his older brother over a decade previous; Army Captain Dudley Smith, a war profiteer and LAPD enforcer stationed in Mexico to prevent fifth column sabotage and communist insurgency within the US; Joan Conville, a naval lieutenant and junior chemist indebted to the LAPD – specifically to Captain William H Parker – for burying a charge of vehicular manslaughter; and Hideo Ashida, a Japanese-American police chemist and closet homosexual whose brotherhood with the malicious Dudley Smith insulates him from the violence of the interment ‘round ups’. These four perspectives are interspersed with diary entries from a fifth character, bored dilettante and Dudley Smith adversary Kay Lake.

Sprawling and intersecting, *This Storm* broadly oscillates around two principle plot lines. The first concerns the unearthing of a body following a mudslide in Griffith park that is allied to the 1931 gold-heist. The complex ideological allegiances circulating around the heist ultimately precipitate the second major investigative strand of the text, the murder of two corrupt, implicitly homosexual policemen at a fascist meeting spot known as ‘the Klubhaus’. Outside of the intricacies of plot, the central theme of *This Storm* is political confluence

across ideological lines, as left- and right-wing extremists converge to sabotage ‘the shuck of democracy’ and pre-emptively destabilise post-war centrist politics (Ellroy, *Storm* 43). At the disputed centre of this political and ideological transgression is the virile, omnipotent master villain of Ellroy’s previous ‘LA Quartet’, Dudley Smith. Known for his espousal of ‘containment’, a theory of policing that permits crime and vice to flourish in the poorer, racially segregated spaces of the city, *This Storm* again sees Smith sanctioning and facilitating the propagation of crime expedient to his own ideological and power-crazed plans. In this instance, Smith must balance his military directive to quash communist insurrections off the coast of Mexico with his simultaneous designs to smuggle heroin across the border with the help of the Sinarquistas, a right-wing Mexican cabal secretly plotting fifth column sabotage on the U.S mainland. These political tensions feed into broader anxieties pertaining to ‘borders’ in *This Storm*, particularly regarding masculinity and sexuality. Indeed, it is through Smith that the climate of ‘homosexual panic’ is most profoundly expressed, as – haunted by a repressed homosexual encounter – his increasingly paranoid behaviour and extreme disciplinary violence marks an effort to reinscribe clear boundaries between legitimate homosocial bonds and unsanctioned homosexuality.

*This Storm* opens with a ‘legal’ manhunt ordered by Dudley Smith that is symptomatic of the ‘constant vigilance (inward and outward)’ that the fear of latent homosexuality necessities in the world of Ellroy’s nostalgic yet paranoid masculinity (Becker 21). The search party, consisting of Sergeant Elmer Jackson and longstanding Dudley ‘enforcers’ Mike Breuning and Dick Carlisle, are tasked with locating and killing Tommy Glennon, a homosexual and ‘recent Quentin grad’ wanted for a string of malicious sexual assaults perpetrated against women (11). In Tommy Glennon we are presented with one of the predatory and deranged homosexual sadists that abound in *This Storm*. And like the rest of these figures, Glennon’s homosexuality is entirely interchangeable with his psychopathy.

A rapist and necrophile who drinks the blood of his victims, descriptions of Tommy are fraught with images of contamination and contagion, pointedly expressing a fear of homosexual encroachment that permeates the text (*Storm* 403).

Indeed, it is this fear of encroachment that induces Dudley to order the hit in the first place. Whilst the directive to eliminate Glennon certainly aligns with a broader climate of sanctioned homophobic violence – and therefore goes unquestioned by the murder squad – Smith’s motive is personal, and dates back to Glennon’s witnessing of a homosexual encounter between himself and an anonymous man at a ‘Night of the Long-Knives’ themed costume party. The assignation is recounted by Huey Cressmeyer, another of the text’s prurient homosexuals whose squalid living space – described as a ‘pus pit’ – again reinforces the conjunction between homosexuality and infection (268):

Uncle Dud kissed and petted with at *least* a dozen women. The last woman was very tall and thin, and she led Uncle Dud outside and over to a pergola.

[. . . ] “Uncle Dud and the tall woman kissed passionately. Tommy and I watched. The woman knelt between Uncle Dud’s legs. *Well*, her gown hiked, and Tommy and I saw those hairy gams. The moon passed over and Dud saw them too. The woman coughed, *meine Herren* – and it was *surely* a man’s cough. *Well*, Uncle Dud screamed then. He pulled out his bayonet and stabbed the girl-boy in the face and chest. He walked away, sobbing – and if you tell Uncle Dud that I told you all this, I’ll be *very* peeved with you (268-269).

Within the landscape of *This Storm*’s nostalgic yet paranoid masculinity, Dudley’s violence appears to be justified by the antiquated judicial logic of ‘homosexual panic’, a defence strategy that licences antigay violence in light of an ‘unwanted sexual advance from a man’ (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 19). The ‘sobbing’ shame experienced by Dudley as a result of this homosexual assignation therefore takes apparent precedence over the excessive and

ultimately fatal violence perpetrated against the ‘girl-boy’, which, within the logic of Dudley’s fragile masculinity, is framed as reasonable.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite attempting to reinscribe boundaries between masculinity and homosexual desire through such corrective violence, the penetrative, phallic imagery used to describe the attack - ‘he pulled out his bayonet and stabbed’ – still raises questions regarding both Dudley’s sexuality and the wider, fragile climate of male bonding in this *This Storm*. Indeed, the text is marked by a profound ambiguity over Dudley’s complicity in this sexual encounter, with Huey Cressmeyer asserting that ‘Dud knew she was really a he and was *looooving* the encounter until something flipped his switch’ (402). Such speculation and ambivalence regarding Dudley’s sexuality is returned to again and again in *This Storm* and becomes intimately tied up not only with his progressively loosening stranglehold over various unruly political and ideological factions in both the U.S and Mexico, but also with a more abstract loss of masculine power, status and agency.

Indeed, even prior to the revelation of this repressed sexual encounter – one that Dudley spends a large part of the novel attempting to conceal – the progressive divestment of Dudley’s masculine authority is repeatedly projected against the backdrop of various symbolic, homoerotic scenes. One such instance appears early in the text, when Smith is tipped off to the secret hideout of one Kyoho Hanamaka, a Japanese naval attaché and fifth column saboteur. Whilst snooping around the safe house, Smith soon discovers a concealed ‘hidden closet’ containing swaths of extremist paraphernalia, including ‘Klu Klux Klan flags’, ‘Red Shirt battalion flags’ and ‘black SS dress kit’ (96). Smith’s response to the ‘hidey-hole’ is both deeply fetishistic and inherently erotic, fondling uniforms and weaponry whilst elliptically recalling the homoerotic encounter that will later be revealed by Huey Cressmeyer:

Dudley stopped there. Winter'39 tore through him. The party reprised the Night of the Long Knives. Tommy Glennon witnessed *Sturmbannführer* Smith's nadir.

Maestro Klemperer's house. The Maestro's recording of *Tristan and Isolde*. The prelude soars. The costumed guests caper.

Dudley fondled Nazi uniforms. He touched silver thunderbolts and death-heads. He kissed stiff black wool. He loved beautiful clothing. Claire joshed him about it.

He'd sweated through his clothes. He felt dizzy. He reached behind the foot rack and pulled out an oak box.

It was two feet long and weighty. It looked ceremonial. A hinged lid lifted up. Dudley opened the box. A bayonet had been placed on black velvet. Swastikas were carved on the handle. The bayonet glowed.

Dudley picked it up and cradled it. He gauged the weight as eight pounds. The bayonet was pure gold (2019: 97)

The metaphor of the closet as a site of repressed desire is unambiguous here. Not only does Dudley allude to the assignation with the 'girl-boy' (albeit cryptically), but the black Nazi uniform that he precedes to 'fondle' and 'kiss' is an exact duplicate of the one he wore during the party. Smith's markedly equivocal behaviour therefore problematises the hermeticism that typically characterises Ellroy's nostalgic masculinity. Whilst the reference to *Tristan and Isolde* frames the action as being ostensibly preoccupied with 'illicit' or transgressive forms of desire, the shame that Dudley appears to exhibit during Huey's latter re-telling of the event is strikingly absent in this scene. Smith does admittedly refer to the altercation as his 'nadir', but otherwise the passage is permeated with the language of sex, fantasisation and desire: 'fondled', 'stiff', 'sweated', 'kissed'. This is significant and frames Smith's homophobic violence not as an expression of a personal hatred of homosexuality, but as a reflection of the

constituting logic that codifies the gendered and sexual politics of Ellroy's ruthlessly masculine, 'homosocial' world.

This is not the first time that Smith's ambiguous sexuality has been brought into focus in Ellroy's work. Indeed, in his reading of *The Big Nowhere*, Jim Mancall posits that Smith's ascension in the original 'LA Quartet' is predicated less on his embodiment of a circumscribed form of hegemonic masculinity than on a capacity to 'hide his own sexuality behind bravado and political manoeuvrings' (185). As an indicator, Mancall not only points to a provocative scene in which Smith kisses disgraced policeman and closet homosexual Danny Upshaw 'full on the lips', but also to an earlier section of the text where he speaks of the value of 'compartmentalization'. Speaking to fellow officer Mal Considine, Smith tells him that 'family is an essential thing for a man to have' and that his own wife and five daughters 'serve well to keep the reins on certain unruly aspects of [his] nature' (232). Of course, it is possible to interpret these 'unruly aspects' simply as a reference to Smith's unsanctioned criminal enterprises and generally prurient sensibilities. Yet Mancall argues that these lines could also be interpreted 'with a different emphasis', one that problematises the 'Quartet's' supposedly stable and 'compartmentalised' demarcations between homosocial and homosexual desire (185).

Indeed, it is arguably Dudley's failure to compartmentalize that precipitates his symbolic castration in *This Storm*, one manifested in the profound divestment of his power and control over the text's phallogentric landscapes. As in much of Ellroy's previous work, ascension through political, departmental and criminal ranks in *This Storm* is predicated on the formation of intense homosocial bonds. And – as Taveira mentions – the desire that underpins such dynamics is often rendered permissible via its circulation through a female character. Whilst these kind of troikas – such as the Smith/Parker/Joan and Smith/Claire/Vasquez-Cruz triangles – once again abound in *This Storm*, it is arguably the

relationship between Dudley and Japanese Police Chemist (and closet homosexual) Hideo Ashida that constitutes the central ‘love story’ in the text, representing an exchange of desire conspicuously devoid of the third (and female) member of the troika. Hideo’s relationship with Smith can be traced back to *Perfidia*, in which Ashida is spared the horrors of internment in exchange for aligning with, and abetting, Smith’s ‘goon squad’. As I have discussed in a previous essay, the success of Ashida’s plan in *Perfidia* is deeply tied up with the text’s broader racial politics and is ultimately contingent on his 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’ (Ashman, ‘Yellow’ 9). This is equally applicable to the operations of gender and sexuality in both *Perfidia* and *This Storm*, as Ashida’s rise through the corrupt structures of the LAPD and military is similarly dependent on his operating within the rigidly prescribed locale of homosocial desire, necessitating the repression and/or sublimation of any acts or behaviours that could be deemed homosexual. The problem is that the frontier between these supposedly opposing domains of masculine desire are fundamentally fragile and permeable in Ellroy’s texts, a paranoid realization that frequently culminates in panicked and retaliatory acts of homophobic violence.

Ashida’s relationship with Smith is one of several intense male bonds that proliferate in *This Storm* and becomes indicative of the blurred boundaries between ‘legitimate’ and ‘reprobate’ desire. The strength of the connection between the two men is provokingly attested to by Kay Lake, who asserts: ‘Dudley Smith and Hideo Ashida love each other deeply. Dudley’s love is fraternal. It’s the love of a brutalised Irish boy [. . .] Hideo’s love for Dudley is wholly lustful and at odds with his fulsome knowledge of Dudley’s evil’ (457). Whilst Kay attempts to differentiate between the forms of desire – fraternal and sexual – that mark Ashida and Smith’s bond, what ultimately unites the two men in *This Storm* is a

paranoid fear of expulsion from the delimited strictures of male power in which they operate. Indeed, much like Danny Upshaw in *The Big Nowhere*, Ashida's character arc in both volumes of Ellroy's 'Second LA Quartet' is underscored by a terror that his repressed homosexual desire will be exposed. The semblance between these two characters also extends to their use of the 'Man Camera', the forensic investigative technique that, in Upshaw's case, malfunctions, sublimating his homosexual fantasies. Ashida's use of his 'Man Camera' on the other hand remains entirely controlled, emblematising the profound and constant vigilance that marks his characterisation throughout *This Storm*. Ashida acknowledges that his security and status within the LAPD – and the broader hetero-masculine landscape of Ellroy's Los Angeles – is predicated solely on his ability to uphold, and operate within, the fragile boundaries of homosocial desire, an undertaking that ultimately necessitates his own participation in homophobic violence.

This is dramatised in chapter 101 of the text, when Ashida uncovers evidence implicating Mexican State police Captain Juan Pimentel in planned fifth column sabotage on the U.S mainland. Whilst indicative of the toxic allegiances across ideological and political lines that undercut all of the criminal machinations in *This Storm*, Ashida's discovery also lays bare Pimentel's deliberate betrayal of Dudley Smith's directives. After confronting Pimentel at Kyoho Hanamaka's stash house, Ashida is made privy to the secret closet containing extremist paraphernalia previously discovered by Smith. Pimentel reveals that a number of implicated members of the state police and Sinarquistas have been using the flop pad to dress up and live out sordid sexual fantasies. The discussion culminates in the State Captain making a sexual advance on Ashida, one that is forcefully and mortally rebuked:

Ashida froze. Pimentel leaned close and kissed him. Ashida grasped his arms and opened his mouth. He felt Pimentel's tongue. He felt Pimentel's hand between his legs.

He kissed back. He smelled mothballs and old wool. He shut his eyes and saw Bucky and Dudley. He opened his eyes and saw the moles on Pimentel's eyelids. He smelled talc and cheap aftershave.

He stifled a screech. He shut his eyes. He clamped down and bit Pimentel's tongue off. Blood burst into his mouth. Pimentel screeched. Ashida pulled his piece and emptied the clip.

Pimentel pitched and flailed. He took down a row of hatboxes. He smashed into mothball sachets and gold, brocade gowns (448).

Whilst Ashida's brutality is, punishment for Pimentel's betrayal, it also signifies the stark negation and ultimate abjection of homosexual desire in the validation of homosocial bonds. Indeed, Ashida appears to reciprocate Pimentel's sexual advances until the point at which his mind conjures images of Bucky Bleichert and Dudley Smith, both objects of his repressed desire. This is significant, as both relationships are only maintained in the realm of the 'legitimate' via Ashida's constant and watchful circumscription of his homosexual predilections. In this moment, Ashida recognises that his reciprocation – and any attendant exposure – will not only precipitate the collapse of these fragile bonds, but the divestment of his position and power within the hierarchy of the text's masculine order. Thus, typically of Ellroy's novels, homophobic violence becomes the means through which the boundaries of masculine desire are forcefully yet precariously maintained. Previously a close associate of Smith and Ashida, as well as a key figure in their Mexican criminal network, Pimentel himself epitomises the brittleness of this frontier, as well as a more profound fear of encroachment/infection that permeates Ellroy's work on both a character and plot level. Indeed, Ashida's sudden realisation that Pimentel is actually 'an invert' coincides with a wider questioning of, and loss of faith in, the Captain's political and ideological loyalties, indicating a clear confluence between homosexuality, betrayal and inauthenticity (393).

The circumscription of *This Storm's* heroic masculinity is similarly traceable in the partnership between 'smart okie' Buzz Meeks and 'dumb cracker' Elmer Jackson. Tasked with locating two of the text's deviant homosexuals – Huey Cressmeyer and Tommy Glennon – the partners' begin a road trip through Southern California to Tijuana, one that is continually heralded by the slogan: '*The boys are back in town*' (90). In this section of the text, the machismo and intensity of Meeks and Jacksons' booze- and drug-fuelled road trip is legitimised via its opposition to the hyper-prurient, homosexual spaces through which they travel and heavy-handedly police. This is particularly true of Tijuana, which is presented as a veritable Sodom and Gomorrah: 'T.J. by nite. It's the fucked-up phantasm. White man, beware. Hock your souls at your own risk' (262). Prior to locating Huey and beating him for information pertaining to the *Klubhaus* murders, Buzz and Elmer's movement through the 'noxious nitespots' of Tijuana leads them to a homosexual 'camera club' that ultimately induces panicked acts of rage on the part of the two policemen. Entering the building, the partners are confronted with 'one jumbo room. Blasting flashbulbs and wall-to-wall bedrolls. Ten thousand penetrations. Disembodied dicks and holes. Camera fiends jumping bedroll to bedroll'. Unable to determine whether Huey is hiding amongst the 'thousand fuck shrieks' and 'flashbulb blips', Elmer commences to indiscriminately enforce a brand of corrective violence: 'He stumbled over bedrolls and kicked fuckers and fuckees elsewhere. He dumped camera fiends and sent cameras airborne... He popped sweat. He almost lost his legs and lunch' (263). This is one of several instances during Buzz and Elmer's road trip when homosexuality becomes bound up with the language of squalor and contagion and the parameters of their relationship are repeatedly 'shored up' via the symbolic distancing of paranoid, homophobic force.

The road trip culminates in the murder of Tommy Glennon, who – after bragging about a range of atrocities, including necrophilia, vampiric blood drinking and the serial rape,

is beaten, smothered and then shot in the face multiple times by Buzz. The monstrosity of Tommy's homosexuality identity, and the homosexual subculture he characterizes, is manifested as of a form of illicit or counterfeit masculinity. A homosexual who rapes women, Tommy not only embodies the paranoid fear of encroachment, but also blurs the rigid structures of masculine desire identity on which Ellroy's revisionist history of American heroism is founded. The nature of the violence – emptying a 'full clip' into Tommy's face – thus operates as form of figurative erasure. Indeed, the frenzied and illegal corrective measures perpetrated by Meeks and Jackson are seemingly framed as justifiable by the extreme classifications of 'otherness' that the novel presents. The homosexual panic driving Meeks and Jackson thus serves as a disciplinary mechanism that regulates the parameters of maleness. Nonetheless, in an effort to demarcate the constraints and sanctity of male desire, the fear and brutality that accentuates the terrified acts of Ellroy's cops reveals only the precariousness of such constructions. As Megan Abbott suggests, what we see is not so much a 'constitutive binary' but a 'house-of-cards masculinity', one built on a 'ritual transformation of every "other" element into a contagion to be avoided' (54).

Indeed, it is ultimately these anxieties regarding legitimacy, hermeticism and contagion – anxieties borne out of an inability to establish clear boundaries between intense homosocial bonds and latent homosexual desires - that plague Dudley Smith's subjectivity throughout the text, catalysing his progressive disempowerment. What begins with the breakdown of Smith's relationships with various women – such as Claire De Haven and Joan Conville – ultimately culminates in his betrayal at the hands of perceived ally and Sinarquista chief Salvador Abascal. Unbeknownst to Smith, Abascal has taken control of his slave and drug peddling operations, instead using the trucks to plant fascist insurgents on the U.S mainland. Betrayed and exiled, Smith's loss of agency coincides with the proliferation of rumours regarding his 'effete eye for callow young men' and becomes physically manifested

in images of extreme bodily depletion: 'He'd lost weight. His trousers hung slack. He stood two days awake' (514, 533).

This progressive divestment of Dudley's masculine authority reaches its apotheosis in Chapter 118 of the text, when Smith adversary, Kay Lake, circulates a pseudo 'scandal rag' – *The El Lay Lowdown*, 'All the news that's *unfit* to print' – that, amongst other 'Hollywood dirt' and 'Police Blotter' features, discloses the details of Dudley's homosexual assignation: 'Peeper 69's put his paws on the pulse of history. He knows *allllll* about the perv party at the Maestro's manse in the winter of 39. *She* was really a *He*, and who blames D.S for taking ultimate umbrage? Thank heavens M.B & fellow cop D.C cleaned up the mess' (518).

Although the tract makes reference to the loyalty of longstanding Smith allies Mike Breuning and Dick Carlisle, rumours of Smith's ambiguous sexuality eventually erode even these allegiances. Indeed, towards the denouement of the text, Breuning catches the 'snitch virus', spilling details of all Smith's criminal machinations to dubious FBI agent Ed Satterlee (505). Breuning's panicked motivation for snitching is framed as a consequence of Dudley's loss of masculine influence over LA's symbolic landscape, a decline and attendant exiling that is undercut by Smith's disruption of the fragile borders of male desire. As Breuning deliriously reveals: 'He's hooked on Bazedrine and opium. He's geezing morphine but he thinks nobody knows. Bill Parker's checkmating him. He's gone full-fledged Nazi. He parades around in Nazi uniforms and preens like a fruit [. . .] He's in with Sinarquista hump Salvy Abascal, who's playing him like he's the village idiot [. . .] I'll depose, Ed. I'll give Dudley up' (505).

With Mike Breuning turning snitch and Ashida interned at Manzanar for the murder of Pimentel, Smith's loss of masculine power encourages long term adversaries Buzz Meeks and Elmer Jackson to attempt an impromptu assassination.<sup>5</sup> Having followed Chuckie Duquesne – a homosexual sax player implicated in the *Klubhaus* murders – to an unlicensed

LA bar, Meeks and Jackson are surprised by the unexpected yet opportune appearance of Dudley Smith (there himself to kill Chuckie in order to prevent the truth of the murders being exposed). Unbeknownst to Smith, also present is Ashida, recently sprung from Manzanar to assist in the *Klubhaus* case. This confluence of mixed motivations, fraught allegiances and cross-ideological purposes culminates in a frenzied shootout, where, in an attempt to murder Smith, Jackson accidentally shoots Ashida as he jumps to protect his Irish comrade:

Elmer braced his gun hand and aimed real careful now. He triggered in on Dudley Smith and squeezed off two perfect shots. He caught a blur simultaneous. He saw Ashida's coat. He blew Ashida up against Dudley. They toppled bar stools and crashed to the floor, all tangled up. Elmer screamed. Buzz crashed tables and ran to the bar.

[...] The whole room screamed. Elmer screamed over it. He kicked screamers out of the way and pushed to the bar. Ashida's suit coat was powder scorched and tattered. He'd bled up the floor. Dudley sobbed and held him tight (567).

Whilst Ashida's self-sacrifice is principally an act of romantic love, it is recircuited into the realm of the fraternal through its expression of a specific form of nostalgic masculinity. Like the homophobic violence that abounds in *This Storm*, the heroism that codifies Ashida's sacrifice operates to assuage the frictions that arise from the text's otherwise unstable renderings of masculine identity and masculine desire, whilst simultaneously permitting Smith's reintegration into the text's symbolic, masculine order. This is indicated by the LA *Herald Express* news article following the shootout, where the 'truth' of the event is precluded by a sensationalist narrative of police gallantry in which Smith is described as a 'legendary policemen' and 'hero cop' (568).

The demise of Ashida is indicative of a broader pattern of attempted cleansing in relation to 'queenrness' that permeates the narrative. It is no coincidence that the majority of

the central characters killed or murdered in *This Storm* - Ashida, Tommy Glennon, Juan Pimentel, Chuckie Duquesne and Officers Wendell Rice and George Kapek – are in some way complicit and/or implicated in homosexual conspiracies. The *Klubhaus* in particular, and the ‘organically homosexual and homosexually spawned’ crimes committed therein, becomes a totemic embodiment of the various forms of political, ideological and sexual transgression that permeate the fraught textual landscape of *This Storm*, a liminal space that ruptures the societal fabric but is ultimately suppressed and re-contained by the penalising structures of nostalgic masculinity (502).

Despite such attempts to definitively catalogue and circumscribe the threat of homosexuality, *This Storm* still anxiously plays out what Josh Meyer describes as the limits of ‘typology’ as a discourse of criminal classification. In his reading of *The Big Nowhere*, Meyer argues that the novel’s ‘typological articulation of criminal identity’ is most profoundly registered in its ‘anti-communist rhetoric’, a rhetoric that becomes ‘consistently directed toward defining communism as a typological category and that takes as its central theme the ostensibly intrinsic relationship between communism and contagion’(40). In *This Storm*, these notions of contagion become similarly bound up not only with comparable yet more complex articulations of political and ideological insurrection (both fascist and communist), but with a correspondingly paranoid fear of homosexual encroachment. More specifically, Ellroy’s representation of homosexuality becomes preoccupied with ‘its threatening capacity to elude classification and control’, an anxiety typified by various illustrations of ‘homosocial betrayal’ in which ostensibly heterosexual men are exposed as otherwise (Meyer 40).

*This Storm* presents a paranoid rendering of wartime Los Angeles whereby the punitive topography of nostalgic masculinity becomes compositely ‘stitched into an ideological narrative of the nation-state (and state power)’ (Baker x). Within this, the climate

of intense male bonding that underscores Ellroy's world of cops, criminals and government agents is persistently and simultaneously marked by a paranoid anxiety regarding homosexual contagion, one borne out of the profoundly precarious boundary between two treacherously opposed yet utterly permeable circumscriptions of male sexual identity. Ellroy's representation of masculinity thus remains loaded with challenging tensions. Whilst *This Storm* ostensibly validates masculine power, continuing a pattern of confluence between criminality, contagion and otherness, the 'double bind' that defines these intense homosocial bonds raises broader questions about the deeper ideological manoeuvrings of Ellroy's work. Far from portraying a stable and hermetic structuring of 'nostalgic masculinity', the paranoia that accentuates the numerous rageful actions of Ellroy's policemen eventually reveals the brittleness and precarity of such identity categories. Ellroy's world may well be ruthlessly masculine, but it is one that is perpetually and concurrently grappling with its own perilous self-definition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The 'LA Quartet' is comprised of *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *LA Confidential* (1989) 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).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this essay I will be focusing solely on Ellroy's treatment of male homosexuality. Although female homosexuality is far less prominent in Ellroy's work, there is still a comparable association between lesbianism and deviance. This image of the 'predatory lesbian' is most perniciously manifested in the form of recurring characters Dot Rothstein – 'a sheriff's matron and grand bull dyke' – and Ruth Mildred Cressmeyer, an 'abortionist' and sexual pervert (Ellroy, *Perfidia* 38).

<sup>3</sup> Taveira's reading of Lenny Sands and Kemper Boyd in *American Tabloid* hints at these dynamics of homosocial bonding as well as the broader climate of homosexual panic in Ellroy's fiction. See Taveira (142).

<sup>4</sup> This moment of brutal punitive violence hearkens back to an interrogation scene in *Clandestine* (1982), where murder suspect Eddie Engels admits to being homosexual after he is severely beaten and tortured by Dudley and his 'goon squad' (146-175).

<sup>5</sup> Manzanar was a real-life concentration camp based in southern California used to intern Japanese-American citizens in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. The camp was open from December 1942 to 1945 and incarcerated some 120,000 people.

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