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Manifest Deception: Utopic Myth and the Fifties Frontier in *L.A. Confidential*

Abstract: Scholars and critics alike associate film noir with gritty, existentialist films that explore the dystopic nature of urban centers. Central to these dystopian environments is the exposure of institutional corruption and the ambiguous morality that blurs the line between cop and criminal. This article examines Curtis Hanson's 1997 neo-noir film, *L.A. Confidential* as a unique example of American noir that explores the dystopic nature of the famed urban center of Los Angeles. It argues that the film's exploration of the dystopic nature of Los Angeles is fundamentally dependent upon a sustained deconstruction of the utopic myths of Western American expansion, specifically, the ideology of manifest destiny. In doing so, this article expands on extant scholarship in American noir, and contributes to a broader understanding of the cross-pollination between the noir film and the Western.

At the midpoint of Curtis Hanson's neo-noir epic, *L.A. Confidential* (1997), a significant montage plays out on screen as the audience views the rapid pace of post-World War II suburbanisation. In one scene, the camera pans over a bustling construction site, with workmen and their tractors standing to the side at the ready. As the camera continues to pan, it settles on the figure of the Los Angeles Mayor (Gregory White), who begins to occupy the salient point at the center of the frame. The mayor is surrounded by eager journalists, while palm trees gently sway in the background. The site he stands on is ground zero for the construction of the Santa Monica Freeway. Proudly, the mayor declares to the jostling journalists that, "Go west America, was the slogan of manifest destiny. Today is that last step westward!

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With no stop signs, no traffic signals—from downtown to the beach in twenty minutes!" The mayor's proclamation is met with rapturous applause, as the camera cuts away to an extreme longshot of the freeway's future construction site, showing its presumed course over a field of green and gold.

This is not the only moment in *L.A. Confidential* in which postwar Los Angeles is compared to the historical frontier or linked with romantic overtures of westward migration that have gripped American colonists from as early as the first puritans. The city's paradisical allure is a constant thread throughout the narrative, with journalist Sid Hudgens (Danny Devito) satirically referring to Los Angeles as the "Garden of Eden." The film even culminates in a gun smoke-filled shoot-out in the middle of a ghost town, with the climax seemingly lifted from a classic Western. Clearly, Hanson's depiction of mid-century Los Angeles is one in which the themes of Western expansion and manifest destiny are as forceful and as influential as they were in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the noir has a history of crossover with the Western film. Numerous noir and neo-noir texts, especially those that take mid-twentieth century Los Angeles and wider California for their setting, engage with stereotypically Western themes and ideals. Such texts, like *L.A. Confidential*, are particularly reflective of the historical and cultural phenomenon of Hollywood stars flocking westward with the same visions of prosperity as frontiersmen a century earlier. Manifest destiny has consistently permeated Los Angeles noir and neo-noir. For example, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), a classic of Los Angeles noir, interrogates manifest destiny's aggressive expansion and control of nature. Private investigator, J.J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson), uncovers corruption and murder at the centre of the Los Angeles Water Department's attempts to dry out land so it can be bought up quickly by developers. Such action finds direct correlation with the historical realities of nineteenth century manifest destiny, in which ardent expansionists would frequently compromise the natural resources of an area (especially buffalo) to drive out Native Americans (Slotkin 1998: 48). Further, in Ruben Fleischer's *Gangster Squad* (2013), the main narrative focuses on gangster Mickey Cohen's (Sean Penn) plans to grow his criminal empire from Los Angeles to the entire West Coast of California. Cohen even envisions his plan as a form of inevitable and unstoppable expansion, likening his approach to that of nineteenth century manifest destiny. In

doing so, Cohen veraciously declares that Los Angeles "is my manifest destiny!" Even the 2011 video game, *L.A. Noire* is no exception. In one mission, the player is tasked with stamping out Cohen's expanding narcotics circle in a case entitled "Manifest Destiny," no doubt gesturing towards the gangster's aspirations for expansion.

Despite this crossover, extant scholarship on the intersections between the noir and the Western make only cursory mentions of manifest destiny as either a thematic device or an ideological influence on *L.A. Confidential*. For example, Joshua Meyer analyses the original novel upon which Hanson's film is based, James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential* (1990), focusing on Ellroy's use of fables to construct his fictional world. Meyer argues that Ellroy's Los Angeles features fables built into the city itself, describing them as undergoing "concretization in the textual landscape" (341). However, such fables do not include that of manifest destiny, despite Meyer's otherwise arresting examination of the text's physical spaces and the "interpretive possibilities these spaces present" (335). Paul Manticone mentions the "mythological frameworks" (337) of settling the frontier and conquering the wilderness in his examination of genre crossover between the noir and the Western, but makes no mention of manifest destiny. Likewise, David Meuel's *The Noir Western: Darkness on the Range, 1943–1962* (2015) makes only one singular mention of manifest destiny. Most notably, in his seminal work, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (2013), Neil Campbell discusses manifest destiny in relation to the classic Westerns of the 1950s and 1960s. However, upon turning to what he calls the "Urban Western" in films such as *Fat City* (1972) and *The Exiles* (1962), Campbell ironically rejects this "limited line of analysis," instead explaining that he is "interested in how the postwar West was being imagined, defined, and explored as a critical region in relation to its mythic past" (55). Thus, what Campbell ultimately overlooks in tracing the "post-Western" film landscape, especially films in urban settings, be they noir or "Urban Westerns," is the extent to which this mythic past remains informed by both the promises and problems of the manifest destiny myth.

Pascal M. Cicchetti aptly explains the fascination that Los Angeles noir and neo-noir has with the mythos of western expansion, implicating if not naming outright the ideology of manifest destiny. Cichetti also notes that the noir genre frequently takes a dystopic view of urban

societies (53). Los Angeles noir and neo-noir texts repeatedly expose corruption at the heart of government institutions and explore the ambiguous morality that blurs the line between cop and criminal. Yet Cicchetti cites Jean Baudrillard who argues that "America was always a utopia in the making" (77), while also quoting David Clarke who maintains that America "asserted its utopianism from the start, thus forcing a conviction in its reality" (6). Los Angeles, therefore, with both its paradisical allure and being emblematic of westward expansion, provides a unique setting for noir and neo-noir texts to deconstruct utopic myths of American expansion whilst simultaneously exposing the dystopic reality of the famed urban center. As Cicchetti contends, Los Angeles noir and neo-noir "addresses the problem of history" (54).

L.A. Confidential specifically exposes the false utopic myth of manifest destiny, whilst simultaneously highlighting how the residual power of this myth in mid-century Los Angeles has destructive consequences for its inhabitants. Specifically, when central characters are exposed to the dystopic reality of their city, they undergo a profound transformation in morality, motive, and even appearance, as they come to terms with the fact that the alluring city of angels is no promised land, but an environment of lies, deception, and broken dreams.

MANIFEST DESTINY

In 1845 John L. O'Sullivan introduced the concept of manifest destiny in his magazine, *The Democratic Review*. In an editorial entitled "Annexation," he confidently called for the further expansion of American borders westward, simultaneously advocating for the annexation of Texas into the union and dismissing claims to Mexican sovereignty in North America. He maintained that it was the United States' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" ("Annexation" 7).[1] O'Sullivan's use of the phrase "manifest destiny" essentially implied that America's eminence and expansion was both obvious (manifest) and assured (destiny). According to William Weeks, manifest destiny contained three central themes: "The special virtues of the American people and their institutions; their mission to redeem and remake the world in the image of America; and the American destiny under God to accomplish this sublime task" (61).

In a second article, what David Pletcher calls "the most famous editorial of the decade" (320), O'Sullivan argued that the United States

should annex the state of Oregon, wrestling it away from British control. He wrote that the US claim on Oregon was "by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us" ("Manifest Destiny" 1845). He not only believed that Britain had no proper claim on Oregon, but more importantly, that the American claim was one of divine origin and thus superior. O'Sullivan's argument concerning the manifest destiny of the United States to possess the territory was based on his intense belief in American exceptionalism, that the United States was to serve as a holy instrument, spreading democracy in North America. He believed that the United States would be unstoppable in its inevitable expansion westward to new lands of increased prosperity, whilst fulfilling a higher calling in taming the frontier. Within a week of the second article, the term manifest destiny would be debated in the United States Congress, and the ideology would become a cornerstone of American expansionist policy throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century (Pratt 795).

Crucially, O'Sullivan's belief that the practice of manifest destiny would lead to tangible reward was predated by American rhetoric of western expansion, which frequently employed of utopic imagery. As Sacvan Bercovitch points out, the idea of the United States as a chosen nation can be traced back to early Puritan theology in the first Massachusetts settlements (xi). Bercovitch argues that it was the Puritan tradition of chosenness that provided O'Sullivan with the rhetorical blueprint from which the journalist could build manifest destiny into a "framework for national identity" (29). For example, John Winthrop's sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), anticipated O'Sullivan's vision for America. Winthrop maintained that if God would "Bring us in peace to the place we desire, then He hath ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained within" (qtd. in Porterfield 172). Cotton Mather went even further, envisioning that God had ordained a new Eden for the colonists in America. Mather believed that the Puritans had inherited God's original promise to Israel that he would "appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more" (2 Sam. 7:10). In fact, many Puritans believed that North America would be the site of Christ's return, descending in triumph to the "New Jerusalem" (Rosenmeier 33).

Of course, it mattered not that this land had been populated by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. From Winthrop's likening of

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Native Americans to serpents in the garden (Bercovitch 144), to their subsequent removal and relocation from their ancestral homelands in the 1830s, as well as Southern expansionism that was fuelled by slavery, manifest destiny was built on xenophobia and violence. O'Sullivan's ideology was designed with specific principles to exclude Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexicans (Gomez 241). It would even be specifically used as justification for the attempted extirpation of Native Americans.

Historical realities did little to dissuade the romantic impulses of manifest destiny for white Americans. In his seminal thesis of 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner's diagnosis of the frontier's closure was occasionally punctuated with a number of romantic flourishes that are clearly indebted to manifest destinarian thought. For example, Turner approvingly cites Francis Grund's work on American society and politics in which Grund declared that "the universal disposition of Americans" appeared to be one in which they "emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion." Grund claims migration "manifests itself" with each new wave of settlers and is "destined to go on until a physical barrier must finally obstruct its process" (qtd. in Turner 7). Turner went on to assert that it was "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics" (27). When considering the presence of manifest destiny in *L.A. Confidential*, it is apparent that the lingering presence of the ideology in the dystopic landscape of post-war Los Angeles has a profound and destructive impact on the "striking characteristics" of each character.

CUL-DE-SACS AND CACTI: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE NOIR AND THE WESTERN

In his seminal survey of the intersections between the noir and the Western, Neil Campbell points to the demolition of "Laramie Street" in 2003, a Warner Brothers's backlot used for shooting Westerns, to make way for modern sets as an indication of the Western's profound ability to survive in "other forms" (2). Despite the destruction of the set, which could easily have been seen as a sign of the Western's demise, the Western has continued to adapt. Key to this adaptation, argues Campbell, is the emergence of the post-Western. Crucially, the post-Western shares many similarities with the noir and neo-noir film. Campbell cites John Cawelti who argues that the post-Western examined "the limits and

generic formulas" of the classic Western which espoused binary representations of law and order, civilisation and savagery (qtd. in Campbell101). The classic Western also represented masculine prowess as a critical force in the advancing settlement of the American West, from which a sense of national identity could be forged. Moreover, Campbell also utilises the work of Diane M. Borden and Eric P. Essman, who maintain that the post-western "remapped the American moral landscape" in which a "dystopic vision of both the past and the present" is the driving force behind the genre's critical scrutiny of the "fictions" of American Western history (30). Thus, the survival of the Western genre, enabled via the post-Western, has transformed the genre into an organism that shares similar concerns with the noir and neo-noir genres. Much as the neo-noir interrogates and challenges the utopic myths of urban societies, the post-Western challenges the utopic myth of the West, inclusive of both rural spaces and urban centers, such as Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix (Campbell 11).

Campbell's study echoes much of the sentiments expressed by Cichetti. Just as Cichetti argues that Los Angeles noir and neo-noir "addresses the problem of history," so too does the post-Western interrogate the problems of American Western history, specifically, the utopic visions of manifest destiny and western settlement. In *L.A. Confidential*, these neo-noir fictions and post-Western myths are one and the same. Manifest destiny fundamentally informs the urban processes of Hanson's depiction of Los Angeles and becomes an urban myth/fiction that drives both the desire for suburban expansion and the migratory appeal of Los Angeles, especially Hollywood, as an alluring city of post-war dreams and desires. As Cichetti outlines, the utopic myths that lie in the crosshairs of neo-noir cinema are those relating to "modernity in the nineteenth century: its rise, its promises, and, most importantly, its failures" (54). The spread of modernity and civilization westward, as well as the promises that such a utopia would bring, are integral to manifest destiny and the westering process, thus creating an inextricable link between the neo-noir film and the post-Western film in their tailored criticisms of America's past.

Moreover, the figure of the neo-noir detective seems particularly congruent with the figure of the Western frontiersman. Cichetti cites Peter Lev's argument that the neo-noir detective embodies the idea that "only heroic action which goes beyond arbitrary rules can stem

the tide" of society's gradual breakdown and ineffective authority (31). Much like Turner's argument that the frontier demanded a fluid identity, in particular, a frontiersman who can navigate civilization and savagery to promote the advancing tide of settlement, the neo-noir detective straddles the line between law and order to see justice delivered (4).

Other scholars add valuable insight to the areas in which noir and the Western intertwine. Significantly, Lee Horsley notes James Ellroy's own observations in this regard, which are undoubtedly applicable to Hanson's adaptation of Ellroy's novel. Ellroy himself notes that crime fiction is the perfect genre to explore "the reality of America's brutal, expansion-minded twentieth century" (qtd. in Horsley 139), a mindset that, as can be seen in Hanson's adaptation in particular, is indebted to the age of manifest destiny. Moreover, Ellroy's mid-century depiction of Los Angeles is bereft of the many notable landmarks that would come to give the city a distinctive, recognizable skyline. As Peter Schmidt Nowara argues, Ellroy's Los Angeles causes characters and readers alike to be geographically and spiritually unanchored. Nowara points to the protagonist of Willett in *The Naked City*, who notes that Los Angeles has a profound sense of "horizonality" (122). In essence, Ellroy's Los Angeles may as well be a frontier town. It is flat, undeveloped, yet at the same time is fundamentally driven by the urge of expansionism.

Finally, in the same collection as Cichetti's work, Cynthia J. Miller and James J. Ward highlight specific areas of crime fiction and noir that had been underexamined by scholars. They write that "what is lacking is any significant consideration of extradiegetic factors as urban geography and morphology, public policy and city planning (xiii). In examining the utopic myth of manifest destiny in *L.A. Confidential,* this paper expands upon Cichetti's work and responds to Miller and Ward's call by demonstrating the extent to which manifest destiny informs the narrative and characterization processes central to the film's depiction of a mid-century Los Angeles indebted to the Old West and enthralled by the processes and policies of expansion.

L.A. CONFIDENTIAL: UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, AND MANIFEST DESTINY

Hanson's adaptation of *L.A. Confidential* is relatively faithful to the source material. Focalized through three contrasting LAPD detectives in the 1950s, Bud White (Russell Crowe), Jack Vincennes (Kevin

Spacey), and Edmund Exley (Guy Pearce), the film follows the detectives' efforts to solve the "Nite Owl Massacre." The mass murder claims the lives of a former LAPD officer and a high-class escort among several others, and the subsequent investigation uncovers systematic layers of crime, corruption, vice, and moral decay throughout the city. These layers include a prostitution ring that surgically alters its call girls to look like film stars, blackmailed city officials, and a corrupt LAPD that is ultimately behind the massacre itself.

Well before the central crime is revealed and a single protagonist shown onscreen, Hanson evokes the utopic appeal of Los Angeles. The film begins with a montage of period footage of post-war Los Angeles, narrated by the character Sid Hudgens (Danny Devito), the editor of a celebrity gossip magazine that features throughout the narrative. The potent combination of glamorous period footage and Hudgens's romanticized, albeit satirical narration, firmly establishes the notion that Hanson's Los Angeles is built upon, and indebted to, the pervasive cultural mythos of manifest destiny and westward migration. "Come to Los Angeles!" Hudgens exclaims in the film's opening line, "the sun shines brighter, the beaches are wide and inviting, the orange groves stretch as far as the eye can see." As he speaks, the visual shifts from a collage of postcards of the city to actual historical and newsreel footage. The transition from the glamourized cards to the equally glamourized footage creates a sense of (curated) verisimilitude between the represented Los Angeles and the real Los Angeles. In other words, by showing footage as equally glamorous as the postcards, the opening montage strongly infers that Los Angeles is as advertised: a west coast paradise, ripe for settlement.

As Hudgens continues his explication of Los Angeles's allure, the glamorized post-war veneer of L.A. recaptures the same spiritual fervour that manifest destiny originally cultivated. Further images of the California coast subsequently flash onto the screen featuring milkshake bars, celebrities, open plots of land, and even swimsuit clad women swimming in apple filled pools, creating an intoxicating cacophony of abundance. Moreover, such abundance is further emphasized by Hudgens' proclamation that in California, "there are jobs aplenty, and land is cheap! Every working man can have his own house, and inside every house: a happy all-American family. You can have all this!" Hudgens' voiceover evokes the words of both John L. O'Sullivan and Cotton

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Mather when he declares that, "Life is good in Los Angeles. It's paradise on earth . . . , yup . . . , you'd think this place was the garden of Eden." Hudgens's narration is as evocative as a sermon, and in particularly fitting fashion, the montage transitions to footage of a nuclear family saying grace at the dinner table, highlighting the city's allure as both spiritually sound and economically prosperous. Moreover, the wide shots of open land and promises of jobs are particularly evocative of nineteenth-century westward expansion, with the newly built suburban bungalows dotting the lush green landscape like modern homesteads. Hudgens extols the virtues of this Edenic paradise, playfully encouraging his readers to flock westward to experience the abundance that Los Angeles has to offer—how this new Jerusalem's beaches, sun, and trees, all shine with a seemingly heavenly glow.

Crucially, it is not solely the film's opening which harnesses the promise that purpose and prosperity lay westward. Hanson utilizes the montage again at the film's halfway point to illustrate the suburbanization and development of Los Angeles. The scenes play out to Kay Starr's 1952 cover of "Wheel of Fortune," indicating both the passing of time, and further cementing prosperity as a key feature of 1950s Los Angeles. It is in this montage that the Los Angeles mayor delivers the speech that marks the beginning of the Santa Monica freeway's construction. As discussed, the mayor begins with a simple, yet powerful proclamation: "Go west America, was the slogan of manifest destiny. Today is that last step westwards." In Hanson's vision of 1950s Los Angeles, manifest destiny is clearly still a powerful operating force. However, the mayor's assertion that manifest destiny's final step begins "today" in 1953, raises an intriguing question. That being, whether the Los Angeles constructed by Hanson is one that sees itself as a reincarnation of manifest destiny and the nineteenth century frontier, or simply a continuation of an ideology that never actually ended. It is a question that is never truly answered in the film, and ultimately creates a city scape that serves as a simulacrum of manifest destiny and the frontier at large, building upon the themes of the opening montage.

By virtue of these two critical montages, it is clear that Hanson's depiction of Los Angeles in the film is fundamentally informed by the utopic myth of westward migration. Moreover, this myth is given particular force by the very features of geography, morphology, and public policy that Miller and Ward argued have been underexamined in the

noir genre (xiii). In the first montage, Hudgens' proclamations of Los Angeles' Edenic features are fundamentally dependent upon the images of California geography that flash upon the screen. Here, the viewer is exposed to vistas of Santa Monica Beach, California orange groves, newly built aerospace factories, as well as repetitive panning shots of homes at the forefront of suburban expansion. With an attractive combination of both man-made and natural geography, this Los Angeles is seemingly a far cry from the dark, crime-ridden urban scapes typical to noir and neo-noir. Moreover, the mayor's speech overtly indicates the fact that manifest destiny and the pursuit of a utopic paradise directly inform public policy in the city. The mayor announces the freeway's construction by directly referencing manifest destiny and westward migration. Yet, significantly, the freeway is only built in the film after a councilman (Jim Metzler) is blackmailed into approving its construction. For as romantic and bold as the mayor's speech is, beneath the veneer of manifest destiny and a utopian Los Angeles is an underbelly of crime and corruption.

Therein lies the second component of the film's utilization of the manifest destiny mythos. The historical reality of the ideology was built on xenophobia, violence, and exploitation. Correspondingly, *L.A. Confidential* demonstrates how the utopia of post-war Los Angeles continues to imitate the frontier space by illustrating how its utopic promises are similarly built on the suppression of racial minorities. Consequently, the American romanticism that characterizes the film's two montages is undermined by the inherent reality of racial discrimination in the city.

Shortly after the opening montage, the audience witnesses the bloody beating of Mexican men detained at the Hollywood station in a fictionalized version of the infamous "Bloody Christmas" incident of 1951. The violence against Mexicans at the heart of this supposed Western paradise evokes frontier conflicts against Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. This is especially the case considering manifest destiny was used as justification for the Mexican-American War of 1846–48, a conflict that saw the United States wrestle control of California away from the Mexican government. What is particularly notable about this scene is how it directly allegorizes the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in particularly salient and exact terms. As the Mexican detainees are brought to the station for processing, false rumors about the men's crimes soon spread amongst the officers. The

officers soon believe that the detainees beat two of their colleagues so badly that one lost an eye, and the other is being "read his last rites." Yet, in reality, Exley notes that the men are just resting at home "with muscle pulls." As the rumors spread, the enraged officers, most of whom are inebriated, march down to the cells eager to inflict vengeance. In identical fashion to the Mexican-American War, the conflict starts under false accusations of Mexicans being the aggressors. There is even the suggestion that the Mexican men being detained are not the ones who scuffled with the officers in question, as one Mexican man protests against the beating of his friend with futile pleas that the man is innocent.

The evocation of the Mexican-American War in this scene is further heightened by the actions of Spacey's Jack Vincennes. In the midst of the chaos, Vincennes tries his best to avoid the brawl, until a bloody Mexican man is pushed against him, staining the overly vain detective's immaculate, white suit with bright red blood. In immediate anger, Vincennes lashes out and punches the Mexican man, for no reason other than ruining his outfit. The symbolism of the red blood staining Vincennes' white suit is striking, demonstrating a loss of innocence and purity in Los Angeles that the film's opening montage had so overtly stoked. Moreover, this specific sequence mimics the outbreak of the Mexican-American War, in which Abraham Lincoln famously challenged James K. Polk to show the spot on American soil in which American blood had been shed, having been certain that the United States, and not Mexico, was the aggressor (Farber 106). In the case of *L.A. Confidential*, the blood is Mexican, not American. Moreover, the "spot" per se, is clear and identifiable, yet ultimately paints white Americans as the aggressors.

The extent to which the film's white Eden is built upon a racist hierarchy is further illustrated in the film's main crime. The narrative revolves around the LAPD's efforts to solve the "Nite Owl Massacre," in which several civilians and a police officer are brutally gunned down in a late-night coffee shop. Unbeknownst to the film's three central protagonists of Exley, Vincennes, and White, the crime was committed by corrupt LAPD officers in an effort to take control of the city's heroin ring for themselves. The corrupt officers, led by the station's captain, Dudley Smith (James Cromwell), frame a group of African American men for the massacre, succeeding in part due to the department's predisposed prejudice. Notably, while the men are innocent of the massacre,

they are guilty of the gang rape of a young Mexican woman, Inez Soto (Marisol Padilla Sánchez). In act of vengeance, Inez proceeds to give false details in her police report to incriminate the men for the massacre for which they had already been framed, solidifying the false charges already filed against them. Crucially, Inez justifies her false report to Exley by asking "Would anyone care that they raped a Mexican girl from Boyle Heights, if they hadn't killed those white people at the Nite Owl?" Evidently, the film's plot is powered by the racial hierarchy at the center of the supposed utopia, one that mimics nineteenth century America's exploitation of and prejudice toward racial minorities, while white Americans assert themselves as upholders of order and progress.

MAINTAINING THE FEMININE FAÇADE

The desire to maintain an idyllic and prosperous image of post-war Los Angeles in *L.A. Confidential* is not just restricted to the city's landscape or geography. The overtures extend to the city's inhabitants. The vanity-stricken and image-obsessed Jack Vincennes serves as a notable example, with the detective driven by the desire to maintain a glamorous exterior. In addition to Vincennes, the narrative features multiple women who seek to cultivate alluring, albeit flawed facsimiles of stereotypical beauty. Central to the mystery of the Nite Owl massacre is a high-class prostitution ring run by one of the city's influential millionaires. These women were lured by the very promise of glamour espoused in Hudgens's opening voiceover, that one could "even be a movie star, or at least see one!" Every woman in the prostitution ring is selected because of her likeness to a Hollywood starlet of the time, some even undergoing plastic surgery at the pimp's behest to enhance the likeness. The pimp (David Strathairn) even explains the selection of one such woman to detective Bud White when he notes, "I needed a Rita Hayworth to fill out my little studio. There's Gardener, Russell, Monroe, and Turner." The women in the prostitution ring had initially dreamed of becoming Hollywood starlets, only to resort to prostitution once their dreams of Hollywood had faded. Thus, in a disturbingly flawed way, the women do become starlets in a sense, albeit curated imitations of them.

Thus, the prostitution ring is directly built upon and made to exploit the utopic idealism of Los Angeles as a place of glamour, prosperity, and as the ring's own slogan reads, a place where one can have "whatever you desire." Critically, this conflation of desire and prosperity

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with an abusive and extortionist prostitution ring serves to powerfully transform the city scape and its inhabitants from utopia to dystopia. As the central mystery advances and viewers are exposed to the corruption and crime that plague the city underneath it's utopic guise, the machinations of the prostitution ring further stoke the reality that beneath the city's glamour lies a dystopian reality. As a result, the dream of a prosperous migration westward gives way to a dark ecosystem of murder, drugs, crooked cops, and both racial and gender exploitation.

This reality, especially as it pertains to the film's female characters, is made profoundly apparent in the murder of Susan Lefferts (Amber Smith). Lefferts had undergone plastic surgery to increase her likeness to Rita Hayworth. In fact, her surgery is so physically arduous that Bud White initially thinks she is a victim of domestic violence, as the woman sports several bruises and a large bandage draped over her nose when the pair meet. Moreover, when Susan's mother is called down to the coroner's office to identify the body, the woman is initially incredibly confused. When Exley asks the woman if the corpse is her daughter's, the woman responds between sobs "I don't know. . . . She seems like my Susan, but Susan was a blonde, not a redhead." It is only after one of the assistants reveals a birth mark on Susan's hip that the woman's mother is able to confirm that the body belongs to her daughter. While certainly at the behest of her pimp, Susan's efforts to look as much like Rita Hayworth as possible inevitably strip her of her own identity, to the point that not even her own mother recognizes her. In the pursuit of an idealist, movie star image, Susan has ultimately compromised her own identity. In fact, Susan's death serves as an allegory for post-war Los Angeles itself. The film portrays both the city and its women as alluring objects of desire. However, much like how the idealism of post-war Los Angeles is propped up by an underbelly of exploitation, so too do the women hide a dark truth beneath their movie star facades.

The most prominent of these women is Lynn Bracken (Kim Bassinger), the Veronica Lake lookalike, and main love interest in the film. Lynn explains that while her and her colleagues' dreams of stardom may have died, their likeness to the actresses they pretend to be at least lets them "act a little" with their clients. The identity of these women therefore, is as much performance as it is veneer. Lynn notes how Detective Bud White is the first man she meets who doesn't tell her

she "looks like Veronica Lake inside of a minute." Bud, who eventually becomes Lynn's boyfriend, retorts that she looks better than Veronica Lake, joking later in the film that while her clients may get Lake, he is the only one who gets Lynn Bracken. For Bud, the woman underneath the imitation of Lake is more unique and more desirable than Lake herself. Yet, if the women of *L.A. Confidential* serve as allegories, even personifications of the dual utopia and dystopia of Los Angeles, Bud and Lynn's romance can be read as a criticism of the utopian side of the coin. Bud's attraction to Lynn is because she is real. He is not interested in the persona of Veronica Lake that she plays, and despite any flaws or foibles Lynn has, she is at least honest with Bud. Bud has seen all of Los Angeles, its glitz and grime alike, yet he is drawn to that which is real, rather than hyperbolic.

In fact, the prostitutes' likenesses to the celebrities they play creates a multitudinous sense of identity throughout the film, to the extent that even the actual Hollywood actresses are mistaken for the prostitutes who resemble them. In one particular scene, detectives Edmund Exley and Jack Vincennes enter a diner to question a person of interest in the Nite Owl case. Exley spies the man in the far corner of the diner, sitting with what he presumes to be another prostitute from the same ring as Lefferts and Bracken. Exley ridicules the woman, telling her to leave lest he take her in to the Hollywood station, much to the vexation of both the woman and her date. The camera proceeds to cut between quick, successive close ups of Exley's and the woman's faces, indicative of the scene's focus on identity and the sudden, impending realization. Exley crassly declares "A hooker cut to look like Lana Turner is still a hooker." Vincennes proceeds to humorously correct his partner, explaining "That is Lana Turner," right before the actress throws her martini in the detective's face. Exley even notes whilst he and Vincennes leave "How was I to know?" In a city which Hanson himself calls a "place of manufactured illusions" (Tibbetts 1599), how is the detective to judge between the real and the imitation? The scene with the real Lana Turner exposes the fine line between utopia and dystopia operating throughout the film. If real Hollywood actresses are confused with their prostitute counterparts, then the utopia of Los Angeles is fundamentally flawed. In failing to recognize the real Lana Turner, Exley's flawed deduction casts doubt on the city itself. The utopian ideal of Los

Angeles is indistinguishable from its dystopian bedrock, rendering it both inoperable and an object of ridicule.

DICHOTOMOUS DETECTIVE IDENTITY

L.A. Confidential's straddling of both the neo-noir genre and frontier mythos is further reinforced in its detective protagonists. The noir detective assumes a similar role to Turner's illustration of the frontiersman, a figure who occupies both law and order, civilization and savagery, in order to see justice advanced and society progress. Originally, each detective typifies stereotypical taxonomies of the post-war Hollywood detective or sleuth: Bud White is the muscle, Jack Vincennes is the glamour, and Edmund Exley is the virtue. However, as the narrative progresses, each man comes face to face with not only the dystopic nature of the city they police, but the inherent corruption of their own station. As a result, each detective is forced to embrace characteristics antithetical to their nature in order to solve the Nite Owl case, and bring their police captain, Dudley Smith, to justice. These transformations strengthen the concentric relationship between the noir detective and the frontiersman and also signpost the film's interplay of the utopic and dystopic nature of post-war Los Angeles.

The first character introduced is detective Bud White. In the film's opening scene, the audience witnesses White brutally punishing a woman-beater on Christmas eve. As White later reveals to Lynn Bracken, his desire to protect women and harm those who threaten them is born out of seeing his own father beat his mother to death when he was a child. White's particular brand of policing leads his fellow officers, in a mixture of admiration and derision, to label him as simply a muscle figure in the LAPD machine. Smith tells White that he particularly admires his "adherence to violence as a necessary adjunct to the job," and begins using White to beat and intimidate apprehended criminals. On the other hand, the cerebral Exley labels White a "mindless thug." White even views himself through this lens, telling Bracken he doesn't believe himself to be smart enough to solve the case, explaining "There's something wrong with the Nite Owl, I know it. I just can't prove it, I'm not smart enough. I'm just the guy they bring in to scare the other guys shitless." Thus, White is painted not only as the muscle, but specifically the mindless muscle.

It is White, however, who begins to first piece together the mystery of the Nite Owl. White is the first of the detectives to find the bodies of Smith's other victims and is the first to piece together the motives behind the captain's corruption. Smith has attempted to seize control of the city's heroin supply for himself after mobster Mickey Cohen is incarcerated. In forcing himself to embrace the more cerebral demands of the job, White crucially sets the case in motion whilst also demonstrating the necessity for each detective to adapt. White's surprising development into an investigative mind leads several characters, including Vincennes and the coroner, to note that White is "not so dumb after all."

White's transformation is not entirely a positive one, as the demands of the fifties frontier eventually take their toll. After learning that his girlfriend, Bracken, slept with Exley, White hits his girlfriend on her front porch. As he does, the camera freezes on a close up of White's frozen face dripping with regret and the Los Angeles rain. White painfully realizes he has become the very thing he despises in his moment of turmoil. Thus, White's transformation can be read as a particularly duplicitous one. On the one hand, White's newfound intellectual edge allows him to find the initial breadcrumbs before anyone else. Yet, on the other hand, it is this very edge that leads him to unravel the mystery of the Nite Owl Massacre. In doing so, White becomes an enemy of Dudley Smith, who, unbeknownst to White at the time, forced Bracken to sleep with Exley. It is Smith who organizes for photos to be taken of Bracken and Exley, planting those photos on White's desk in order to drive a wedge between the two detectives who are close to uncovering the captain's crimes. Thus, in his anger, White devolves into the type of domestic abuser he frequently despised and enacted vengeance upon.

In contrast to White, Jack Vincennes embodies the glitz and glamour of post-war Hollywood. As a detective, Vincennes originally cares more about establishing himself as a Hollywood figure than he does about solving crimes. Vincennes moonlights as a technical advisor on the fictional television show "Badge of Honor," and his main drive is to rub shoulders with the Hollywood elite. For example, Vincennes takes numerous kickbacks from Sid Hudgens' tabloid "Hush-Hush," to give tips on celebrity arrests. Vincennes even becomes a director-like figure in these busts. The detective instructs Hudgens's crew where to put

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their camera and lights in order to get a movie premiere in the background shot of an arrest.

Like White, Vincennes also undergoes a transformation as the narrative progresses. Vincennes initially refuses to testify against fellow officers involved in the Bloody Christmas scandal, bluntly stating "No thanks, I'm not a snitch." When his superiors threaten to remove him from "Badge of Honor," however, Vincennes's ability to adapt is foreshadowed as he immediately replies "Okay, I'll do it." Yet, the detective's most profound transformation comes when he grows weary of his vices and seeks to right the wrongs he has committed. The turning point for Vincennes comes when he takes yet another kickback from Hudgens in an attempt to expose the district attorney's homosexuality. Hudgens uses the same young actor Vincennes's arrested earlier to seduce the district attorney, much to Vincennes's chagrin, as Hudgens falsely promises the actor, Matt Reynolds (played by Simon Baker) a revival of his career. After the arrangement, Vincennes is seen sitting in his favorite bar, an empty glass in front of him, studying the fifty-dollar bill given to him by Hudgens. Vincennes looks up to see his forlorn face reflected in the bar mirror in a moment of self-reflection. Abruptly, Vincennes stands from his seat, leaving the fifty-dollar bribe behind as a tip for the waiter, signaling his newfound desire to atone for his sins. Vincennes rushes to the hotel room where the Reynolds and the district attorney are scheduled to meet, determined to rescue the actor from Hudgens's exploitative plan. Vincennes is too late, and as if echoing the detective's earlier analytical stare into his own soul, the eyes in the young man's still fresh corpse glare up at him from the motel room floor, reinforcing the consequences of the sins that he now regrets.

Vincennes's most redeeming moment is his final one. As the truth of the Nite Owl case comes to light, late one evening Vincennes seeks out his captain at the man's home for advice on the case. Smith is surprised that Vincennes is working so hard to solve the mystery, even asking why the vice detective is obsessed with solving a homicide case. Vincennes poignantly replies that he is trying to "make amends" for something, a reference to his failure to rescue Matt before the actor is killed. Initially, Smith jokes with Vincennes' quipping "Don't start trying to do the right thing boyo, you haven't had the practice." Yet Smith, sensing his deeds will soon be exposed, shoots Vincennes. The captain gives the dying Vincennes the opportunity for some final words,

to which the detective utters a name Exley had told him earlier in confidence. Thus, when Smith repeats that same name at the station in the wake of Vincennes's death, Exley realizes their captain is behind the massacre, and Vincennes finds vindication from beyond the grave in assisting his partner. The originally glamourous, vain, and exploitative detective cultivates his own sense of virtue as he seeks to right the wrongs of both himself and those around him.

Edmund Exley is arguably the most significant of the detective trio. A young, promising officer, obsessed with his career, Exley is defined by strict moral principles of right and wrong. For instance, just prior to the Bloody Christmas incident, then uniformed policeman Exley presses Captain Smith for the opportunity to become a detective. In response, Smith asks him a series of questions, including whether he would be willing to beat a confession out of a suspect he knew to be guilty, or shoot one to offset the chance a jury finds them innocent. When Exley replies he wouldn't, Smith explains that it is those very characteristics that make a good detective. Each characteristic is evidence to a willingness to take the law into one's own hands, a willingness that according to Exley's initial characterization, he does not possess as it violates his moral code. Consequently, not only does Exley not possess the makings of a good detective, but if the concentric nature of the detective and frontiersman is anything to go by, he would not make a good frontier figure either. Fittingly, however, Exley's transformation not only sees him openly straddle the boundaries of law and order, but his actions see him illustrated into a cowboy-esque figure, one who is as comfortable with gun smoke filled shootouts as he is with taking the law into his own hands.

As with White and Vincennes, Exley and his code are reshaped as he becomes Lieutenant Detective and works the Nite Owl case. In addition to answering no to Smith's earlier questions about what he would be willing to do in taking the law into his own hands, Exley is initially portrayed as weak and squeamish in the face of violence. During the Bloody Christmas incident, Exley's voice stammers as he unsuccessfully attempts to stop the officers from beating the detainees. Exley is then thrown into a cell by two of his colleagues during the chaos, with the man repeatedly and futilely pounding on the glass in an attempt to be let out and for the beatings to stop. The ultimate catalyst for Exley's transformation is a violent shootout in an apartment building, in which

Exley and another detective cross guns with the African American men framed for the massacre. Exley and the detective break into the men's apartment, prompting an exchange of shots in which the other detective is killed and all but one of the suspects is shot. However, one unarmed suspect sprints down the apartment hallway, steering into the elevator as he frantically pushes the button for the doors to close. Exley, with blood on his face, chases after than man, shoving his shotgun into the gap left by the closing doors as he pulls the trigger, killing the unarmed suspect before he could get away. The camera abruptly cuts to a stunned Exley, still covered in blood, returning to the station, having earned the respect of the same officers who once intimidated and ridiculed him. Exley even earns himself the cowboy nickname of "Shotgun Ed," with the beaming Smith bestowing the moniker upon Exley. The once weak, albeit principled man, has been shaken to his core by both the violence and the bending of moral codes that the case has demanded of him.

Soon after this incident the audience learns of Exley's motivation to join the force. Exley was prompted to become a policeman to honor his father, a promising officer himself, who was murdered off duty, with the killer never found. As if further reinforcing the ethereal nature of identity in post-war Los Angeles, Exley admits to Vincennes he named the killer "Rollo Tomassi," simply to give the unknown man "some personality." For Exley, Tomassi embodies the "guy who he thinks he can get away it." Tomassi just so happens to be the name Vincennes whispers to Smith with his dying breath.

Taking place in an abandoned motel reminiscent of an Old West ghost town, the final shootout is particularly symbolic of the frontier. The location reinforces not only Exley's status as a cowboy gunslinger, but also the film's crucial crosspollination of both the noir and the Western. If not for the survival of Exley and White as they battle their corrupt captain, argues Christine Sterkel, *L.A. Confidential*'s ending would bear a startling resemblance to the Western classic *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (803). In the moment in which it seems Exley and White will meet their demise like the infamous gun slingers, Exley looks up the barrel of his captain's gun, and calls the man Rollo Tomassi. When Smith asks who Tomassi is, Exley explains "You are, you're the guy who gets away with it." White and Exley eventually overpower Smith, and the injured Exley shepherds his captain outside to the sound of oncoming sirens. Smith, the architect behind the case

and its subsequent murders, tells Exley "hold up your badge, so they'll know you're a policeman" as he lifts his own up. The irony of the film's villain, an LAPD captain, holding his badge to the oncoming patrol cars, whose lights shine on the two men and the mystery itself, further blurs the line between cop and criminal. Dudley is both Smith and Tomassi, mentor and menace, ally and antagonist, cop and criminal. Finally, a close tracking shot of Exley's front subsequently follows the young detective from the door of the motel, as if foreshadowing the stalking of his prey. Suddenly, Exley shoots his former mentor in the back. In doing so, he does the very thing he refused to do earlier in the film, the very thing his former captain insisted was essential to becoming the great detective Exley now is. In shooting his captain in similar fashion to the Nite Owl suspect in the apartment shootout, Exley's transformation from idealistic to cynical is complete. Much like the women in the prostitution ring, Exley's duplicitous nature signposts the dichotomous utopia and dystopia of Los Angeles. The detective cowboy emerges from the post-war ghost town, the myths of manifest destiny and the Edenic nature of Los Angeles having been long buried alongside the bodies of the Nite Owl Massacre.

Whilst the noir and the Western share areas of intersection, *L.A. Confidential* provides a salient example of the cross-pollination between the genres. Both genres are concerned with explorations of utopic and dystopic myths, but most significant is the concentric relationship between the noir detective and the frontiersman. In *L.A. Confidential*, the utopic mythos of manifest destiny is fundamental to the idealized and glamorized allure of Los Angeles, with this Western heritage driving the film's narrative. This heritage informs the Edenic opening montage, the construction of the Santa Monica Freeway, as well as the film's final shoutout. Crucially, it is the very underbelly of manifest destiny, such as its inherent violence and racial xenophobia, that paves the way for Hanson's portrayal of the dystopic underbelly of post-war Los Angeles. This reality is allegorized by the film's main characters—detectives and call-girls alike—as they undergo transformations that mimic the utopic myths and dystopic realities that permeate both the city and its characters. Thus, *L.A. Confidential* serves as a striking simulacrum of the American West in Hanson's neo-noir vision of Los Angeles.

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NOTES

1. As Pratt observed in 1927, files of O'Sullivan's periodicals are rare and difficult obtain. Consequently, a precise page number/range has been omitted for some of O'Sullivan's articles.

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