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37. John Belton, "Language, Oedipus, and *Chinatown*," *MLN* 106 (1991), 933–50.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 937.
40. Ibid., 944–45.
41. Ibid., 949.

Investigating the City – Detective Fiction as Urban Interpretation: Reply to M. Christine Boyer

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Recent rereadings of *Chinatown,* using the film as a metaphor for the act of urban interpretation, raise important questions about the subject positions that inform contemporary urban criticism.[1] Mike Davis, proposing *Chinatown*'s detective, Jake Gittes, as a model for investigating the hidden deals and invisible powers that continue to shape Los Angeles, initiated this discussion. In response, Rosalyn Deutsche has drawn attention to another aspect of the neo-noir genre: the unacknowledged but deeply gendered nature of its representations of urban space. Christine Boyer expands and deepens this critique. Without disagreeing with either Deutsche or Boyer, I would like to offer a slightly different reading of *Chinatown,* examining another distinct genre that also clearly informs *Chinatown:* the hard-boiled detective novel. By focusing exclusively on the noir and neo-noir modes of representation, Davis, Deutsche, and Boyer have ignored both the history and the contemporary discourse of the detective genre. In fact, detective fiction as a popular literary genre has produced a parallel discourse of urban interpretation, developed independently of academic urban studies. Historically linked with both urban reality and the urban imagination, the continuing evolution of the genre offers rich possibilities for rethinking the connections between subjectivity, interpretation, and urban space. Recent detective novels with gay, African-American, and female authors and characters suggest a multiplicity of new positions from which to investigate the city.

It is Walter Benjamin who has drawn attention to the emergence of the detective novel as a uniquely urban literary form,[2] noting that the process of detection is closely linked to the emergence of a city large enough

to obliterate the individual criminal's traces in its crowded streets. (The detective story first appeared in the early 1840s, with Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Mystery of Marie Roget.*) Benjamin sees the role of the detective as a successor to the amateur *flâneur* as a privileged observer and interpreter of the city. But unlike the *flâneur,* who derives his pleasures by skimming along the visible surfaces of the city, the detective's goal is to penetrate below the surface to discover the meanings hidden in the city's streets. The detective's unique access to these urban secrets allows him, like a psychoanalyst, to go beyond the purely visible to read the city's collective unconscious. Benjamin follows the detective story in the direction of high art. Tracing the influence Poe had on Baudelaire, he notes that Baudelaire eliminates the detective and his function (solving the crime), maintaining only the heightened and emotion-laden atmosphere that Poe evokes in describing the crime.

An equally important aspect of the detective novel, however, is its realistic representation of actual urban crimes. Poe retells these crimes in ways that highlight the cultural and social themes they embody. *The Mystery of Marie Roget,* for example, is based on the 1840 murder of Mary Rogers, a young New York woman. This crime electrified and obsessed the city much as the violent death of Nicole Simpson recently obsessed Los Angeles.[3] The story of Mary Rogers became a significant cultural event, a text that brought together discussions of female sexuality, social danger, and public safety in a rapidly changing city beset by social transformation and unparalleled cultural diversity. Like the Simpson case, with its narratives of domestic violence, racism, and celebrity in contemporary Los Angeles, the case of Mary Rogers turned private matters – previously considered outside of the purview of public discourse – into both newsworthy information and everyday conversation.

Thus, from its beginnings, the detective novel had a dual relationship to the city. On one hand, it produced literary interpretations that incorporated the mysteries of the urban condition; on the other, it opened up a popular social discourse by representing current concerns about urban life in an accessible fashion, allowing them to be widely and publicly discussed. Significantly, the figure of the female appears prominently in both discourses, inscribed as real and imaginary.

Published between 1930 and 1950, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles detective novels embodied both of these discourses, overturning the previous genre tradition of the genteel murder mystery.[4] By moving the setting from the drawing room to the streets, he created an alternative set of conventions. Instead of individual psychological motives, social and political corruption motivated the plot and characters. A new model of detection appeared in the character of Philip Marlowe, Chandler's classic hard-boiled private investigator. In Chandler's formula, crime is always doubly rooted: in the public sphere of economic and political corruption, and in the private world of family and sexual disturbances. As in Poe's stories, settings and crimes drawn from social reality were described with a hallucinatory intensity. Chandler's novels combined exaggeratedly tough prose ("lost town, shabby town, crook town . . . [with] women with faces of stale beer . . . [and] men with pulled-down hats") with a social landscape laid out with sharply critical realism. This produced a vision of Los Angeles so potent that, fifty years later, it has acquired the status of an official representation of the city. Several recent books devoted to discovering the "real" settings of Chandler's novels testify to the continued blurring between fiction and history.

As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, Chandler's view of Los Angeles is circular.[5] In Chandler's Los Angeles, already a centerless city where different classes were geographically separate, it was impossible to grasp the social structure as a whole. In this fragmented setting the detective became a privileged figure, moving between rich and poor, and, in the course of investigating a crime, linking the city's separate and isolated parts together. The detective alone could reveal the hidden patterns of the city, the invisible relationships that connect wealth to poverty. Only the detective could comprehend the city as a totality. Chandler's belief that wealth always originated in crime linked crime and corruption as the indissoluble bond between the mansion and the slum. *Farewell, My Lovely* established this familiar pattern, beginning in Florian's, a dive on Central Avenue, the main street of Los Angeles's black district, then moving to an apparently unrelated scene in the Grayle mansion in the exclusive suburb of Pacific Palisades. The plot of the novel operates to connect the two. However, if knowing both sides of town is necessary to

fully understand the city, their relationship was never equal. The urban slum was always cast as "other," providing necessary resolution but never existing as a place on its own, only as a counterpoint to the sites of wealth, power, and corruption that truly interested Chandler.

The ability to move comfortably between such disparate locales is the key to the detective's secret knowledge of the city. But, as Jameson shows, the detective's ability to mediate between rich and poor depends on his distance from both. Hard-boiled detectives such as Marlowe are never part of society, but float above it, disengaged from time and space. Unlike the families who hire him, Marlowe had no family. Although the mysteries he solved were rooted in the past, he, himself, had no past; and although the meaning of places was central to his detection, he lived a transient life and belonged to no place. His power was based solely in knowledge, founded in observation and description rather than lived experience. His gaze was always one-way; he described, but was never, himself, described. Claiming to know society as a whole, he did not stand for any genuine close-up experience of it.

Marlowe's unique mobility also gave him access to women from all social classes. Unlike the detective, however, these women were denied mobility – their positions were firmly fixed by their social and urban settings. In contrast to Marlowe – the active, self-created subject – they derived their identities from their fathers and husbands. Women who crossed social boundaries voluntarily, such as the Velma Valento/Mrs. Grayle character in *Farewell, My Lovely,* were punished for their violations. Velma's dramatic self-transformation from red-haired taxi dancer to blond socialite, clearly transgressive, could only have been achieved through crime. Yet, equally criminal behavior on the part of women who stayed in their place were, in Chandler's novels, rewarded with the detective's loyalty. Although, in the course of an investigation, Marlowe invariably uncovered evidence of pervasive public corruption, he never attempted to rectify such social evils. Instead, his resolutions always occurred in the private realm where his loyalties remained, shaped by the mingled impulses of male bonding, chivalry, and sexual desire. This clear separation between public crimes and individual solutions leaves the social order untouched.

Jake Gittes, the protagonist of *Chinatown,* is clearly modeled on Philip Marlowe. He occupies a similar seedy office and his tough and cynical persona masks an equally romantic self-image as a knight errant. *Chinatown,* however, strips the detective of any heroic qualities, revealing the delusions and inadequacies of the hard-boiled role. Jake is able to uncover the film's public crime, the water conspiracy, but incapable of comprehending the private crime of incest. This professional failure is clearly bound up with the gendered subjectivity of the detective's role. Unable to think outside of the accepted categories of petty crimes and sexual peccadilloes that are his stock in trade, Gittes continually misinterprets the nature of the crimes committed in the film. Simultaneously protector/rescuer and seducer/sexual predator, his own ambivalence toward the female protagonists further confuse his perceptions. His incomprehension leads to a double tragedy in which the innocent are killed and the perpetrator of both crimes triumphs. As the movie ends, Jake is handcuffed to a police car, while the police detective reminds him, "After all, it's Chinatown. . . ."

As Boyer notes, Chinatown itself plays an allegorical role in the film, representing the invisible city, neither knowable nor decipherable. Alluded to throughout the film, it becomes actual only as the setting for the final tragedy. In the hard-boiled tradition, the unknowable urban "other" is invariably represented as an ethnic slum. Anything can happen in Chinatown. The role of Chinatown conforms to Chandler's circular image of the city, where corruption connects the white ruling-class with the Asians, African-Americans, or Latinos who also inhabit the city. Deutsche and Boyer demonstrate that women constitute another, equally significant category of "otherness." Thus, Chinatown remains a mystery, a treacherous urban space that hard-boiled perception is incapable of comprehending. If, in *Farewell, My Lovely,* Philip Marlowe can still convincingly link South Central to Pacific Palisades, Jake Gittes is no longer able to do so. Although Los Angeles remains fragmented, the detective's knowledge can no longer bind it together into a single, comprehensible whole. At the same time, public and private acts, rather than existing in separate spheres, as the hard-boiled tradition would have it, are shown to be inextricably linked in urban space. This renders the

hard-boiled understanding of the city doubly impossible.

If *Chinatown* struck a strong blow at the pretensions of the male investigator of the city, the genre of detective fiction has continued the process. Over the past ten years, detective writing has developed far beyond the nostalgic sensibility of the neo-noir detective, which continually reinvokes its own fixed categories of interpretation. Interrogating itself, it has dismantled its own assumptions, producing new models of detection that offer a multiplicity of suggestions for new ways of investigating the city. Several contemporary writers have problematized the hard-boiled male role and its relationship to urban knowledge. Joseph Hansen introduced Dave Brandstetter, the first gay detective. Brandstetter's self-consciousness about his gay identity foregrounds the sexual subjectivity suppressed, or taken for granted, in conventional hard-boiled narratives. His always-present awareness of sexual identity and desire, instead of distorting his ability to solve crimes, as it does for Jake in *Chinatown,* actually sharpens his perceptions. This gives him the ability to go beyond a hard-boiled understanding to penetrate another layer of the city, one usually veiled by deceptive appearances.

If Marlowe, Gittes, and their successors are *on* the streets, many current detectives are *of* the streets. Walter Mosely's detective novels, set in Watts and South Central Los Angeles, completely invert Chandler's view of the city, placing its black residents at the center while leaving whites on the periphery. Refuting the detective's claim of understanding the totality of the city, Mosely delineates the boundaries of urban knowledge, recognizing the impossibility of the detective bridging the gap between the two separate realms of the city. For him, South Central or Chinatown can be understood only from the inside. Unlike Philip Marlowe, Mosely's protagonist, Easy Rawlins, is not a professional detective and is reluctantly forced into investigating. He acquires his knowledge not through questioning or intimidating strangers but through friendship and shared histories within a circumscribed community.

Other fictional sleuths challenge even the rationality of detection itself – the source of the male detective's power and knowledge. Romulus Ledbetter, the homeless protagonist of George Dawes Green's *The Caveman's Valentine,* successfully takes on the role of detective, although

he lives in a cave in Inwood Park and is beset by paranoid delusions. In a further overturning of genre convention, Ledbetter, who as a transient might be expected to resemble the hard-boiled detective in his lack of social attachment, in fact possesses a devoted middle-class family, who figure prominently in his life.

The most profound transformation of the genre, however, has come from the proliferation of female detectives. In current detective fiction, female writers and characters now outnumber males and dominate the field. This extensive sub-genre has generated a multiplicity of new types of detectives. Professional activities are no longer privileged: any woman can assume the role of detective; any social position, from welfare mother to First Lady, can constitute a vantage point from which to solve crimes and interpret the city and the world. Even the professional female detectives most closely tied to conventional formulas differ considerably from their hard-boiled colleagues. Their lives demonstrate the fluid boundaries between private and public and a far more complex and nuanced subjectivity than that of, say, Philip Marlowe. Female investigators such as Kinsey Milhone or V. I. Warshawski are not separate from society or distanced from everyday life. No longer confined to their offices, they appear in both private and professional settings, allowing the reader to become familiar with their pasts, their neighborhoods, their apartments, their eating habits, and even their mother's china. They also embody multiple roles. Inevitably, any attempt on their part to seek totalizing solutions will invariably be complicated by the presence of family, friends, elderly neighbors, pets, ex-husbands, and past and potential lovers. Subjectivity, rather than being an impediment to the detective's understanding of crime and the city, becomes a mode of understanding them.

A recent Los Angeles detective novel, *North of Montana,* by April Smith, blurs the boundaries between the detective's subjectivity and the city even further. As the title suggests, the plot follows the familiar circular social space of the city, connecting the wealthy Santa Monica neighborhood north of Montana Avenue with the Central American barrio – a recent site of urban "otherness." In the course of an investigation, a female FBI agent, Ana Grey, uncovers her own previously unknown past, discovering that she is part Salvadorian. With part of herself as

"other," she occupies a multiple subject position, both inside and outside, detective and object of detection. Like Jake Gittes, she both fails to solve the crime and inadvertently causes the death of an innocent victim. Unlike him, however, she finds hope and redemption – literally on the street in the barrio – that is, in "Chinatown." This reverses the terms of the relationship between the detective and the city, turning Chandler's circular motion back on itself. Instead of the detective attempting to heal the city, or more typically, failing to heal the city, the city has healed the detective.

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1. Mike Davis, "*Chinatown,* Part Two? The 'Internationalization' of Downtown Los Angeles," *New Left Review* (July/August 1987), 65–86, and *City of Quartz* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1990), 17–97; Rosalyn Deutsche, "Chinatown, Part Four? What Jake Forgets about Downtown," *Assemblage* 20 (April 1993), 32–33. Also see Rosalyn Deutsche, "Boys Town," *Society and Space* 9 (1991), 5–30.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 43.
3. Amy Gilman Srebnick, "The Death of Mary Rogers, the 'Public Prints' and the Violence of Representation" (paper presented at American Studies conference, UCLA, May 21, 1993).
4. Ernest Mandel points out that after World War I, the detective novel moved from the streets to the drawing room. This can be seen in the British country house subgenre, typified by the work of Agatha Christie as well as in American authors such as Rex Stout and Ellery Queen. Although this genre continued to be popular, after Prohibition American writers turned to urban subjects such as gangsters, organized crime, and corruption. Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 22–39.
5. Fredric Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler," in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 127.

Gendered Spaces in Colonial Algiers

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The French colonial discourse, developed by a broad base of intellectuals and military and administrative officers, identified the Algerian woman as the key symbol of the country's cultural identity.[1] In a typical formulation, J. Lorrain, writing at the turn of the century, called the entire country "a wise and dangerous mistress," but one who "exudes a climate of caress and torpor," suggesting that control over her mind and body was essential.[2] This association extended to the city of Algiers as well. Popular literature from the colonial period abounds with gendered descriptions that attribute an excessive sensuality to the city. In the turn-of-the-century travel accounts of Marius Bernard, for example, Algiers is a lascivious woman whose appeal was evident even in her name: "Algiers! Such a musical word, like the murmur of waves against the white sand of the beach; a name as sweet as the rippling of the breeze in the palm trees of the oases! Algiers! So seductive and easy-going, a town to be loved for the deep purity of her sky, the radiant splendor of her turquoise sea, her mysterious smells, the warm breath in which she wraps her visitors like a long caress."[3] Similarly, Lucienne Favre, a woman novelist writing in the 1930s, described the Casbah (the precolonial town of al-Jaza'ir) as "the vamp of North Africa," endowed with a "capricious feminine charm" and great "sex appeal."[4] Heralded by Eugène Delacroix's *Les Femmes d'Alger* – a painting from the first years of the French occupation that, symbolically, entered the privacy of an Algerian home – the artistic discourse reiterated this association. Beginning in the 1930s, Le Corbusier's gendering of Algiers extended this tradition to architecture. Provoking associations between the curved lines of his projects to