The Street Was Hers: Deconstructing the Hardboiled in Megan Abbott's Noir Fiction

Bio: *Nathan Ashman* is a Lecturer in Crime Writing at the University of East Anglia. He has previously held teaching posts at both the University of Surrey and the University of Gloucestershire. He is the author of *James Ellroy and Voyeur Fiction* (2018) and has published articles on writers such as Ross Macdonald, E.C Bentley and Don DeLillo. His research spans the fields of crime fiction, contemporary American fiction, and ecocriticism, with a particular specialism in the works of James Ellroy. He is currently in the early stages of a new research project examining the relationship between crime fiction and ecocriticism.

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In her critical study *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*, Megan Abbott offers a reconsideration of the archetypal "tough guy" figure, illustrating what she perceives as hardboiled masculinity's parasitic reliance on "the other" for its own preservation. Far from reproducing the macho violence of Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Abbott argues that most hardboiled heroes – particularly Chandler's Marlowe – are, in contrast, frequently characterised by a profound sense of "gender panic." For Abbott, this sense of "masculinity in crisis" underscores the broader strategies of paranoia, containment and control that typify such narratives and is most forcefully exhibited via the hardboiled hero's ambivalence towards the figure of the femme fatale (Abbott and Adams 398). In these texts, the hardboiled hero finds himself caught in an irreconcilable and vacillating double bind, one that is marked by a concurrent "fascination with - and fear of - the feminine" (Abbott and Adams 399). These oscillating tropes of desire and destruction epitomise a hardboiled logic that continually situates women as threatening seductresses, with the femme fatale emerging as the ultimate embodiment of the temptation/peril dichotomy. For John Scaggs, it is the femme fatale's antithesis to the private eye hero that marks her threat, as "she reverses the normal dialectic of tough surface and sensitive depth" that punctuates the private eye's chivalric, masculine code (77). In other words, it is the femme fatale's transgression of the boundaries of gender that precipitates what Abbott identifies as a profound sense of panic. Within the hardboiled novel's hermetic structuring of masculinity -- one entirely dependent on "remaining free from contagion" -- there is ultimately "no space for a woman who can volley masculine

and feminine signifiers" (Abbott 54). The reaffirmation of the hardboiled hero's identity thus derives from the defeat of the femme fatale and, by proxy, the threat that she embodies.

The warped gender politics underlying the hardboiled detective text are forcefully spotlighted and interrogated in Abbott's first two neo-noir novels *Die a Little* (2005) and *The Song Is You* (2007), as she repositions feminine identity, agency and subjectivity from the delimited margins to the narrative centre. Focusing on Abbott's nuanced and complex reinterpretation of previously "passive" categorisations of femininity -- such as the femme fatale and the voiceless victim -- this essay argues that Abbott actively shifts the dominant gaze of the genre, whilst explicitly spotlighting masculinity's subjugating dependence on femininity for its own definition. As a consequence, the "house of cards" that is hardboiled masculine identity is explicitly revealed in all its violent and paranoid glory. Ultimately, this essay will suggest that Abbott's work can not only be read as an active engagement with, and response to, the traditions of the hardboiled novel, but to her own literary criticism.

This awareness of the patriarchal determinations of the hardboiled novel is by no means a new strand in the study and writing of crime fiction. Indeed, in their book *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (1999), Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones identify a number of female writers -- such as Sarah Paretsky, Marcia Muller and Sue Grafton – who have "strategically redirected the masculinist trajectory of the American hard-boiled detective novel of the 1930's and 1940's to feminist ends" (4). In these texts, the investigative process does not just involve uncovering a particular crime, but the broader and more systemic "offenses in which the patriarchal power structure of contemporary society itself is potentially incriminated" (4). For Walton and Jones, the feminist impetus of such writing derives from the ambivalent relationship it strikes with the "literary tradition" of the hardboiled novel. Whilst drawing on the tropes of such narratives, these texts simultaneously endeavour to "establish the distinctive voice of an empowered female subject," a move that is both a "formal" and "political gesture" (4). In most cases, this entails deviating away from conventional representations of female characters, a process that is frequently enacted by situating the female protagonist as detective rather than threatening femme fatale. Heather Humann points to Sue Grafton's private eye Kinsey Milhone as an example of such self-conscious disruption, deliberately challenging "the traditional narrative that hard-boiled private investigators must be male" (64). By actively subverting a "hitherto male dominated genre" through active, tough-talking and politicised female detectives, the works of writers like Paretsky and Grafton are positioned to examine "a range of themes and ideas that are frequently marginalised in conventional crime fiction and patriarchal society more broadly" (Beyer 228).

Whilst this "second wave" of feminist crime writing – a term used by Walton and Jones to differentiate between women's crime writing that emerged out of the feminist politics of the 1960's and 1970's and that written during the 'golden age' of detective fiction - has been widely discussed in critical discourse, Abbott's work, by contrast, has received very little critical attention (1999 27). This is perhaps surprising considering Abbott's comparable preoccupation with articulations of feminine identity (even if the historical, neo-noir dimensions of her work do distinguish her from many of these writers). In a 2011 interview, Abbott describes how her early works were born out of an acute awareness that hardboiled detective novels "were heavily a world of men," a disparity that offered the potential to construct a series of narratives with "female characters who were not femme fatales (or not viewed as femme fatales and defined solely by their ability to entrap men)." Yet, rather than repositioning the female as detective, Abbott's work instead revisits the "destructively sexual world" of post-war Los Angeles, offering a re-examination and reframing of noir's entrenched and hierarchical gender politics from a uniquely "female purview" (Powell 179). Within this, Lee Horsley argues that Abbott's work oscillates around different representations of female identity "under pressure," not solely from "male treachery and violence but from their own ambition, vanity and destructive impulses" (38). In other words, Abbott's work provides a broader, more diverse spectrum of female identity and female agency, one that not only challenges the rigid binaries of "victim" and "seductress" that epitomises the gendered logic of hardboiled fiction, but that simultaneously exposes the extreme fragility of masculine identity more broadly.

"All These Lost Girls": *Die a Little* (2005)

The first of Abbott's early noir novels, *Die a Little* starkly spotlights the fraught duality of 1950's Hollywood, counterbalancing the superficial glamour of celebrity culture with a percolating underworld of exploitation, corruption and violence. The narrative centres around the relationship between respectable schoolteacher Lora King and her brother Bill, a straight-arrow junior investigator for the district attorney's office. Orphaned in late adolescence after their parents were killed in a car crash, the connection between brother and sister vacillates ambivalently between the wholesome and the insalubrious. Domiciled together since the accident, there is a quasi-libidinal intensity to the relationship that often threatens to transgress the boundaries of the familial. In an early section of the text, Lora recounts cutting Bill's hair with a potency and sensuality that certainly hints at a form of illicit desire; *Hours afterward, I would find slim, beaten gold bristles on my finger, my arms, no matter how careful I was. I'd*

blow them off my fingertips, one by one (2, italics in original). Diana Powell has similarly identified these "protective, incestuous" undercurrents within the text, an implicit hint of degradation that prefigures the recurrent patterns of duality and illegitimacy that will mark the text.

The equilibrium and domesticity of Lora and Bill's dynamic is violently disturbed when the latter falls for the mysterious and seductive Alice Steele, a former Hollywood costume seamstress with an indistinct past. As her name and appearance suggests, Alice epitomises the dialectic of soft exterior and hard centre that John Scaggs identifies as symptomatic of the femme fatale. This opposition is starkly projected when Lora spies, late at night, on the unknowing Alice as she flips through a King family photo album:

> I slide my robe on and make my way to the door. Opening it delicately, and walking down the hall, I see one of the living room lights on. As I move closer, I realize it is only Alice after all. Her legs tucked beneath her on a wing chair, she is paging through one of our thick old family photo albums.
>
> I am about to turn around and head back, not wanting to disturb her, but as I do, my eyes play a funny trick.
>
> I stop suddenly at the archway and find myself stifling a tight gasp. Under the harsh lamp, in sharp contrast to the dark room, her eyes look strangely eaten through. The eyes of a death mask, rotting behind the gleaming facade. A trick of light somehow-- (Abbott 17)

The "dialectic of opposites" that characterises both the femme fatale -- and the aesthetics of noir more generally -- is vividly actualised here through counterbalancing images of light and dark (Brook 105). Spotlighted by the "harsh lamp," the boundaries of Alice's corporeality are disturbed and unfixed by an uncanny merging of surface and depth. The haunting "death mask," an aberration usually concealed beneath "a pretty Alice-smile," haemorrhages to the surface, distorting Alice's face into a kind of gothic palimpsest. This blurred separation between "gleaming façade" and "rotting" foundation typifies the oscillating paradigms of seduction and death that underscore the traditions of the femme fatale paradigm, as well as the "more general divisions" between the superficial surface reality and the threatening underworld of Los Angeles, a theme that Scaggs argues is central to the "hardboiled world" (77).

Whilst foreshadowing her threat, the extent to which Alice Steele represents a transgressive incarnation of female identity, one that challenges the traditional gender hierarchies of the genre, is perhaps questionable here. Indeed, although conceding that the "strength and dynamism" of such flawed neo-noir "anti-heroes" continue to endure and fascinate, Lee Horsley argues that Abbott's somewhat customary re-articulation of the femme

fatale paradigm actually risks "fuelling the most negative stereotypes" (38). Yet, as Diana Powell suggests, as much as Alice "awakens Bill sexually" and "fulfils his fantasy of rescuing her," the typical power dynamics of the femme fatale narrative are simultaneously subverted via the equally rousing impact that Alice has upon Lora. This is indicative of Abbott's conscious repositioning of female identity from the margins of the hardboiled text to the narrative centre, as Bill's relationship with Alice becomes peripheral to Lora's own wavering attraction to, and distrust of, her sister-in-law. Nauseated by the lewdness and immorality she perceives bubbling underneath Alice's poised surface, Lora cannot help being equally magnetised by her enigmatic sexuality: "There was a glamour to her, in her unconventional beauty, in her faintly red-rimmed eyes and the bristly, inky lashes sparking out of them…She had no curves. She was barely a woman at all, and yet she seemed so hopelessly feminine" (10).

Lora's ambivalence towards Alice magnifies as the latter becomes progressively entrenched in her personal and professional life. After Alice takes a job teaching home economics at the same school as Lora, her poised, orchestrated persona begins to slip. Despite seeming "very present" in her classes, Alice's animation and enthusiasm is belied by an absent "faraway look in her eyes," a "slick, silver" nothingness "just hanging there, unfixed" (40). Lora's suspicion is further compounded by the sudden and then regular presence of Alice's "old friend" Lois Slattery, "a professional extra and sometimes dancer," who Alice claims to have met whilst she worked as a costume seamstress. With her "eternally blood shot eye" and general "dishevelled beauty," Lois emanates a sense of desecration and loss that further punctures Alice's veneer of respectability and domesticity. Yet, as Lora becomes increasingly obsessed with uncovering Alice's sordid past, the inviolability of her previously "unpolluted" life slowly begins to rupture. Lora's overpowering attraction to Alice's darkness, and indeed, the corrupt, violent underbelly of post-war Los Angeles, is further intensified by her relationship with Hollywood fixer Mike Standish. A precursor to Abbott's protagonist Gil "Hop" Hopkins in *The Song Is You*, Standish is employed by Hollywood studios to bury and distort details of celebrities' salacious private lives. An embodiment of the stark duality of Hollywood, Standish further exposes Lora to the seedy underworld of the Los Angeles dream factory. Yet, rather than being seduced, exploited and corrupted by Standish – as Alice intended – Lora remains emotionally disconnected from their sexual dalliances, even when faced with signs of Mike's philandering. On discovering lipstick stains on his soiled sheets, she queries:

> "Is that the usual routine?" I say, walking toward the centre of the room, then turning and facing him again.
> "Not always, but with you…." He smiles suddenly and, head still tilted against the wall, he twists around to catch my gaze. "Aren't I a bastard? Or maybe I'm a powder puff. You see, Lora King, turns out I'm surprising myself this time. Turns out I'm disappointed how little you care."
> I find myself offering a sharp giggle of shock.
> "Hard-boiled." He winces.
> Covering my mouth, I concede, "You're rotten,", before letting my smile spread, blowing smoke. I run the tip of my thumb along my lower lip, brushing away a stay wisp of tobacco (Abbott 2005, 99).

Having previously pegged her as a "finger pointer, or a hysteric," Standish is discombobulated by Lora's seeming indifference to the discovery of his promiscuity (98). Describing her as "hard-boiled," Lora transgresses the role of vulnerable victim whilst discovering her own sexual power. As Diana Powell suggests, Lora's "curiosity leads to her own self-discovery: her 'giggle of shock' brings an awareness of her own dark pleasure" (168). Such "hardboiled femininity" operates to subvert noir fiction's typical positioning of women as "sexual objects, domestic nurturers and vulnerable figures in need of a chivalrous male rescuer" (Smith 2000, 153). This marks a key moment in Lora's transition into amateur investigator and pseudo-fixer. Indeed, it is her active "detachment" from Standish's duplicity that, Powell argues, "accompanies her birth into this dark underworld through which she can save her brother by understanding the darkness and using it to her own advantage" (168).

Lora's desire to protect her brother from the tendrillic clutches of Alice and the underworld escalates exponentially after the mutilated body of Lois Slattery is discovered dumped in Bronson Canyon. Deliberately disfigured in an attempt to preclude identification, Lois's body nonetheless becomes the catalyst for Lora's unravelling of a dark network of corruption, prostitution and murder. With the help of Standish, Lora discovers that Alice had previously worked for a pimp called Joe Avalon, both servicing clients and using her reputation as "the girl with tape" to recruit disaffected or struggling actresses, anyone she "thought would sell" (182). One client of Avalon's is Hollywood producer Walter Schor, a violent and powerful sexual deviant with a penchant for violence. Schor's predilection for the extreme has been experienced first-hand by Alice, who was once hospitalized after a night of severe sexual savagery. It is therefore unsurprising when Schor is revealed to be the murderer of Lois Slattery, whom he beat and brutalised before eventually leaving her to drown in his pool. Alice's role in the murder and cover up is more ambiguous. Although marrying Bill

emancipates her from a life of enforced prostitution, she continues to act as an adjunct pimp to Joe Avalon, selling and profiting from Lois's services. Although she doesn't directly participate in Lois's death, she helps Avalon dispose of the body and cover up the murder.

The powerful and sadistic Schor prefigures a pattern of Hollywood exploitation that continues into *The Song Is You* in the form of celebrity dance duo Marv Sutton and Gene Merrel. In both cases, the stark duplicity of these public figures forcefully spotlights the power of cultural spectacle to obscure and hypnotise, as the "superficial fantasy world" of Los Angeles is juxtaposed against "its gloomier, dissolute counterpart – the underworld" (Ashman 19). Through these and other counterfeit figures such as Standish, Abbott exposes the corrupt and fabricated history of Los Angeles, one built upon the brutal effacement and systematic disposal of female bodies. The underlying and destructive misogyny of various institutions of power ensures the maintenance of these public personas at the cost of innumerable "lost girls" (228). Although Lois conforms to this pattern of delimitation, Lora's perception of Alice as a similarly tragic victim of circumstance is altered as the narrative reaches the denouement. Driving to confront Alice, Lora admits: "*Once I thought she was trying to escape the darkness, and she found rescue in Bill. Now I know that she wanted both. She liked the double life. It kept her alive"* (219, italics in original). Although Alice is given the opportunity to "escape" the darkness through her marriage to Bill, Lora recognises that a conventional suburban life would not be enough to satisfy her sister-in-law's murkier cravings. Abbott knowingly positions Alice on the indeterminate boundary between traditional feminine binaries, exposing the "fine line between contaminating femme fatale" and "the good girl" (Abbott 2002, 54). This is symptomatic of Alice's ability to "volley" competing signifiers throughout the narrative, continually oscillating between oppositions such as seductress/wife, friend/enemy, light/dark.

Yet, this blurring, and thus deconstruction, of binaries of femininity similarly applies to Lora. Indeed, in a farewell letter near the finale of the text, Alice recognises this same sense of paradox and equivalent penchant for darkness percolating beneath Lora's projected piety:

> I guess I can tell you now: I started working you right away. I knew what I was up against. I was careful how dark my lipstick was, how low I'd wear my neckline, how I hung the drapes, made the dinner, danced with him at parties, and looked at him across rooms.…
>
> But then I saw that you liked my dark edges. Here was the surprise long after anyone could surprise me. You liked it.
>
> You like the voile nightgown you saw in my closet, touched it with your milky fingers and asked me where I'd gotten it. When I bought you one of your own, your face steamed baby pink, but you wore it. I knew you'd wear it (236-7).

The dynamic between Lora and Alice -- as depicted here -- is permeated with images of seduction and corruption. Expecting to have to indulge her sister-in-law's expectations of propriety, Alice is surprised to discover that it is her "darker edges" that captivate and intrigue Lora. Alice's predatory manipulation is juxtaposed against Lora's "baby pink" face and "milky fingers," images of virtue that vividly emphasise Lora's spectacular shift towards the underworld over the course of the text. Indeed, ultimately it is Lora's recognition and embracement of her darker potentialities that allow her to reclaim Bill not only from Alice's destructive clutches, but from potential ruin. Knowing that Alice intends to flee Los Angeles with Bill – only after he helps her frame Joe Avalon for murder and bribe a potential witness -- Lora gambles on the belief that their sibling love is stronger than Bill's commitment to Alice. After a phone call to Bill where she elliptically implies that she is being threatened and abused by Mike Standish, Lora throws herself down her apartment stairwell, only to drag herself back upstairs to maintain the impression of a brutal, domestic attack. Bill does indeed return to rescue Lora, ultimately leaving Alice to face the violent retributions of Joe Avalon.

As Powell suggests, Lora's devious actions towards the end of the narrative reveal the "extent to which she has become hardboiled" (168). Disposing of Alice Steele and framing Mike Standish in the process, Lora must, ironically, channel her own "steel" to purge the corrupted facets of her and Bill's life. Lora ultimately finds empowerment and agency through touching the darkness, even if the other female characters are left faceless and lost. After being released from hospital, Lora searches for news of the missing Alice at the Los Angeles public library. Whilst trawling through newspapers articles, she is confronted with endless "stories of mutilated starlets, scorched bodies, pregnant suicides, lost girls leaping, falling, and being pushed, strangled, shot stabbed, and set in flames" (239). Buried in the archives of the library, the forgotten narratives of these "lost girls" potently illustrate the perverse cycle of sensationalism and disregard that characterises the brutalisation and disposal of female bodies. Found dead in a ravine, Alice becomes just another of these unidentified women, her face "faded away, erased by water" (239). Indeed, although Abbott's female protagonists ultimately resist the "conventions of gender, genre and the vengeful propensities of the past," they are still victim to the misogynistic imperatives of post-war Los Angeles. This ambivalence is symptomatic of Abbott's work more broadly and is further compounded by the uncertainty that surrounds the end of the narrative. Although Lora is able to prevent her brother's downfall, the means via which this is achieved represent what Powell describes as an "unsettling, false and fragile compromise" (169). This is validated by the sense of haunting that permeates the final

pages of the narrative, as Lora recalls an exchange with Alice "months before, before everything..." (240). Leading Lora to a back alley, she asserts:

> "It's okay. You don't have to pretend with me"
> "Pretend what?"
> "That you don't like it. All of it and more still. Darker still.
> […]
> "You don't have to talk about it, but it's something we both have, Lora. It's something we've both got" (241).

Rather than being diametrically opposed, Lora is faced with the stark parity between herself and Alice. Whilst Abbott initially sets up the narrative as a contest between two fixed and contradictory binaries of female identity (angel/whore), over the course of the text such determinations are revealed as unhinged and violable. Ultimately, dualities such as good/evil and victim/seductress become difficult to distinguish, as Lora embraces the darkness to restore the equilibrium of her relationship with Bill. The final page of the text reveals Lora's inability to accept her own iniquity, asserting multiple times: "*I don't have it in me, I don't have it in me*" (italics in original). Defeating Alice is ultimately scant victory, as the awakened Lora must live with the psychic consequences of her immoral actions.

"She Had Whole Other Stories to Tell": *The Song Is You* (2007)

The Song Is You offers a fictionalisation of the real life 1949 disappearance of movie "starlet" Jean Spangler, a case that is often compared to the similarly high-profile murder of aspiring actress Elizabeth Short (aka "The Black Dahlia"). Indeed, Diana Powell argues that this marks a conscious striving by Abbott to create a tie not only "directly to noir," but to "the Black Dahlia's chronicler James Ellroy" (169). Abbott herself has regularly cited Ellroy as a "tremendous influence" on her early work and this can certainly be seen in her comparable examination of a dark and destructive underworld percolating beneath the superficial glitz of post-war Los Angeles's phantasmagoric and sycophantic celebrity culture (Godfrey). Our conduit to this world in *The Song Is You* is reporter turned Hollywood fixer Gil "Hop" Hopkins, a slick-talking "fireman" paid by movie execs to disguise, fabricate and repress details of stars' salacious private lives to maintain their public image (Abbott 29). Yet, Hop's ascent within the Hollywood studios is built upon the rotten foundations of the Jean Spangler case, a suspected murder he helped bury by ensuring "that a few names never found their way into the papers or to the police" (39). Hop's complicity in the disappearance resurfaces when – two years after

the event – he is confronted and extorted by an actress named Iolene, who accuses Hop of concealing evidence related to the case to protect the reputation of certain implicated celebrities. It is subsequently revealed that Hop was in attendance on the evening of Spangler's disappearance, having accompanied the actress and friend Iolene on a booze-fuelled night out at the "Eight Ball, a sweat-on-the-walls roadhouse in a dark stretch of nowhere just east of civilization" (32). After Hop later disappeared with a "burlesque blonde" in tow, the two women were left alone with "Hollywood's premier song and dance duo" Marv Sutton and Gene Merrel, celebrity superstars rumoured to have a disturbing predilection for sexual violence (33). As the night became increasingly debauched, Iolene reveals that Jean eventually disappeared with Sutton and Merrel, never to be seen again. Despite Hop's insistence that neither he or Iolene should feel complicit in, or guilty about, Jean's suspected death, Iolene blames him not only for leaving them in the clutches of the warped movie stars, but for subsequently ensuring that neither of the men was named as a suspect in the ensuing inquiry.

Hop ultimately undertakes his own private investigation, one driven less by the desire to attain justice for Jean and more by the fear of professional and criminal reprisals should the true details of the case be revealed. This pressure to tie up any loose ends is escalated by the presence of reporter Frannie Adair, who, piqued by Hop's sudden interest in a seemingly dead-end case, resumes her own search into the events surrounding Spangler's disappearance. Through his investigation, Hop is gradually exposed to the profound ambivalence that marks hardboiled masculinity, a revolving door of desire and revulsion that becomes markedly expressed in instances of violence and sexual rage. At the most extreme end of this scale are movie stars Gene Merrel and Marv Sutton, whose wholesome on-screen image conceals a warped history of psychopathy and sadistic sexual violence. The vicious duality of both men becomes connected to the "schizophrenic nature" of Abbott's Los Angeles more broadly, a "double rendering of hallucinatory commodity spectacles counterbalanced by an underworld of death and exploitation driven by urban power" (Ashman 19).The falsity of Los Angeles's cinematic reality is vividly projected when Hop tries to conjure an image of Gene Merrel's beatific "on-screen face" in his mind, only for the "flickering movie image" to blur, darken and transmute into "something else," something "he didn't want to think about" (128).

Whilst Hop is revolted and disturbed by the sexual deviancy of Merrel and Sutton, he is nonetheless forced to confront his own complicity, not only in the concealment of such brutality, but in the sustainment and normalisation of misogynist violence more broadly. Indeed, Diana Powell recognises this desire to destroy and physically mark women as a recurrent pattern that punctuates Abbott's narrative. Specifically, she points to the media's

handling of the Spangler case, arguing that they "lose interest in her once she is labelled a mistress to one of Mickey Cohen's hoodlums" (171). The implication here is that Spangler's disappearance is less commercially viable for the tabloids when the "sex angle" is disregarded, particularly as there is "no body, and thus no signs of torture to titillate" (171). And, despite Hop's attempt to differentiate himself from Merrel and Sutton -- to reaffirm his assertion that he is "not that guy" -- his own paranoid and panic-stricken masculine rage is incrementally revealed over the course of the text (Abbott 137). This escalation is foregrounded in one of the early sections of the narrative, as Hop attempts to frame his relentless desire for women via a logic that flirts dangerously and disturbingly with notions of culpability and blame:

> Really, if they're going to wear those darted sweaters tucked tight into those long fitted skirts cradling heart-shaped asses, skirts so tight they swivelled when they walked in them, clack-clack-clacking away down the hall, full aware – *with full intention* – that he was watching, even as his face betrayed nothing, not a rough twitch or a faint hint of saliva on his decidedly not-trembling lip. It wasn't he who was *unusual*, so lust-filled or insatiable. It was they who packaged themselves up so pertly for utmost oomph, for him alone, really, even if they hadn't met him yet when they slid on their treacherous gossamer stockings that morning, even if they hadn't known why they had straightened the seams on their blouses so they'd hang in perfectly sharp arrows down their waiting, waiting breasts (Abbott 70, italics in original).

Here Abbott depicts the devastatingly destructive operation of the male gaze, where "woman as icon" is displayed for the pleasure and enjoyment of men, "the active controllers of the look" (Mulvey 13). Perceived by Hop in atomised parts, the female body is fragmented, dislocated and disarticulated by the fetishistic directives of the subjugating gaze, one that renders it both passive and silent. As Lilly Pâquet suggests, these notions of "dismemberment" and "silence" connect "the theory of the gaze to crime fiction" in specific and disturbing ways, as "women are often more than just symbolically dismembered and silenced" (133). The association between the gaze and violence is significant here, as implicitly layered into Hop's appraisal of his helpless (and blameless) masculine desire is an oscillating paradigm of attraction and revulsion towards such ungoverned female sexuality. Whilst ostensibly an appreciation of the female form, the passage is saturated with hostile and aggressive language -- "sharp arrows," "rough twitch," "treacherous," "trembling" -- that lend it an underlying sense of contradiction. For Abbott, such ambivalence is symptomatic of the hardboiled hero more broadly, constantly caught between shifting desires of "fascination" and "fear" (Abbott and Adams 399). Imbedded and perceptible in Hop's language is the implication that men cannot be blamed for their actions – sexual or violent -- in the face of this dangerously alluring and knowing femininity.

Indeed, as Hop uncovers more about the sordid circumstances surrounding Spangler's disappearance, his identification with the sexual violence of Merrel and Sutton becomes progressively and alarmingly pronounced. This is evidenced after a chance meeting with Sutton, where, despite being once again revulsed and disturbed by the starlet's behaviour towards a young waitress (telling Hop that he intends to "fuck her blind"), Hop proceeds to engage in a violently energised sexual assignation of his own with the waitress's companion. Initially intending to slide his hand "around the back of her neck," Hop describes how -- as if out of his control -- he "saw his hand cover her face, the heel of his hand on her bright red mouth." Half wondering "why he was doing it" before "for[getting] to care," Hop proceeds to knock the girl's head "hard against the wall," eliciting a "sharp, excited little noise" (126). Hop's sexual aggression here is strikingly imitative of the language used to describe his encounter with Jean Spangler near the beginning of the text. Hop recalls how "it was her voice that purred and snapped and stuck in his head most ferociously, making him sick with random desire, making him want to do something foul, unmentionable, unarticulated, ugly. How he'd like to fuck her into oblivion. But someone beat him to it" (3). Notwithstanding the sadistic mutilations of Sutton and Merrel, it is via these expressions of Hop's misogynistic rage that Abbott's engagement with a broader "masculine urge to destroy the feminine" becomes most apparent (Powell 171). Rather than something immutable and controlled, Abbott exposes masculinity as a pointedly paranoid and "hysterical structure," one that displaces "its own anxieties onto an undefined, empty femininity" (Abbott 2002, 30).

Yet, whilst Abbott's depiction of Hop reaffirms the shaky, parasitic structure of hardboiled masculinity, her representation of female identity is far from a one note emulation of the seductive, dangerous femme fatale. Indeed, the female characters that pose the most threat to Hop's subjectivity are those that fall outside of the traditional "seductress" paradigm. Both reporter Frannie Adair and ex-wife Midge, in particular, are able to see through the fragile veneer that Hop projects, whilst exhibiting an autonomy and agency that threatens to destroy the career and identity he has forged. The menace posed by femininity thus derives not from "beauty and eroticism," but from "the way that [it] establishes rule over men by utilizing the apparently 'masculine' qualities of power and authority" (Sully 57). This proves to be the case with Spangler, who, although ostensibly cast in the role of victim and "whore," becomes representative of the immense pressure exerted upon female identity by the misogynistic, patriarchal structures of Los Angeles and Hollywood film. As the narrative proceeds, Hop's conflicted attempts to both solve and quash the Spangler case lead him to uncover a festering underworld of racketeering, corruption and death.

After implicitly revealing his connection to the Spangler case to reporter Frannie Adair during a booze fuelled breakdown, Hop grows increasingly anxious that she will uncover his direct involvement in the suppression of evidence. He subsequently begins tailing Adair, only to be led to the familiar apartment of "Miss Hotcha," the burlesque blonde he spent the night with on the evening Spangler disappeared. Hop quickly realises that the blonde is actually Jean's cousin – Peggy – who reveals that Jean and Iolene had been running an extortion racket surreptitiously subsidised by a Mickey Cohen "goon" called Davy Ogul. This involved Jean seducing celebrities and executives whilst Iolene secretly snapped compromising smut pics. Peggy later directs Hop to Iolene's secret hideaway, where he not only discovers a cryptic file tab marked "Dr Stillman," but also Iolene's decomposing corpse with a bullet wound in the temple. The Stillman clue ultimately implicates Hop's ex-wife Midge, who had once worked at Stillman's underground "celebrity" abortion clinic (with Spangler) prior to meeting Hop. Whilst only employed for a short time, Spangler had used her friendship with Midge to swipe medical files from the cabinet to facilitate her and Iolene's extortion scheme.

Although Adair ultimately abandons the case after surmising that Iolene and Jean were whacked by Mickey Cohen for getting "greedy," Hop's trail leads him to Merry Lake, a rural, scenic getaway overlooking a "shimmering" vista of water (210). In a deliberate reversal of Chandler's, *The Lady in the Lake* – where the idyllic rural landscape of "Puma Lake" is corrupted by brutalised bodies (women, in both cases) – the solitude and tranquillity of "Merry Lake" is the site of Jean Spangler's resurrection. Able to flee the merciless clutches of Merrel and Sutton, Spangler's reappearance at the denouement of the narrative consciously reverses the traditional "voicelessness" of the female victim (Messent 89). Indeed, Abbott's focus on the existence of "other" narratives and "other" voices -- ones that operate against the hegemonic logic of hardboiled masculinity -- is foreshadowed earlier in the text, when Midge tells Hop: "You think Jean was just another starlet grifting her way down. But she had whole other stories to tell. They all do" (201). The implication here is unambiguous, as Abbott underscores the importance of recognising spectrums and nuances of female identity that operate outside of the rigid binaries of "dangerous seductress" and the "voiceless victim." Indeed, Spangler's account of her attack and subsequent escape problematises this very opposition, whilst vividly actualising a ruthless world of patriarchal violence that renders such patterns of femininity less distinct and less inviolable. No longer a disembodied image on to which fantasies of male lust and rage can be projected, Jean is given the opportunity to take control of her own narrative, a narrative that counters, disrupts and challenges Hop's masculine paradigm.

After being confronted by Hop, Jean attempts to explain her version of events, one that contests Hop's tale of seduction, manipulation and promiscuity:

> "I was a fine mother, Mr Hopkins – sure, I remember your name. I was a fine mother who got pulled into something rotten and didn't want to put my little girl into danger for it."
>
> "Pulled in, eh? Is that how you frame it? You know, when you fall into the blackmail racket, you're not falling. You're jumping. Those were some rough boys you were mixed up with. But I didn't see you kicking and screaming."
>
> "What are you talking about?"
>
> "You knew what you were doing, didn't you, doll?" Since when did he call women "doll"? He didn't like the sound of his voice, wasn't even sure what it was, but he couldn't stop. It flew out at sharp angles, shards whizzing through the air. "The biggest stars in town. And ready for a dance with you. You were seeing dollar signs all the way to the back room of the Red Lily."
>
> "That's what you think", she said, with nary a flinch.
>
> "Yes," he replied, watching her, looking.
>
> "You know all about it, huh?"
>
> "I know enough."
>
> "You don't know anything," she said quietly. (Abbott, 217-218)

Faced with a narrative that dislocates his preconceived configuration of Jean as dangerous femme fatale turned mutilated victim, Hop begins ventriloquising the hardboiled vernacular of the noir private eye. Yet, Hop's appropriation of this language is represented as entirely out of his control, something almost spectral that inhabits and then flies out of him at "sharp angles." This seeming loss of linguistic authority is in fact, on the contrary, demonstrative of Hop's attempts to reassert jurisdiction over the narrative. The story that Hop constructs repositions Jean as a stereotypical seductress, a fast "doll" blinded by "dollar signs" who ultimately got in too deep with "some rough boys." In the process, Hop's uncontrollable espousal of this hardboiled dialect becomes a composite part of his reassertion of a masculine identity. As Krutnik suggests, the "masculinisation of language" is one of the key facets of the hardboiled style, a linguistic "weapon" that is "often more a measure of the hero's prowess than the use of guns and other more tangible aids to violence" (43). Yet, having already been brutalised and physically scarred by the masculine rage of Merrel and Sutton – who quite literally carve "DEAD WHORE" on to her navel -- Jean refuses to succumb to Hop's linguistic violence, to his similar attempts to inscribe her body. Through crushing Hop's protests and telling her own story, it becomes demonstrably evident that Jean is neither "victim" or "perpetrator," "angel" or "whore" (Abbott 171). These rigid determinations of identity are not applicable in a toxic, misogynistic post-war culture.

Whilst Jean escapes being reduced to a "voiceless victim," the finale of *The Song Is You* reaffirms the cyclicality of a depraved and destructive Hollywood machine that consistently makes "women disappear" (Powell 172). The novel ends with Hop being approached for help -- once again -- by Barbara Payton, a down on her luck actress who had once "had it all" (237). Yet, with Payton's commercial appeal on the decline, Hop's obligation to the actress diminishes in tandem. Now just a "whore" whose luck "finally ran out" Hop repeats the pattern of abandonment that saw Spangler assaulted and almost killed at the hands of Merrel and Sutton. Whilst Payton eventually persuades Hop to "make some calls," her impending and inevitable disappearance is hauntingly foreshadowed via her reference to the "shadow life":

> Hop smiled and looked surreptitiously at his watch.
> "Do you ever feel like none of it's real, Hop? Like" – she moved forward in her chair, eyes still, behind the skein of red, jewel-blue – "like you're not real. Like I think maybe if I reached across the desk toward you, my hand would go right through you. I know it would. Do you ever feel like that?"
> "No," he said, surprised at his own abruptness. Suddenly, he felt like he'd do anything to get her out of his office. What did she mean, her hand would go right through him? What did it have to do with him? "Never. But I know a lot of stars do think about that. About the persona --
> "I'm not talking about that," she said. I'm talking about the shadow life. The life you're living instead. The life you're living because you can't fight yourself anymore. You're too goddamned tired to fight yourself anymore" (Abbott 240).

Hop mistakes Barbara's reference to his lack of corporality as a metaphor for the holographic reality of celebrity culture, where subjectivity becomes a mere extension of a world structured around commodity signs and cinematic simulacra. Instead, Barbara recognises Hop's, and her own, pervasion by the "shadow life," the seedy, corrupt underworld of the Hollywood machine that disregards, rejects and buries. Hop's complicity in facilitating these disappearances lends him his own shadow quality, a lack of definition or spectrality that is the price of knowing "where all the bodies are buried" (238).

Whilst Abbott refuses to negate the existence of a perniciously violent and misogynistic hardboiled world in *Die a Little* and *The Song Is You*, both texts emphasise the existence and importance of "other narratives" of female identity that fall outside the rigid binaries of victim and seductress. Victimhood still prevails, but Abbott deliberately shifts the dominant gaze of the genre to those who are under pressure from the patriarchal imperatives of post-war culture. This often materialises in images of duality, ones that become connected to the schizophrenic nature of Los Angeles's social and physical topography more broadly. In the process, Abbott

creatively explores her critical assumptions about the hardboiled hero, revealing masculinity as a paranoid and parasitic construction that forms a destructive reliance on the feminine for its very meaning and sustainment. Whilst drawing on the traditions of hardboiled fiction and film, Abbott's work actively interrogates and transgresses the assumptions of the form, revealing her as a new and important voice in contemporary crime fiction.

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