2. Raymond Chandler's Semi-Tropical Romance

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The opening sequence of *The Big Sleep* finds detective Philip Marlowe in the atrium of the Sternwood mansion, reflecting on a stained-glass scene drawn from medieval romance:

Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some long and very convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizard of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn’t seem to be really trying. (3)

Looking forward to Marlowe’s later pronouncement that “Knights had no meaning in this game” (95), this moment inaugurates a strain of medievalism that runs throughout *The Big Sleep* and the Chandler oeuvre at large. Indeed, as Charles J. Rzepka suggests, Chandler’s casting of the detective as “ideal knight” “has become “something of a touchstone of evaluation both to Chandler’s most fervent admirers and to his most derisory critics” (720). Whether explicitly evoking Mallory in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) or giving his characters allusive names...
such as Quest, Grayle, and Kingsley; Chandler renders in Marlowe a “detective-knight,” as Ernest Fontana has it, vainly struggling in “an ironic or failed romance . . . [which] establishes a mystery whose solution does not liberate or energize a diseased and entropic world” (185). Such a reading illuminates Chandler’s own vision of authenticating alienation—Marlowe emerges in heroic relief against a universe hostile to his chivalric code. At the same time, however, attention to Chandler’s modernist medievalism has to some extent obscured critical recognition of the novelist’s Orientalism. After all, Marlowe prefaces his reading of the stained-glass romance with an observation that the image frames “entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants”—an offhand remark that recalls the foreign invasions pervasive to “imperial gothic” detective fiction. As we shall see, the Sternwood mansion becomes a synecdoche for Chandler’s California—a world of breached borders and compromised identities countered only by the “continental” operations of the alienated hard-boiled detective. Like Hammett, Chandler achieved this vision of authenticating alienation by means of a sustained dialogue with colonial adventure.

Chandler introduces his The Simple Art of Murder (1950) with the line, “Some literary antiquarian of a rather special type may one day think it worthwhile to run through the files of the pulp magazines which flourished during the late twenties and early thirties, and determine just how and when and by what steps the popular mystery story shed its refined good manners and went native” (1016). Anticipating the essay’s celebration of the rough-hewn pulps, this overture also hints at Chandler’s own sense of the complex entanglements between hard-boiled fiction and colonial adventure—a relationship which Chandler himself nurtured and sustained. Megan Abbott notes, “It is no accident that Chandler’s language is infused with a vague late-imperialist sentiment (‘went native,’ ‘dark with something more than night’). Such heart-of-darkness rhetoric discloses the tough guy’s connection to America’s own racial history.” Abbott finds in this passage a pretext for discussion of “American frontier and Western literature” (12–13), which trumps the classical mystery story as a primary influence upon hard-boiled fiction. As we see in Hammett’s fiction, however, the Victorian detective story exemplified by Poe and Doyle shares with its cynical twentieth-century descendant an anxious preoccupation with fin-de-siècle adventure fiction. In a much earlier and lesser-known critical work, “The Tropical Romance” (1912), Chandler takes this literary form as his subject, elegizing a genre that “appears to be doomed”:

No longer does it glide majestically by glorious palm-fringed islands bathed in opalescent light, pant over burning ageless deserts, insinuate
itself through the tangled mysterious bazaars of the Orient, or have strange dealings with grave Arabs, smiling Kanakas, inscrutable Chinamen, wily Japanese. Gone too are its heroes, the strong men who looked unmoved on death and horror, picturesque, hard-living cynics of the high-seas and barbaric lands, lean as tigers, weather-beaten as figure-heads, clad in weird garments, smoking eternal cheroots. (68)

Though he mentions no specific writers, Chandler might well be describing the fictions of Stevenson, Becke, and Russell, which most conspicuously foreground “palm-fringed islands” and “smiling Kanakas,” as a setting for the adventures of “hard-living cynics.” Chandler goes on to elaborate the modern fate of the tropical romance—victim of a world in which “[t]he touch of strangeness, the sense of exploration, has vanished from those far-off, dangerous, inaccessible regions once loved by violent adventure” (69). In terms that look forward to the advent of the Black Mask school, Chandler laments the passing of adventure: “It was apt to display the raw edge of things, and to provide murderous-minded authors with a great many opportunities to enlarge on the surgical aspect of sudden death.”

But the real focus of the essay is the “adventurer, artless and incorrigible”: “He is driven from his kingdom and has no land to call his own. . . . A few of his kind only, and those degenerate ones, have not scorned to set foot in cities, where they bow and strut in Brummagem-made clockwork detective stories, and may possibly appear heroic to errand boys” (68–69).

It is easy to discern in “The Tropical Romance” a glimmer of Chandler’s later work; the essay’s argument for a populist “raw-edged” aesthetic prefigures “The Simple Art of Murder” (1934), in which Chandler describes how “Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley” (16). Moreover, Chandler’s valorization of adventurers as “shop-soiled heroes with tarnished morals and unflinching courage” (69) holds the germs of his later characterization of the hard-boiled detective as a “shop-soiled Galahad . . . ,” though one “who is neither tarnished nor afraid.” That Chandler knew and was influenced by late-Victorian adventure is indisputable; but while it would be tempting to simply recognize the genre as a source of energy and vitality for Chandler’s own fiction, such a reading cannot account for the ways in which Chandler admits colonial adventure motifs into his detective stories, investigating and responding to their ideological implications.

Matthew Bruccoli imagines Chandler himself as a protagonist of exotic adventure, “one of those Englishmen who went out to settle Africa and dressed for dinner every night in the jungle.” This is an apt tableau, for Chandler, like Hammett and Hemingway, inherited from Conrad the
agonism of the western sojourner striving to retain his “civilization” in a savage wilderness. Herein lies the fundamental drama of Chandler’s crime fiction: the Sisyphean task of arresting the plastic selves of adventurers gone native in California’s urban jungles. If Marlowe is a knight-errant, then he is a lonely Crusader seeking to rescue not damsels in distress so much as comrades-in-arms victimized by distressing damsels. As McCann has it, “Chandler returned time and again to a vision of male fellowship and showed the way it was undermined by the various evils of the modern world. . . . Each of the novels for which Chandler is best remembered . . . depicts the deep feeling between Phillip Marlowe and some idealized brother figure; and each shows that brotherhood falling prey to corruption and exploitation” (140–41). I pursue Chandler’s dialogue with the adventure story throughout three representative texts: the early short story “Mandarin’s Jade” (1937), the inaugural novel *The Big Sleep* (1939), and the later Marlowe novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), in which Chandler most explicitly evokes and treats the epistemological problems elicited by the “tropical romance.” While it is important to keep in mind the pretext of the cynical fin-de-siècle adventure story, we should also consider Chandler’s response to the triumphalist spirit of Manifest Destiny, which perhaps found its highest expression in the “California adventure.” I therefore read Chandler’s fictions as literary responses not only to late-Victorian adventures, but also to a specific adventurous mid-Victorian text, Benjamin Cummings Truman’s 1874 promotional tract *Semi-tropical California.* In *The Big Sleep,* Chandler recasts Major Truman’s Utopian Anglo-American colony as the savage colonial periphery of late-Victorian adventure; following Hammett, however, Chandler then delimits the confusions of that milieu via the person of the alienated hard-boiled detective.

**Often Exploited** as a fictional setting, California in a real sense emerges from fiction; the region is named for a fabulous island in Garcí Rodrí­guez de Montalvo’s 1508 novel *Las Sergas de Esplandián,* “the strangest thing that could ever be found in literature, or in any case the memory of people”: “Know that to the right-hand of the Indies was an island called California, very near the region of the Terrestrial Paradise, which was populated by black women, without there being any men among them, that almost like the Amazons was their style of living. . . . Any male that entered the island was killed and eaten by them. . . . ” Montalvo’s seminal tropical romance proved enormously influential, guiding western cartographic representations of California until well into the seventeenth century. California has persisted as a world of contrary polarities, at once a utopian field of adventure, wealth, and pleasure and a dystopia in which
the western adventurer might be wholly subsumed into savage otherness. Obvious in Montalvo’s foundational myth, such ambivalence also clearly informs later texts such as Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast* (1840), not to mention L.A. noir as a whole. Fears of white enervation are suspended in Anglo-Californian writing surrounding the U.S.-Mexican War, when such misgivings might impede Yankee conquest and settlement. Travel writers like Edwin Bryant and Frederick William Beechey continue to emphasize the entrepreneurial possibilities of California, a trend that reaches its apex in Truman’s *Semi-tropical California*, a book calculated to celebrate the “climate, healthfulness, productiveness, and scenery” of Los Angeles and to thereby attract settlers from the eastern United States to the newly acquired territory.

Truman assures the reader that, “Having traveled largely in Semi-tropical California, having examined closely and carefully its agricultural and pomological limits and advantages,” he has “written faithfully and elaborately of this land flowing with milk and honey . . . where every man may sit under his own vine and fig tree” (61). The biblical allusion is telling, for Truman persistently returns to the “Pisgah view” of Los Angeles. Unlike his Israelite predecessor, however, Truman has gained admission into a Promised Land that he continually surveys from above. To “the traveler inspecting this region from the deck of a steamer,” who “can form but a poor idea of its wonderfully attractive features” (13), Truman recommends the “matchless panorama” that may be had from the heights:

A stroll up Buena Vista street, on one of the matchless mornings which are the pride and boast of Los Angeles, will serve a double purpose to either resident or tourist. It will furnish him with an opportunity to look over and upon a panorama of “sea and sky, and field,” which, whenever we look upon it, and we have seen it from almost every available point, seems to reveal some new and still more ravishing charm. . . . [T]he denizen of Los Angeles, or the stranger within her gates, need only ascend the first eminence to the north of its business streets, to look out upon a scene which rivals in picturesque variety any vision which ever inspired the poet’s pen, or fascinated the beholder’s eye.

Her vineyards and orange and lemon groves, and orchards of almost every known fruit, make Los Angeles the garden spot of Semi-tropical California. It is a collection of gardens six miles square, producing, at all times of the year, almost everything that grows under the sun.

But it is not alone the aesthetic taste of the rambler which is gratified. He sees everywhere around him the evidences of a constantly increasing prosperity, of the steady development of the boundless natural resources with which he is surrounded. He sees it in the comfortable and tasteful
buildings which have lately been constructed, and are in the process of construction, a sort of dim faint prophecy of what will be a very few years hence, multiplied a thousand fold, and beautified in proportion, by the constantly increasing wealth of the inhabitants. Elegant residences and villas will adorn the hill-sides, and every available building site will be considered a prize, which good taste and abundant means will struggle for the possession of. (48–49)

Truman begins with the aesthetic pleasures of the view—its “ravishing charm” and “picturesque variety.” Stopping short of the sublime, however, Truman proceeds immediately to entrepreneurial possibilities. Gaining “Buena Vista street,” the “gazer from the hill-tops” (48) enjoys the sense of empowerment that comes with the panoramic view; remarking at another such moment that “the greater part of the city lies stretched out before you like a map” (61), Truman assumes the voice of the Enlightenment surveyor coolly rehearsing a catalogue of natural resources and commercial prospects. Underlying and supplementing both Romantic and Enlightenment ways of seeing are the not-too-distant scriptural allusions: as suggested above, Truman imagines himself an Adamic proprietor of this new Eden (the “garden-spot of Semi-tropical California”) who completes Moses’s forestalled journey into Canaan. Each of these discourses, then, subserves the colonizing mission of Manifest Destiny—Anglo-American conquest and occupation of California emerges as natural, inevitable, and wholly ordained. The “good view” that Truman shares throughout his tract is a Los Angeles yielded to Anglo-American management and development. I would enlarge upon this aspect of Semi-tropical California by encountering Truman’s visions of history and social hierarchy.

Truman’s description of L.A. exemplifies what Albert Boime has described as the “magisterial gaze”; whether registered in painting or literature, this elevated perspective “represents not only a visual line of sight but an ideological one as well. . . . [T]he view from the summit metaphorically undercut the past and blazed a trail into the wilderness for ‘the abodes of commerce and the seats of manufacture.’”5 Throughout the tract, Truman indeed claims a vantage point that embraces past and present. Adumbrating the later rhetoric of Mission Revival boosters such as Charles Fletcher Lummis, Frank A. Miller, and John S. McGroarty, Truman styles the California Missions as evidences of prior European settlement that might charm the inheritors of the Golden State: “A romantic glamour hangs over the region. Before the Declaration of Independence was framed, this portion of California had been settled by Spanish missionaries; the missions and churches which they founded remain, many of them intact, and are
still places of worship; others have yielded to the touch of ‘time’s effacing finger,’ and are but piles of ruins.” Truman assures us that “[w]herever the sites of these churches and missions are found, they present objects of profound interest; not only because of their venerable antiquity, but as indicating the intelligent foresight of their founders” (14). However propitious, these earlier settlements are valuable only as “the development of the resources of the locality increases among the present occupants, and as the necessity of utilizing all these elements becomes daily more and more apparent” (15). John-the-Baptist like, the Franciscans prepared the way for what Truman terms “the real march of improvement” (17), which began with the U.S. victory over Mexico.

“In 1846 Los Angeles was captured from the Mexicans after two sharply contested battles,” writes Truman, a “movement . . . handsomely conceived and executed” that introduced Los Angeles not only into “the great Yankee nation,” but into history itself: the war puts an end to the “‘primitive’ times” of the inefficient whip-saws and “slovenly” zanjas (112), inaugurating rather an era of rapid growth and improvement (26). In a particularly telling passage, Truman contrasts contemporary L.A. to the Mexican pueblo of 1867:

Crooked, ungraded, unpaved streets; low, lean, rickety, adobe houses, with flat asphaltum roofs, and here and there an indolent native, hugging the inside of a blanket, or burying his head in a gigantic watermelon, were the, then, most notable features of this quondam Mexican town. But a wonderful change has come over the spirit of its dream, and Los Angeles is at present—at least to a great extent—an American city. Adobes have given way to elegant and substantial dwellings and stores; the customs of well-regulated society have proved to be destructive elements in opposition to lawlessness and crime; industry and enterprise have now usurped the place of indolence and unproductiveness; and places of public worship, institutions of learning, newspapers, hotels, banks, manufactories, etc., produce ornamental dottings throughout a city, the site of which might have been dedicated by nature as a second Eden. . . . (27)

Truman’s portrait of “an indolent native” recalls the racist stereotypes of African-Americans in the plantation fictions of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page; and, indeed, the Anglo-American vision of the “quondam Mexican town” of L.A. has much in common with the paternalist ideologies that pervade the Reconstruction era. As in colonial discourse at large, the lazy native figure here signifies an arrested culture that fails to properly develop the advantages of this “second Eden.” Yankee inter-
vention becomes therefore a salvific force capable of delivering California into history: indolence gives way to industry, stasis to progress, anarchy to order, ugliness to beauty. From atop the heights, Truman sees that his Los Angeles is the fulfillment of the promise of Manifest Destiny; Montalvo's savage island has been transmuted into the Yankee “city on a hill.”

**IN A SEMINAL** interpretation of L.A. noir, David Fine argues that hard-boiled writers sought to counter the myth of El Dorado: “they transformed it into its antithesis; that of the dream of running out along the California shore,” and thereby founded “a regional fiction obsessively concerned with puncturing the bloated image of Southern California as the golden land of opportunity and the fresh start” (7). I read in hard-boiled virtuosi such as Hammett and Chandler not so much an unalloyed counterpoint to the myth of El Dorado, but rather a return to another Spanish myth, Montalvo’s terrifying and alluring island: “the strangest thing ever found anywhere in written texts or in human memory,” a land of black Amazons who sexually exploit and/or cannibalize captive white men. Teeming with predatory savages and corrupted adventurers, Chandler’s L.A., like Montalvo’s island of California, seems the reverse of the “second Eden” purported by Truman and other boosters. On one hand, Chandler’s fictions may be aligned with the “counter-discursive practices” of California narratives such as John Rollin Ridge’s *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854)—texts that unsettle the linear teleology of Manifest Destiny. Nominating Chandler “the first uncle of western American history,” Patricia Nelson Limerick lauds the novelist’s attention to consequences of the exercise of power: “Raymond Chandler did not fall into the western historian’s trap of acting as if the American conquest of the Southwest put the cultural, social, and economic conflicts of the region to rest” (33). Like Ridge, however, Chandler mitigates the radicality of his historiographical critique; detectives such as John Dalmas and Philip Marlowe illuminate the violent legacies of colonialism in California, but they also restrict the subversive implications of life in the contact zone.

Before turning to Marlowe, Chandler experimented with several prototypical detectives, including Ted Carmody, Steve Grayce, Mallory, and John Dalmas. The latter appeared in four *Dime Detective* stories between 1937 and 1939. My initial response to stories like “Mandarin’s Jade” and “Red Wind” was that the tales turn upon a simple Orientalism, pitting the rational consciousness of the western detective against an irrational world suffused with signs of the exotic. While this Orientalist semiotic is certainly operative within Chandler, as within the noir ethos at large, it forms part of a larger anxiety about stable meanings and identities and
part of larger generic dialogue with late-Victorian adventure. Along with Hammett, Chandler writes California as an exotic frontier in which the metropolitan understanding of self and world might mutate and deform. In other words, Chandler’s Los Angeles, in contrast to Truman’s, is the colonial periphery of late Victorian adventure, a dangerous region whose geological and climatic uncertainties (recall the Santa Anas treated in “Red Wind”) find resonance in savage criminals, femmes fatales, protean confidence men, and defective adventurers.

As its title implies, “Mandarin’s Jade” is a story deeply invested in the Orientalist motifs endemic to detective fiction: the mystery and mayhem incited by the introduction of some exotic object into the domestic west. Like Wilkie Collins’s Moonstone, Doyle’s blue carbuncle, and Hammett’s Maltese falcon, the titular jade necklace, “300 carats of Fei-Tsui,” is an exotic artifact of great value that generates about itself a series of thefts and murders. From the outset of the story, however, we see Dalmas “err” into a world of compromised subjectivities, a “paradise of fakers” (211). Dalmas has been summoned by Lindley Paul, a wealthy socialite who hires him as a bodyguard to guarantee the ransom of the jade necklace from thieves; endowing Paul with a “soft brown neck, like the neck of a very strong woman” and a “white flannel suit with a violet scarf inside the collar” (183), Dalmas calls into question the masculinity of this effete character—it is a homophobic subtext that would declare itself more fully in The Big Sleep. Indeed, Lindley Paul prefigures Chandler’s portrait of Arthur Geiger: Dalmas’s remark that Paul’s beach-house is decorated with “peach-colored Chinese rug a gopher could have spent a week in without showing his nose above the nap” (184) is repeated verbatim in Marlowe’s description of Geiger’s “neat, fussy, womanish” home (25). Recalling late-Victorian Orientalists such as Gustave Flaubert, Lindley Paul and Arthur Geiger appropriate and decontextualize exotic artifacts; as Ali Behdad suggests, this species of Orientalism erases the connections between the artifact and its culture, inscribing rather “the modern traveler’s nostalgic narrative of an imaginary Orient” (63). In a characteristic gesture, Chandler ironizes the Orientalist only to write him into a recuperative “tropical romance”; as we see in the next chapter of “Mandarin’s Jade,” the “belated traveler,” to return to Behdad’s idiom, becomes a reiteration of the defective colonial adventurer.

Paul’s home proves a threshold into a violent Los Angeles far removed from Truman’s “second Eden.” After his client is murdered in an attempt to buy the stolen necklace from thieves, Dalmas embarks on a quest to apprehend the murderer, recover the necklace, and, in doing so, fulfill his ethic of professionalism. Throughout his investigation, Dalmas encounters not only the resistant environment of the hard-boiled formula, but
one reminiscent of the exotic and threatening world of the colonial adventure. The murder episode proper inaugurates this trend. Having been sapped by one of the thieves (themselves racial others—Dalmas notes “a high, niggerish voice” [189] and the hold-up man turns out to be a “tough dinge gunman” [190]), Dalmas finds himself unarmed but for a “fountainpen flash” (191), and we are treated once more to an iconic noir tableau—the lone detective probing about a nocturnal murder-site, not with the exaggerated magnifying glass of the classical detective, but rather a tiny penlight. The archetypal noir scenario is underscored by thematics of corporeal coherence and compromise which Bethany Ogdon has identified as a central tenet of “hard-boiled ideology” (76). Dalmas becomes a reiteration of the bounded noir protagonist, contused but intact: though painfully sapped, the back of his head feeling “soft and pulpy, like a bruised peach,” Dalmas “gathered [his] insides together again” to pursue the alienated professionalism that parallels this bodily integrity. But while Dalmas recalls the monadic alienation of Hammett’s heroes (who are likewise “all in one piece”), then Lindley Paul suffers a fate consistent with cultural defection: Dalmas finds Paul “smeared to the ground,” “[h]is thick blond hair . . . matted with blood, black as shoe polish under the moon, and there was more of it on his face and there was gray ooze mixed in with the blood” (193). Here is a “smearing” of body-boundaries reflective of Becke’s violent adventure stories, an abjection that portends the colonial threat to identity. This grim fate becomes even more explicit in Chandler’s revision of the murder episode in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940): “His face was a face I had never seen before. His hair was dark with blood, the beautiful blond ledges were tangled with blood and some thick grayish ooze, like primeval slime” (60). Paul’s counterpart Lindsay Marriott has not only perished but become unrecognizable; his battered body now devolves toward a primitive and undifferentiated state of existence.

As Dalmas proceeds to investigate the murder, he encounters a number of other characters that amplify Chandler’s evocation of the colonial adventure. The most significant “clue” revealed under Dalmas’s light is a “cigarette case, with tortoise-shell frame and embroidered silk sides, each side a writhing dragon” (194). Found on Paul’s corpse, this “Chinese box” holds a series of clues-within-clues that introduce Dalmas to the story’s central characters; as in Hammett’s fictions, these antagonists are slippery figures who call into question stable and essential subjectivity. The case contains Russian cigarettes which turn out to be marijuana “jujus” (194): a rather offhand and stereotypic conflation of the exotic with the irrational. The plastic mouthpieces of these cigarettes disclose a calling card which reads, “SOUKESIAN THE PSYCHIC.” Dalmas imagines a figure who twists
women “like silk thread around an Asiatic figure” (203), and his introduc-
tions to the Armenian psychic fulfill these Orientalist preconceptions. Souksesian summons Dalmas through his Native American medium Second Harvest, an aboriginal who in a sense recalls the dangerous cultural transgressions of Hammett’s Anglicized Tai Choon Tau. Labeling himself a “Hollywood Indian,” Second Harvest adopts western attire that only amplifies his alterity: his suit and hat are ill-fitting and unkempt, concealing neither his stereotypical pidgin nor what Dalmas discerns as a tell-tale odor—“His smell was the earthy smell of the primitive man, dirty, but not the dirt of the cities” (206). Dismissing Souksesian’s assertion of Second Harvest as a psychic, Dalmas yet reads the Indian in terms of the mythology of the noble savage: he becomes for the detective a massive, purely physical figure who looks “as if he had been cast in bronze” and resembles a “Roman senator” (205–6). Even after he is forced to shoot the Indian, Dalmas eulogizes him as a “poor simple dead guy who didn’t know what it was all about” (216).

Chandler’s “Hollywood Indian” reassuringly suggests that identity is essential, unchanging, and legible beneath the superficial trappings of culture. With “sleek, black, coiled hair, a dark Asiatic face,” and a smile “older than Egypt” (209), Souksesian’s exotic receptionist similarly yields to Dalmas’s ethnographic gaze. Dalmas expects to find in Souksesian himself “something furtive and dark and greasy that rubbed its hands,” but he is greeted instead by “a matinee idol”: “He didn’t look any more Armenian than I did. His hair was brushed straight back from as good a profile as John Barrymore had at twenty-eight” (210). Souksesian is a dangerous cipher for illegibility itself: “His eyes were as shallow as a cafeteria tray or as deep as a hole to China—whichever you like. They didn’t say anything either way. . . . The hands moved in a swift, graceful, intricate pattern that meant anything or nothing . . . whatever you liked” (211–13). The repetition of this latter phrase suggests that Souksesian does not simply register as a discernable racial other, but rather calls into question the validity of reading such signs. This moment is therefore a rare instance of reflexivity in a noir ethos overwhelmingly devoted to the work of realism. Chandler does not, however, exploit Dalmas’s unreliability, proceeding instead with the thematic tension between subjective mutation and arrest.

In the climactic chapter of “Mandarin’s Jade,” “I CROSS THE BAR,” Dal-
mas leaves the affluent coastal neighborhoods of Santa Monica and pursues his investigation into the industrial wastelands of Los Angeles. Interestingly, the seedy environs of the Hotel Tremaine and Moose Magoon’s beer parlor are not only dangerous and run-down, but are also characterized by geographical and corporeal liminality: each end of the bar itself is adorned
with “an old frontier .44 in a flimsy cheap holster no gunfighter would ever have worn” (226); the neighborhood is peopled with “pin-jabbers” and figures such as the bartender, who wears “a thick white scar on his throat” where “a knife had gone in once” (226). But just as porous compromise threatens to overwhelm the detective’s sense of self, he locates in Moose Magoon an essential otherness: “The man was very broad and swarthy. He had a build like a wrestler. He looked plenty tough. He didn’t look as if his real name was Magoon” (227). If Chandler’s portrait of Lindley Paul hints at that of Geiger in *The Big Sleep*, then Magoon’s beer parlor looks forward to the notorious episode in *Farewell, My Lovely*, in which Marlowe enters Florian’s to find “the dead alien silence of another race” (4). In the ensuing combat, Dalmas almost suffers absorption into the Armenian exotic; “The crooks had you all wrapped up in a carpet,” Carol Pride informs him, “for shipment in a truck out back” (229). But, here again, the hard-boiled hero eludes any bodily penetrations or metamorphoses that might undermine his identity; he suffers rather a concussion which affirms the boundaries of the embodied self.

Chandler would later develop “Mandarin’s Jade” and other short stories in the direction of the 1940 novel *Farewell, My Lovely*; but this *Dime Detective* tale is more forthrightly inflected with adventure motifs and, as such, prefigures those in *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*. As in all of his detective fictions, Chandler here boldly reinscribes Los Angeles as an unsetled territory. In doing so, he evokes a central ideological question of imperial/colonial discourse: is human identity essential, as the normalizing rhetoric of western culture insists, or socially constructed, as suggested by the transformations of the self that recur throughout the colonial periphery? John Dalmas on one hand encounters corrupted Anglos like Lindley Paul and Mrs. Prendergast, and seemingly assimilated aliens such as Soukesian—subversive characters who frustrate the detective’s analytic gaze. Reassured, however, by dangerous but discernable racial others—Lou Lid and Second Harvest—Dalmas pushes deeper into “endo-colonial” geographies of Los Angeles. Even as Dalmas finds in the Hollywood Indian a vision of essential racial identity beneath the ill-fitting constructs of western culture, he ultimately locates an “Oriental” exotic at the dark heart of the mystery surrounding the savage murder of Lindley Paul. In the midst of his encounter with the slippery Soukesian, Dalmas assures us, “I’m no schoolmarm at the snakedances” (206); as Richard Slotkin might suggest, he is a reinscription of the western “man who knows Indians.” Within the context of noir, such a moniker not only denotes a savvy frontiersman well acquainted with the ways of his savage adversary, but connotes a colonial border-patrolman capable of recognizing and establishing fixed and stable selves in a shifting carni-
Intuiting, therefore, that Moose “didn’t look as if his real name was Magoon” (we might recall the Continental Op’s initial questioning of Tom-Tom Carey), Dalmas ultimately determines a bedrock of racial otherness beneath the “paradise of fakers”: “Moose Magoon, who turned out to be Armenian; Soukesian, who used his connections to find out who had the right kind of jewels; and Lindley Paul, who fingered the jobs and tipped the gang off when to strike” (232). Racialized identity therefore becomes the unquestionable referent which circumscribes and contains the fluid subjectivities of Lindley Paul and Mrs. Prendergast (who manipulates the gang in order to have Paul murdered). Not surprisingly, Dalmas himself remains as the most coherent figure in the text. Although Dalmas fulfills his professional obligations by unraveling the mystery of Paul’s death, he concludes his narrative with an admission of failure; unable to apprehend Mrs. Prendergast, Dalmas confides to Carol Pride, “I didn’t get the big warm feeling . . . I didn’t get to slap anybody down. I didn’t get to make it stick” (238). Contrary to the positivism of the classical detective story, this bathetic conclusion contributes in a central way to the constructive strategy of authenticating alienation. The hard-boiled protagonist experiences the absurd confrontation of the rational consciousness with the irrational world; cloaked in pessimistic realism, figures such as Dalmas reside in the “protective enclosure” of alienation, insulated from the mutability of the adventurer gone native.

IN “MANDARIN’S JADE,” Chandler broadly counters the utopian mythology of California; with his first and most famous novel, however, Chandler would explicitly evoke and subvert Truman’s Semi-tropical California. From its first pages, The Big Sleep conjures Truman’s ideal Anglo settler, recasting that figure as the corrupted fin-de-siècle adventurer. Although they have realized Truman’s dream of conquest and exploitation, the Sternwoods have also fallen prey to the atavistic dangers of the colonial periphery: Truman’s Edenic garden is hereby transmuted into Montalvo’s savage island of California. Throughout his promotional tract, Truman elaborates upon several settlers that exemplify the Anglo-American development of semi-tropical California, the most prominent of which is a former U.S. army officer who is “the owner of the most beautiful property . . . in Los Angeles county”:

Twenty-eight years ago, General George Stoneman, then a lieutenant in the United States army, camped with his command, after a day’s march, upon the spot which he is now converting into one of the most beautiful estates in California. . . . The four hundred acres . . . he has named “Los Robles,”
the generic Spanish for “The Oaks,” a beautiful natural park of which skirts the southern boundary of his lands, which form a portion of the old Gallardo grant, formerly known as “Pasqualitos.”

This representative passage captures Truman’s reading of Yankee conquest as a teleological force that ushers California into history; the soldier-cum-entrepreneur Stoneman first accomplishes the military occupation of Los Angeles, then acquires, renames, and refashions the “old Gallardo grant.” Truman later dismisses the “interminable labyrinths” of legal disputes between the Mexican landowners and Yankee squatters; in his account of Stoneman’s estate, he altogether elides the legalized dispossession of Californios in the nineteenth century, presenting instead an idyllic vision of the American Adam entering into a new Eden, “finding fresh miracles of loneliness unfolding themselves in ever varying forms at every step he takes” (120). Whether stocking his streams with trout and bass, cultivating a profusion of tropical fruits, or making “steam power and the power of gravitation do all that could be done on the premises,” Stoneman indeed appears divinely appointed to manage natural resources untapped by improvident Indians and Mexicans. “The interior of the General’s homestead,” Truman assures us, “are in keeping with the beauty and wealth of the exterior”: “Books, new and old; pictures and engravings, rare and elegant, in endless profusion; music; a hospitable and charming hostess, healthy and smiling and happy children; in short, all that can be desired to make a pleasant home, ought to make the possessor of ‘The Oaks’ a charming and contented man” (122–23).

The uncharacteristic qualification with which Truman concludes his remarks on General Stoneman strangely prefigures Chandler’s dystopian recasting of *Semi-tropical California* in *The Big Sleep*. “Calling on four million dollars” at the outset of the novel, Marlowe encounters not General Stoneman, but General Sternwood, a fictional counterpart of Truman’s historical figure. As he enters the atrium of the Sternwood mansion, Marlowe finds the alluring “stained-glass romance” together with a painting that reads as a clear allusion to Truman:

> Above the mantel there was a large oil portrait, and above the portrait two bullet-torn or moth-eaten cavalry pennants crossed in a glass frame. The portrait was a stiffly posed job of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican war. The officer had a neat black imperial, black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with. I thought this might be General Sternwood’s grandfather. It could hardly be the General himself, even though I had
heard he was pretty far gone in years to have a couple of daughters still in the dangerous twenties.

Marlowe’s offhand suggestion that this mid-Victorian officer might be the General himself perhaps lends credence to Sean McCann’s reading of the Sternwoods as a family of vampires. Less speculative is the notion that this is the General’s grandfather—like General George Stoneman, the patriarchal Sternwood seems to have settled in Los Angeles following action in the U.S.-Mexican War, founding a dynasty based on rational exploitation of natural resources and transmission of wealth along familial lines of descent. For critics such as Limerick, McCann, and Blake Allmendinger, Marlowe’s investigation of the corruptions surrounding the Sternwood household should be recognized as Chandler’s own disturbance of the Edenic mythology by which Anglo-American boosters repress the arbitrary violence of colonial contest. At the same time, however, the reverence with which Marlowe approaches the portrait implies his nostalgia for the adventurous world of empire. Even as he works to recognize and recuperate the identities of fallen adventurers such as Sternwood and Rusty Regan, Marlowe himself emerges as the authentically alienated noir protagonist, a hero rendered more coherent and distinct by virtue of his suspension between Victorian certitudes and modern fragmentations.

As the suggestive introductory sequence continues, Chandler persists in his evocation of Truman, if in a negative way. While the “stiffly-posed” portrait might hint at the artificiality of imperial ideals, the Sternwoods themselves immediately betray the horrific legacy of this colonial plantation—contrary to Truman’s prophecy, there is here no “hospitable and charming hostess, healthy and smiling and happy children . . . all that can be desired to make a pleasant home”; nor is Sternwood “a charming and contented man.” We might recall McClintock’s reading of the Victorian home as an exercise in “the semiotics of boundary maintenance”—“As colonials traveled back and forth across the thresholds of their known world, crisis and boundary confusion were warded off and contained by fetishes, absolution rituals and liminal scenes.” Like Hammett, Chandler generates narrative and thematic energy by presenting the decay of this central space of imperial/colonial signification: whereas Hammett’s Margaret Tharp is a Sisyphean housekeeper incapable of purging her home of colonial filth, Sternwood’s wife is nowhere to be found, and the vacuum left by this absent “angel in the house” has permitted the household itself to go native. Marlowe is therefore greeted by a perverse recasting of General Stoneman’s “smiling and happy children”; his revery over the portrait ends when Carmen Sternwood emerges like the return-of-the-repressed
Chapter Two

via “a door far back under the stairs.” Marked by “little sharp predatory teeth” and a “curiously shaped thumb, thin and narrow like an extra finger, with no curve in the first joint,” Carmen appears a truly atavistic figure. Like the “uncanny” and “primitive” aura of Second Harvest in “Mandarin’s Jade,” these animalistic regressions steer colonial defection toward essentialism rather than constructivism: as the narrative proceeds, Carmen will form a central part of an entropically darkening world, a collective Other against which the white protagonist might distinguish himself. Approaching reflexivity, however, Chandler moves beyond this naturalization of alienated selfhood to dramatize the quest for identity. As he enters into the service of the Sternwood household, he encounters a spectrum of corrupted selves whose lapses he must somehow recuperate or contain.

McCann argues for *The Big Sleep* as a pseudo-Marxist Gothic tale in which “Chandler paints capital as a vampiric force driven to steal the labor power of honest workingmen” (167). Carmen Sternwood, McCann contends, “is a classic and ludicrously exaggerated example of the female vampire” whose predatory qualities are also evident in her sister and father. Reflecting that no Sternwood ever had “any more moral sense than a cat” (9), the General himself reads as a succubus who “resembles the predatory beasts of turn-of-the century fantasy” and who “needs to lure guileless young men like Regan and Marlowe to join him in corruption.” Therefore, despite its ostensible thematics of male fraternity, the novel betrays “a subtle antagonism running between the detective and his client . . . an undercurrent of hostility [that] runs deeper than personal feeling to reflect the brute facts of economic exploitation.” Although Marlowe, unlike Regan, “refuses to trade his body for money,” he commits himself to the elegiac task of “remembering the decent and rapidly disappearing men everyone else is determined to exploit and forget.”11 Such a reading is wholly consistent with Chandler’s insistence in “The Simple Art of Murder” that “even in death a man has a right to his own identity.”

Whether filial or hostile, Marlowe’s initial encounter with General Sternwood resembles a tableau from a captivity narrative as much as an episode from Gothic horror. If the Sternwood home is a Gothic mansion,12 it appears so in part because of a disturbing collision between culture and nature. Under the careful supervision of the domestic angel, Victorian households might reify the geographical boundaries of empire: exotic elements such as Persian rugs and potted palms may therefore be read as signs of savagery contained and exploited. In Sternwood’s mansion, however, the Edenically managed natural world represented in the hothouse becomes an endo-colonial jungle: “The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. . . . The light
had an unreal greenish color, like the light filtered through an aquarium tank. The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men” (5). This moment recalls not only Henry Morton Stanley’s famous historical encounter with Dr. Livingstone in the African jungle, but, more tellingly, the search-and-rescue operation of Conrad’s Marlow for the lost and corrupted Kurtz. What the detective finds in “a clearing in the middle of the jungle” (6) is neither simply a Gothic vampire nor, as Fontana has it, a “sick and dying lord” (163), but a lost adventurer. Wheelchair-bound on a Turkish rug (like the one that almost subsumes John Dalmas in “Mandarin’s Jade”), the General appears to Marlowe “dying,” “leaden,” and “sunken,” with “claw-like, “purple-nailed” hands and “the outward-turning earlobes of approaching dissolution.” Often applied to castaways in late-Victorian adventure fictions, the term “dissolution” is particularly descriptive, suggesting not merely the imminent death of Sternwood, but his entropic commingling with the savage environment. And what is true of the body is here true of the psyche; the General admits that he has no more sense than his wild, bestial daughters. But while the General’s eyes have lost their fire, they retain “the coal black directness of the eyes in the portrait that hung above the mantel in the hall.” Marlowe significantly restores the connections between the deformed and corrupted jungle castaway and the bold, self-possessed adventurer of the atrium, the space which opposes the exotic hothouse in its relations to Victorian domesticity and U.S. imperial conquest in California. Successful or failed, this is precisely the task of the hard-boiled detective: to seek out lost and captured adventurers, to assess the degrees to which they have succumbed to native turpitude, and to somehow counter the ravages of the colonial periphery.

Sternwood’s hothouse is another of the almost reflexively exaggerated signs that recur throughout both Hammett and Chandler. Though obviously arbitrary and “constructed,” the endo-colonial space does, within the larger context of the novel, signify the tropical decay that has overspread the model Yankee colony of Los Angeles. Chandler evokes and inverts Truman’s imagination of the victorious yet “toilsome struggles with savage nature, and still more savage tribes” (139) that have characterized the Euro-American experience in Los Angeles. The rank jungle growing within the very heart of the Sternwood mansion diametrically opposes the ideal “semi-tropical” environment fantasized by Truman. “Purity of atmosphere is another great desideratum,” writes Truman, as he favorably contrasts the climate of Los Angeles against those of “Florida, Cuba, and most of the Italian landscapes, [which] are covered with a rank, rich growth of tropical vegetation, saturated always with moisture, and undergoing a
constant and rapid decomposition”: “The purity of Los Angeles is remarkable. Vegetation dries up before it dies, and hardly ever seems to decay. Meat suspended in the air dries up, but never rots. The air, when inhaled, gives to the individual a stimulus and vital force which only an atmosphere so pure can ever communicate” (33–34). Mild and temperate, this “sanitarium of the Union” (35) does not enervate, as do the other tropical climes: “The dolce far niente has not yet, in the slightest degree, weighed down the wings of American energy. This may be abundantly seen in their railroad building and other costly enterprises, and the indications of an extraordinary degree of public spirit that may be observed at every turn, and felt in the very atmosphere” (80). As its title implies, The Big Sleep is a text that discerns torpor in the midst of the “energetic” Anglo-American civilization in California. The crippled body of General Sternwood represents an exhaustion that pervades the community at large; suggesting tropical rot rather than semi-tropical abundance, the hothouse becomes an important symbol of the backslidden “outpost of progress” that Marlowe must negotiate throughout the course of the narrative.

Reminiscent of the nostalgic storytellers of Conrad, Stevenson, and Becke, General Sternwood would sit for hours in his greenhouse swapping yarns with his son-in-law Sean “Rusty” Regan, the Irish rover who has gone missing prior to Marlowe's arrival. The subtle contrast between Regan's and Marlowe's respective conversations with the General is telling, for while Regan's bull sessions are consistent with the nostalgic recollections of late-Victorian adventure, Marlowe speaks with Sternwood about immediately pressing “family secrets.” Embarking upon a tandem investigation of Carmen's indiscretions and Regan's disappearance, this archetypal hard-boiled detective assumes the role of colonial administrator/trouble-shooter, after the fashion of Edgar Wallace's Commissioner Sanders, but tempers the cynicism of such a figure with the elegiac voice of Conrad's Marlow. Even as the novel's recurrent allusions to medieval romance encourage us to read Marlowe's investigations in terms of an alienated ethic of comitatus, attention to the adjacent intertext of colonial adventure proves no less relevant, illuminating the former quest as a suppression of the insurgent racial Other, and the latter as the search-and-rescue mission for the lost adventurer. Both inquiries take Marlowe from the wilds of the greenhouse through similarly dangerous endo-colonial spaces, and into confrontation with a host of beleaguered and corrupted whites, who, like General Sternwood, have fallen prey to the “island of California.”

As he surveils Arthur Geiger's bookstore, Marlowe notes that the humid “air was as still as the air in General Sternwood's orchid house” (17); the simile signals not only the tropical decay that pervades the city at large, but
also the collapse of fundamental borders between inside/outside, nature/culture, East/West. Geiger is himself a prominent casualty and sign of this compromised world. For Rzepka, the pornographer-cum-blackmailer reads, along with Eddie Mars and Lash Canino, as a grotesque parody of chivalric virtue: though evocative of Arthurian romance, Geiger’s first names—Arthur and Gwyn—also call into question his masculinity. Moreover, “Geiger’s ‘Chinese robe and farcical Charlie Chan mustache’ suggest his Oriental or, in Gothic terms, ‘Saracenic’ tendencies, a constant temptation to crusaders-gone-wrong such as the renegade Templar, Brian de Bois-Guilbert, in Ivanhoe, or the brothers Sans Foy, Sans Joy, and Sans Loy, in The Faerie Queen” (Rzepka 710). To be sure, such renegades are variations upon the theme of going native, which drives later colonial adventures; and Geiger even more strikingly recalls the defective Orientalist, which Chandler had treated via the character of Lindley Paul in “Mandarin’s Jade.” Geiger’s shop reflects his fin-de-siècle decadence: here is “oriental junk” and “Chinese screens” which obstruct Marlowe’s penetrating gaze, not to mention a femme-fatale receptionist whose “black dress . . . didn’t reflect any light” (14–15). These confluences of exoticism and “indescribable filth,” as Marlowe terms Geiger’s pornographic tome, persist into Marlowe’s description of the blackmailer’s Laurel Canyon home.

“Far more interesting than the Oriental landscapes in detective novels,” writes Walter Benjamin in “One Way Street” (1928), is that rank Orient inhabiting their interiors: the Persian carpet and the ottoman, the hanging lamp and the genuine Caucasian dagger. Behind the heavy, gathered Khilim tapestries the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feels himself the Eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanserai of otiose enchantment, until that dagger in its silver sling above the divan puts an end, one fine afternoon, to his siesta and himself. (64–65)

Explicitly addressing mystery writers such as Poe, Doyle, and Gaston Leroux, Benjamin might well have been describing Geiger’s death-room in The Big Sleep. Like his precursor John Dalmas, Marlowe finds here “brown plaster walls decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames . . . [T]here was a thick pinkish Chinese rug in which a gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap.” The pornographer’s camera is concealed, suggestively, in a totem pole (conspicuously replaced by a Buddha’s head in Hawks’s film adaptation). If Marlowe encounters the natural rot of the jungle in Sternwood’s hothouse, then he finds in the “Geiger menage” (23)
a cultural decay that likewise threatens coherent boundaries, most especially those of the white male adventurer. Amidst the exotica, Marlowe discerns “an odd assortment of odors” (22) and a “sticky riot of colors” (39) which, true to Benjamin’s analysis, presage the horrible spectacle of Geiger’s corpse: “Geiger was wearing Chinese slippers with thick felt soles, and his legs were in black satin pajamas and the upper part of him wore a Chinese embroidered coat, the front of which was mostly blood” (23). For Marlowe, Geiger was already deformed by a missing eye; besides, as he suggests after taking Carol Lundgren’s punch, gay men are inherently characterized by a plasticity at odds with the hard-boiled ideal: “a pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like” (61). It is therefore appropriate that Geiger dies with a “soft messy thump” (21)—like Lindley Paul, who was “smeared to the ground,” Geiger perishes in a physical abjection that underscores his cultural defection. As if to generically locate this fate, Chandler places the oozing corpse at the feet of “an Egyptian goddess”: clothed only in “long jade earrings” and drugged with ether, Miss Carmen Sternwood stares at the prone figure with “mad eyes” (22), as if she has herself wrought the destruction. The tableau is indeed Gothic, but it is the “imperial Gothic” characterized for Brantlinger by thematics of “individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism.” Cynically adopting the title “Miss,” which conjures Victorian proprieties, Marlowe recognizes the failure of imperial/colonial evangelism. The island of California has not been conquered by adventurous men and civilized by angelic metropolitan women, as Truman had predicted; conversely, these figures have been assimilated into savagery.

Marlowe’s response to this scene of abject confusion and inversion may be read as a synecdoche for noir ideology. He sets about the “janitorial” work of the hard-boiled detective, retrieving documents that might implicate the Sternwoods: “I put the notebook in my pocket, wiped the steel box where I had touched it, locked the desk up, pocketed the keys, turned the gas logs off in the fireplace, wrapped myself in my coat and tried to rouse Miss Sternwood. It couldn’t be done. I crammed her vagabond hat on her head and swathed her in her coat and carried her out to her car. I went back and put all the lights out and shut the front door . . .” (24). Like Hammett’s Margaret Tharp, Marlowe must perform the “semiotics of boundary maintenance” central to imperial/colonial housework. More importantly, he engages in prophylactic gestures that lie at the heart of noir subjectivity: he wraps himself in the archetypal trenchcoat and similarly swathes the toxic Carmen (she is “breathing ether” [24]). As best he can, Marlowe restores the corporeal boundaries compromised by Geiger’s decadent spectacle. Fittingly, Marlowe delivers his dangerous package to
Sternwood’s domestics, recommending, “The job needs a woman’s touch” (25). Marlowe has no illusions about the continued efficacy of an imperial ideal that would, as Victorian soap advertisements insist, spread sanitation throughout a septic colonial world. Along with the General’s butler, however, who intones that “We all try to do right” (25) by the contaminated Sternwood household, the detective persists with his arduous task of boundary-maintenance. Wrapped as much in distancing irony as in the cohering trenchcoat, Marlowe concludes the chapter with a vision of alienation: “I went to bed full of whiskey and frustration and dreamed about a man in a bloody Chinese coat who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings while I ran after them and tried to take a photograph with an empty camera” (26). Marlowe is deeply anxious about his ability to contain the boundless horrors of semi-tropical California; but whether or not he succeeds in his janitorial mission, the distinct figure of the noir hero becomes a last bastion against self-loss in the “sticky riot” of California.

Many episodes of *The Big Sleep* find Marlowe suspended between savagery and the lost adventurer: to the opening sequence of the novel and the lurid scene at Geiger’s home, we might add the moment in which Lash Canino murders Harry Jones in the dilapidated Fulwider Building (perhaps one of the “comfortable and tasteful buildings” noted by Truman). Rzepka counts Canino, along with Geiger, as one of the “Knights of Mars”; I would suggest, however, that this “brown man” (113) joins the hissing, murderous Carmen as a savage predator of the urban jungle. The animalistic Canino coldly poisons Harry, who conversely emerges as one of the lost white men eulogized by Marlowe: “You died like a poisoned rat, Harry, but you’re no rat to me” (108). However noble, Harry is yet linked in death and abjection to General Sternwood and Arthur Geiger; the “funny little hard guy” (102) vomits on himself as he dies, an unsettling fact that Marlowe mentions twice. This episode recalls not only the first sequence of the novel, in which Marlowe mediates between Carmen, with her “little sharp predatory teeth,” and the decrepit General, but also with the bloody murder scene in Geiger’s home. *The Big Sleep* reaches a narrative climax with a similar tripartite composition, Marlowe’s “shooting-lesson” with Carmen in the Sternwood oil fields.

Marlowe initially notes that he “could barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money”: “The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich” (14). Chandler replaces the forward-looking expansionist gaze with closed and circular vistas that reveal exploitations of the past, rather than possibilities of the future. Not
so with Truman, whose entrepreneurs, “with an eye always open for big things,” discern in the landscape signs of “vast pools of petroleum which exist in many places in Southern California” (100–1). A little more than a half-century after Truman surveyed the oil-rich possibilities of semi-tropical California, Chandler found himself enmeshed in the heart of the Los Angeles petroleum industry: before turning to the pulps, Chandler worked his way from accountant to vice-president of a number of L.A. oil companies, only to be fired in the midst of the Depression in 1932. Whether Chandler was fired because of alcoholism, business scandal, insubordination, or the collapse of the oil markets, his own story reads as an intertext for *The Big Sleep.* Critics agree that the wizened General stands as some kind of objective correlative for the exhaustion of the natural resources in Southern California and, as Fontana observes, for the diminishing “world of the courageous entrepreneur who develops socially beneficial, primary raw materials,” the “early capitalist ethic of the heroic, individualistic production of empowering energy” (163). In other words, General Sternwood represents the withering of Truman’s adventurous colonizer, General George Stoneman.

It is therefore fitting that the novel peaks in the dilapidated oil field that the Sternwoods might wish to ignore. As with the bizarre juxtapositions of the Sternwood mansion, the slowly disintegrating site of modern production assumes an aspect of natural decay. There is plenty of industrial “junk”—the rotting derrick, rusting pipes, cables, and oil drums—but there is also the “stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight,” the smell of which “would poison a herd of goats,” and “dusty” eucalyptus trees with “flat leathery leaves” (132). In short, the climactic setting of the oil field joins Sternwood’s orchid house and Geiger’s Orientalist interiors to suggest that the pliant environment of semi-tropical California, which yields to the hand of the colonizer, has in fact become the savage milieu of the tropical romance; indeed, these locales are linked not only by death and exoticism, but also by poisonous odors which threaten the protagonist. Unlike its utopian counterpart, this is a hostile world which wreaks insidious transformations upon the body and spirit of the adventurer: hence, the deformed Sternwood, the bloody Geiger, and the poisoned, vomit-soiled Harry Jones. So when Marlowe, having placed Carmen’s target, turns to face the shooter, he emerges as the “cornered” adventure hero: “When I was about ten feet from her, at the edge of the sump, she showed me all her sharp little teeth and brought the gun up and started to hiss. I stopped dead, the sump water stagnant and stinking at my back. . . . The gun pointed at my chest. . . . The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated,
become animal, and not a nice animal” (133). The “sump” might as well be the “swamp” of tropical adventure, and, indeed, Marlowe suggests that the “empty and sunny” spot seems as though it were “not in the city at all, but far away in a daydream land” (132). Although the reader does not know it yet, this episode reiterates the tripartite composition of the earlier moments: Marlowe is confronted by an essentialized savage, who oscillates between bestial predation and infantile regression (after her animalistic fit has passed, Carmen giggles and wets herself). Behind him, in the sump, however, lies Rusty Regan (the nickname is surely a perverse, foreshadowing joke): once a “weather beaten,” “hard-living cynic” of the tropical romance, he is now “a horrible decayed thing” (138).

Here again recalling Hammett’s detectives, Marlowe must work to quarantine the devastations wrought by the literally incontinent Carmen. Marlowe’s relationship with Carmen might indeed be read as a drama of containment. In addition to jeopardizing the hierarchical structures and coherent bodies of semi-tropical California, this femme fatale also menaces the strategies by which Marlowe maintains his own moral and epistemological integrity. Turning up naked in his bed, Carmen penetrates the monastic cell that reflects Marlowe’s own chaste individualism; moreover, her invasion, coded by Marlowe as a breach of racial and geographical boundaries (he dubs her “Cute as a Filipino on Saturday night” [93]), provokes in the detective a momentary regression: with the affront of Carmen’s “small corrupt body” in “the room [he] had to live in” (96), Marlowe “tore the bed to pieces savagely” (97). Recognizing her manifold threat to the subjectivity of the adventurer, Marlowe punctuates his dealings with Carmen by consigning her to an asylum, “Somewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her” (138). What we have witnessed throughout the novel is an escalation of the “continental ops” directed toward Carmen. Marlowe’s initial response of literally keeping Carmen at arm’s length gives way to his prophylactic gestures at Geiger’s death-house, and, finally, to this decisive recourse of institutionalization.

Like Melville’s Ishmael and Conrad’s narrators, Marlowe is “alone returned” to relate a story of catastrophic colonial adventure; The Big Sleep is, in McCann phrase, a “survivor’s tale” in which Marlowe, “[h]aving escaped the parasitic Sternwoods, . . . can only look back with sorrow and longing on the fraternal figure who failed to resist so assiduously and who paid for his weakness with his life” (170). The elegiac conclusion of the novel therefore represents Marlowe’s attempt at damage control, at somehow halting the metamorphic forces unleashed by Carmen. Whatever antagonisms Marlowe might feel for General Sternwood, he persists in his
mission “to protect what little pride a broken and sick old man has left in his blood, in the thought that his blood is not poison, and that although his two little girls are a trifle wild, as many nice girls are these days, they are not perverts or killers” (138). Excepting Geiger, a lapsed adventurer for whom Marlowe has little sympathy, the detective’s investigation is aimed at re-humanizing the victims of “entropical” California. Thus, Harry Jones, who “died like a poisoned rat,” may be remembered as a continent “hard guy”; Sternwood and General and Rusty Regan, both in a sense “horrible, decayed things,” might also be given humanizing eulogies:

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? . . . You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. Far more part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn’t have to be. He could lie quiet in his canopied bed, with his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting. . . . And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep. (139)

Fulfilling Chandler’s dictum that “Even in death, a man has a right to his own identity,” Marlowe seeks to segregate Sternwood and Regan from abject “nastiness” and to thereby restore to these disfigured men discrete and coherent identities. Although he admits himself “part of the nastiness,” Marlowe yet enjoys the alienated authenticity that is noir’s response to late-Victorian adventure. “Outside the gardens had a haunted look,” Marlowe warily notes as he leaves the Sternwood mansion, “as though small wild eyes were watching me from behind the bushes, as though the sunshine itself had a mysterious something in its light” (139). Semi-tropical California becomes an entropical heart of darkness, and, like his Conradian namesake, Marlowe might yet stand in stark relief against the savage nature/native that he has failed to subdue.

**AS A RETORT** to one of Carmen’s many advances, Marlowe at one point replies, “What you see is nothing . . .” “I’ve got a Bali dancing girl tattooed on my right thigh” (54). The crack is on one hand an unremarkable instance of Marlowe’s signature sarcasm, part of the irony which, like the iconic trenchcoat, bounds the alienated detective. Keeping in mind the generic pretext of colonial adventure, however, we might note that such a badge of exotic travel distantly recalls the elaborately tattooed defectors of the nineteenth century. As I argue at greater length in chapter 6, tattooed bodies persist in noir, but usually in the form of antagonists opposed to the sealed body/self of the hard-boiled hero. A tattoo of a Bali dancing girl, in short,
is precisely something that Marlowe would never have: neither tattoos nor the more radical bodily mutations that befall characters such as General Sternwood and Rusty Regan in *The Big Sleep*, or the horribly crushed John Degarmo in *The Lady in the Lake*, will be visited upon Marlowe.\(^\text{20}\) As we have seen, gruesome physical transformations are central to Chandler’s fictions, underscoring the self-abnegation that constitutes the principal danger of the colonial periphery. No one of Chandler’s novels stages the drama of the embodied self more forcefully than *The Long Goodbye*. Often considered Chandler’s magnum opus, this novel continually evokes themes and motifs of colonial adventure, offers an interpretation of their ideological significances, and places these elements in a contrapuntal relationship against the “janitorial” work of the hard-boiled detective. In the person of Terry Lennox/Paul Marston/Cisco Maioranos, Marlowe encounters a lapsed adventurer who, more than any Chandler character, captures the nexus of exotic sojourn, body modification, and (de)constructed identity. In other words, Lennox is not only a compromised white man beset by another savage femme fatale, but a confidence man whose transformations threaten the very notion of an essential self. Along with the roving con artists of Dashiell Hammett, Lennox sees the incipience of a dynamic figure that will haunt noir throughout the twentieth century.

In the first paragraphs of *The Long Goodbye*, Terry Lennox falls out of a Rolls Royce, a British automobile which, as Marlowe observes, possesses an indelible aura. Lennox’s spill into the gutters of Los Angeles is not only a fall from socioeconomic grace and propriety, but descent from a superior metropolitan culture into the tumult of an unsettled territory. On one hand, Lennox suffers the manifold signs of decay that represent western culture in decline: he is drunk (connoting moral and rational compromise) and broke (forced to sell his roadster for “eating money” [2]). Upon their second meeting, Marlowe finds a disheveled and haggard figure bereft of the “energy” that would, for boosters like Truman and Teddy Roosevelt, revitalize exhausted empires: “He was leaning against a store front. He had to lean against something. His shirt was dirty and open at the neck and partly outside his jacket and partly not. He hadn’t shaved for four or five days. His nose was pinched. His skin was so pale that the long thin scars hardly showed. And his eyes were like holes poked in a snow-bank” (6). Scarred, sick, poor, and alone, Lennox might well remind us of Hemingway characters such as Nick Adams and Jake Barnes, traumatized anti-heroes who embody a western world devastated by two world wars. And yet this very comparison implies an important counterpoint to regression. Recognizing Chandler’s admiration of Hemingway, Frank MacShane argues that while Chandler would parody and significantly depart from Hemingway’s formal style, he would retain the modernist
devotion to “divided individuals who are trying to come to terms with their surroundings . . . to give themselves some stability [and] evolve patterns of behavior that permit them to cope” (42, 207). Deeming Lennox “the politest drunk I ever met,” Marlowe is captivated by his dogged self-possession: “Whatever he didn’t have he had manners . . . I’m supposed to be tough but there was something about the guy that got me. I didn’t know what it was unless it was the white hair and the scarred face and the clear voice and the politeness” (5). Like the old man in Hemingway’s story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” Terry Lennox impresses Marlowe as a clean and dignified drunk capable of self-possession amidst dissolution.

It is possible to chart a literary genealogy that works backward from Lennox through Hemingway and into the milieu of colonial adventure. Possessed of a certain “grace under pressure,” Lennox resembles not only Hemingway’s “old men,” generally, but also figures like Francis Macomber and Harry (in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” [1936]): in essence, African adventurers for whom the exotic becomes a stage for self-realization. This motif may also be found within the canonical modernist adventure stories of Conrad—in an existential hero such as Lord Jim—and throughout western fictions about the Pacific. While Stevenson’s and Becke’s unkempt beachcombers and castaways rarely return, “in one piece,” to western civilization, the “prodigals” of Charles Warren Stoddard and John Russell experience in the exotic a baptismal regeneration, an identity “neatly recovered, renewed, refurbished, reanimated, and restored,” as the narrator suggests in Russell’s “The Price of His Head.” Like the colonial periphery of these tales, Chandler’s Los Angeles may be read as an all-or-nothing existential proposition for the adventuring anti-hero. The disheveled drunk who falls out of the Rolls-Royce at the outset of The Long Goodbye, is, in short, a figure drawn immediately from the prodigals of late-Victorian adventure.

“Down and out, starving, dirty, without a bean,” and a yet possessed of “the pride of a man who has nothing else,” Lennox fascinates and vexes Marlowe: “I didn’t know why . . . a man would starve and walk the streets rather than pawn his wardrobe. Whatever his rules were he played by them” (9–10). Here again, body modification reflexively underscores the mutative potential of the self: “The right side of my new friend’s face was frozen and whitish and seamed with thin fine scars. The skin had a glossy look along the scars. A plastic job and a pretty drastic one” (3). Lennox’s reconstructive surgeries become an outright statement of the “plastic” identity implied by the various bodily transformations that pervade Chandler’s fictions. Even as he braces up Lennox in the first two chapters of the novel, Marlowe will make it his business to arrest this plastic subjectivity, to
render Lennox “human again” (7). In other words, throughout the course of their relationship, Marlowe hopes to steer his friend and alter-ego into the subject-position of the existential hero and away from the slippages of the itinerant confidence man, both of which are discernable trajectories of modern colonial discourse. Along with Hammett’s fictions, as well as later romans noirs such as William Linsday Gresham’s *Nightmare Alley* (to which I return in chapter 7), *The Long Goodbye* reflexively demonstrates the noir commitment to authenticating alienation.

Taking place through the Christmas holidays, the first phases of Marlowe’s encounter with Lennox create an aura of heroic alienation via another modernist ethos: the economy of gift exchange. Marlowe’s personal economy is a subject worthy of study in its own right. Here is a small businessman curiously loathe to accept payment: in *The Big Sleep*; for example, Marlowe refuses not only General Sternwood’s initial offer of retainer but final payment as well. While this reluctance may on one hand be attributed to his professional ethics—he cannot accept compensation for anything but a job well done—it also reveals Marlowe’s commitment to a mode of exchange that predates the accumulative philosophy of capitalism. Marlowe’s second meeting with Lennox accordingly takes place “the week after Thanksgiving” as the “stores along Hollywood Boulevard were already beginning to fill up with overpriced Christmas junk, and the daily papers were beginning to scream about how terrible it would be if you didn’t get your Christmas shopping done early.” As he laments, “It would be terrible; it always is” (5), Marlowe does not merely decry the season’s inconveniences, but rather seconds Marcel Mauss’s complaint that ancient gifting practices once central to a society have been supplanted by corrupt rituals of accumulation. These anxieties deeply inform Marlowe’s relations with Lennox, which are characterized by “expensive” tensions. The fact that Lennox sends Marlowe a cashier’s check for $100, “three days before Christmas” (12), anticipates the compromises that will recur throughout the novel. Whereas Lennox tends to compensate his friend with cash, Marlowe himself encourages a personal economy oriented toward objects and rituals that symbolize their relationship: traditions such as the shared gimlets at Victor’s and the circulation of the pigskin suitcase. Indeed, the pair’s attraction to the “quiet bar,” with its ceremonially prepared cocktails and reverent atmosphere, might be read as another allusion to Hemingway. Here as elsewhere, Lennox emerges an ambivalent figure caught between contrapuntal modes of conduct: although he recognizes the communal potential of personal exchange, he also falls into the corrupted economies of his marriage to the wealthy Sylvia Lennox and his wartime camaraderie with Randy Starr and Mendy Menendez. The obligatory principles of
exchange are at work here, but, for Chandler and Marlowe alike, these are inverted and inappropriate relationships that reflect and lead to the ultimate dissolution of the white adventurer. In the former instance, Lennox does not appear a human self bound in expensive obligation to a person or community so much as a man transmuted by the femme fatale into a “thing” alongside other pricey objects. As suggested above, Marlowe is himself impressed with high-end commodities such as the Rolls-Royce, the Jupiter-Jowitt roadster, and the gold-fitted English pigskin valise; his approach to these items parallels his take on Lennox, in that he strives to emphasize the craftsmanship of objects that lie somewhere between art and mass-culture.

The murder plot of the novel amplifies Marlowe’s quest for aesthetic aura, expensive exchange, and alienated humanism. Her face “beat to pieces with a bronze statuette of a monkey” (31), Sylvia Lennox is not simply murdered but obliterated: more than any other bodily trauma, “losing face” means losing identity, and the brutal killing therefore refracts Terry’s own jeopardized identity. In this savage and violent milieu, the besieged fraternity of Marlowe and Lennox stands forth in stark relief. This tradition of bonding exchange culminates as Marlowe aids Terry in his flight to Mexico, a gift compromised only by Lennox’s continual attempts at monetary compensation—the “five Cs” about which Marlowe remains “sore.” Marlowe therefore envisions himself and Lennox as Orwellian, world-weary British colonials, solemnly and ritualistically sipping their Gimlets—which Marlowe assumes “a tropical drink, hot weather stuff. Malaya or some place like that” (131)—as they contemplate the decaying social order of California. We might imagine Marlowe strangely reassured, when he receives the lonely missive from Lennox, a note which momentarily ties up three thematic loose-ends. Although Lennox has feinted toward ethnic defection—not only removing to Mexico but adopting the guise of a Latino—he seems to reinscribe himself into a harshly realistic narrative of authenticating alienation:

I’m sitting beside a second-floor window in a room in a not too clean hotel in a town called Otatoclán. . . . There’s a swarthy character with pointed shoes and a dirty shirt outside the door watching it. He’s waiting for something, I don’t know what, but he won’t let me out. It doesn’t matter too much as long as the letter gets posted. . . . I feel a little sick and more than a little scared. You read about these situations in books, but you don’t read the truth. When it happens to you, when all you have left is the gun in your pocket, when you are cornered in a dirty little hotel in a strange country, and the only way out—believe me, pal, there is nothing elevating
With a vignette worthy of Marlowe himself, Lennox staves off the mutations of “going na(rra)tive” by writing himself into the “last stand” scenario common to colonial adventure. The “not too clean” hotel room suggests a monadic self besieged by dark and hostile forces—the “swarthy character” and the “strange country” without. In addition to the inadequate handgun, Lennox is also possessed of a rational consciousness capable of lucid reflection and self-expression. In good existentialist fashion, he unflinchingly assesses his situation and, against the romantic mythos of adventure, pronounces it “just plain nasty and sordid and gray and grim.” Against Lennox’s protestations, however, we might recognize in his bleak outlook something that is indeed “elevating and dramatic.” His calm reflections and his refusal to somehow save himself by adapting to the surrounding otherness create the conditions for authenticating alienation.

These reassuring “situations” are underscored by Lennox’s statements about Sylvia’s murder and by his treatment of the gift economy. “I might have killed her and perhaps I did,” Lennox insists, “but I never could have done the other thing. That kind of brutality is not in my line” (67). Though marked by his own disturbing facial “plastic job,” Lennox could have no hand in these kinds of mutilations, which call into question the integrity of the self. However “sore,” Marlowe is also assuaged by the way in which Lennox narrates his gift of the five-thousand-dollar bill, the “portrait of Madison” prominent throughout the novel. In his letter, Lennox insists that “it isn’t meant to buy anything”; he encourages Marlowe to accept the gift as an apology and a “token of esteem for a pretty decent guy” (67). As McCann observes, the bill is “‘on one hand, . . . a mark of Lennox’s central qualities—his ‘manners,’ ‘breeding, and generosity. On the other, its extraordinary denomination sums up Lennox’s own decadent wealth and the dangerous abundance of the postwar world” (180). Like Terry Lennox himself, the bill reads for Marlowe as a site of disturbing contradictions and possibilities; he therefore persistently sacralizes this object, emphasizing its rarity and referring to it as a “portrait,” a work of art. Endowing Marlowe with this aesthetic impulse, McCann claims, Chandler “stumbles into a tenet of the Klannish thinking that Hammett and Daly worked so diligently to undermine thirty years before” (181). But this tendency does not represent a clean break with Chandler’s early fiction. Even as he aligns the bill with other rescued mass cultural objects, Marlowe tries to maintain Lennox as a white adventurer safely ensconced in protective alienation, a “continental” operation central to Hammett, Chandler, and the noir ethos.
at large. One of the characteristics that distinguishes *The Long Goodbye*, however, is the complicated reflexivity with which Chandler treats these problems. Marlowe might wish that Lennox had met his end in a heroic last stand in a dirty Mexican hotel room; but this conclusion occurs rather too early in the narrative trajectory.

The first twelve chapters of *The Long Goodbye* certainly satisfy Marlowe’s desire for isolated fraternity in a “world gone wrong.” Terry’s lonely pitched battle in Mexico is complemented by Marlowe’s conclusive gift, his dogged protection of Lennox’s secrets against the threats and intimidations of the police. With the introduction of the Wades, however, the novel replicates Marlowe’s relationship with Terry Lennox, prefiguring its ultimate demise. As we have seen in *The Big Sleep*, Chandler writes Marlowe as a mediator between a helpless adventurer and a threat to masculine identity, often the femme fatale. This is certainly the case with the dissolute Lennox, who is menaced by his wife Sylvia, even in death, and with Roger Wade, who faces a series of threats to selfhood. A purveyor of hackneyed historical romances (a species of debased adventure, perhaps), Wade has already conceded artistic integrity, and is therefore vulnerable to predators such as Dr. Verringer, Candy, and his wife Eileen. Characterized by Australian eucalyptus trees, aloha shirts, and especially the solipsistic “play world” of the cinematic cowboy Earl, Dr. Verringer’s remote compound represents the constructivist threat of exotic adventure, the possibility that the subject might forego any sense of reality, agency, and identity. Verringer readily attributes his lack of professional ethics to the fact that he is “a mixed character, like most people” (117); it is an admission that, for Marlowe, suggests the abnegation of an essential self—the central problem of the novel. In keeping with his holistic function as custodian of white male subjectivity, Marlowe “finds [Wade] when [he is] lost in the savage splendor of Sepulveda Canyon,” physically and emotionally bracing the writer just as he had supported Terry Lennox (151). But while Verringer and Earl recede into the exotic (the doctor purports a connection in Cuba), even more explicitly savage predators confront Wade in his own home.

Having rescued Wade from Verringer, Marlowe returns to the Idle Valley mansion to find Candy, the houseboy, who “looked like a Mexican who was getting fifty a week and not killing himself with hard work” (140). “I didn’t think I was going to like Candy,” Marlowe admits, inaugurating a rhetorical struggle that persists throughout the novel. Slinging epithets such as “cholo,” “pachuco,” and “greaseball,” Marlowe doggedly attempts to locate Candy as a member of the Mexican underclass identified by Anglo-American boosters like Truman as a potential, if problematic, labor pool in Southern California (158, 176). Against Marlowe’s assignments, Candy
insists, “Don’t call me cholo. I’m no wetback. My name is Juan Garcia de Soto yo Soto-mayor. I am Chileno . . . from Viña del Mar near Valparaíso” (159, 258). Candy refuses Marlowe’s “lazy Mexican” stereotype to assume an even more aggressive, subversive role. Though Wade had imagined his houseboy an easily instrumentalized “cockroach in a white jacket,” and “a helpful little guy—in spots” (168, 194), Candy becomes a threatening presence in the Wade household. “I gave Candy too much money,” Wade laments, “Mistake. Should have started him with a bag of peanuts and worked up to a banana” (167). Wade has not only lost the baronial prestige and authority of Truman’s California nobility, but he suffers phantasmic racist visions of “a dark animal underneath the bed” (165) and a figure “with a knife . . . leaning over the bed. . . . Looked a little like Candy. Couldn’t of been Candy” (169). Here is another opportunity for Marlowe to exercise his housekeeping proclivities; he intervenes to discipline Candy through a program that includes verbal reprimands and even corporal punishment. Going so far as to slap Candy for calling him a “son of a whore,” Marlowe continually reminds the houseboy of “his place”: “Just don’t get out of line around here. Keep your nose and mouth clean when you talk about the people you work for” (159). By the conclusion of the novel, Marlowe has accomplished what Wade could not—absolute control of the knife-wielding insurgent: “‘Give me the knife, Candy. You’re just a nice Mexican houseboy. . . . You’re free. You’ve got money saved. You’ve probably got eight brothers and sisters back home. Be smart and go back where you came from. This job is dead.’ Then he reached out and dropped the knife into my hand. ‘For you I do this’” (260). Marlowe is so confident in his management of Candy that he returns his switchblade a few moments later; “Nobody trusts me, but I trust you, Candy,” he intones. Chandler’s climactic moments often take place in and around the homes of the decadent elite who, contrary to Truman’s colonialist fantasy, have failed in their noblesse oblige to govern semi-tropical California. Marlowe must therefore intervene to at least partially recuperate the domestic “semiotics of boundary maintenance.” He is here interested in “personnel” rather than sanitation: in addition to disciplining and “deporting” Candy, the detective-cum-major domo criticizes the insolence of the “Jap gardener,” dubbed “Hardhearted Harry” (261), and tacitly approves the educated deference and distance of the Lorings’ black chauffeur, Amos (293–94). As McCann observes, Amos, like the disciplined Candy, “knows enough to know his place and accept it graciously” (196).

With Verringer “gone to Cuba or . . . dead” and Candy sent packing to Chile, Marlowe has yet another continental operation to perform. Upon seeing the lovely Eileen Wade for the first time, her hair “the pale gold of
a fairy princess” (71), Marlowe reflects, “There are blondes and blondes and it is almost a joke word nowadays. . . . All blondes have their points except perhaps the metallic ones who are as blonde as a Zulu under the bleach and as to disposition as soft as a sidewalk” (72). Nominating Eileen “unclassifiable, as remote and clear as mountain water, as elusive as its color” (73), Marlowe initially exempts her from noir misogyny, which collapses two polar patriarchal stereotypes—the metropolitan wife/mother and the savage temptress of the colonial periphery. He even at one point imagines Eileen the heroine of a conventional captivity narrative—“she was behind a locked door and somebody was howling outside and trying to break it in, she was running down a moonlit road barefoot and a big buck Negro with a meat cleaver was chasing her” (154). Concurring with the Continental Op’s generalization that “all women are dark,” however, Marlowe also imagines that there might lurk “a Zulu under the bleach.” As in “Mandarin’s Jade” and The Big Sleep, the compromised boundaries of the Wade household and of society at large may be traced back to the corruption of the metropolitan angel—the perfidious Eileen proves the chief culprit of the novel. She encompasses the manifold threats to subjectivity that confront latter-day adventurers such as Terry Lennox and Roger Wade. On one hand, Eileen, along with Carmen Sternwood, practices a savage violence upon the body—her murder and mutilation of Sylvia Lennox “defaces” that form in such a way as to undermine its suggestion of discrete and coherent identity. At the same time, however, Chandler associates Eileen with a rampant constructivism that is just as threatening to notions of essential reality and selfhood. Using props such as the replicated British military badge, she has “tried to build another kind of memory—[if] even a false one” (248). As with Verringer’s “hyperreal” universe, in which Earl plays at being a screen cowboy—Eileen’s fantasy world subsumes authentic subjectivity. Roger warns Marlowe that he might go missing, along with Eileen’s “first love,” who “got so lost a man sometimes wonders if he ever existed. You figure she could have maybe just invented him to have a toy to play with?” (151). Similarly, Bernie Ohls assures Marlowe that Eileen had regarded him as just another pliable text—“She wanted to milk you, and she had the charm to use, and a situation ready-made for an excuse to get next to you. And if she needed a fall guy, you were it. You might say she was collecting fall guys” (267). In McCann’s reading, Eileen Wade “inverts Marlowe’s homosocial romance,” thereby raising the “disturbing possibility that all ideal bonds are but masturbatory fantasies” (182). She also exploits the most unsettling implication of the “tropical romance”—the possibility that empirical reality, history, and subjectivity are mutable, porous, and therefore subject to infinite manipulations.
Circe-like, Eileen deforms adventurers on the colonial periphery of Los Angeles. But while the mythological seductress transforms men into animals, Eileen reveals and exploits their ultimate insubstantiality—she characterizes Roger as a “mercenary hack . . . a weak man, unreconciled, frustrated,” and Paul Marston as “less than nothing” (251). Despite all his efforts to authenticate Lennox/Marston, Marlowe must ultimately concur—as his multiple aliases imply, Marston/Lennox/Maioranos is ultimately nothing more than a “plastic job,” a con-man who shifts with his many changes in context. Marlowe's investigations never in fact yield Terry's “true” identity. Paul Marston promises to be the primary self antecedent to Terry Lennox—it is the name that Eileen associates with the man she married in London. In a climactic moment, however, Marlowe reveals that “There was no such person as Paul Edward Marston. It was a fake name because in the army you have to get permission to get married. The man faked an identity. In the army he had another name. I have his whole army history” (246–47). In an effort, perhaps, to retain some sense of his friend's authentic self, Marlowe does not divulge this name. Whether due to his foxhole camaraderie with Mendy Menendez and Randy Starr or his traumatic experience with Nazi surgeons, Marston/Lennox emerges from the war, as Eileen suggests, “an empty shell,” “the friend of gamblers, the husband of a rich whore, a spoiled and ruined man, and probably some kind of crook in his past life” (271). Sylvia's murder initiates another transformation, as Terry flees to Mexico, undergoes a false (though symbolic) death, and is resuscitated as Señor Cisco Maioranos. The product, Marlowe suggests, of Mexican “doctors, technicians, hospitals, painters, [and] architects,” not to mention the machinations of Menendez and Starr, Maioranos seems more construct than authentic human subject: “They couldn't make Terry's face perfect, but they had done plenty. They had even changed his nose, taken out some bone and made it look flatter, less Nordic. They couldn't eliminate every trace of a scar, so they had put a couple on the other side of his face too. Knife scars are not uncommon in Latin countries” (308). Perhaps more than any noir character, Marston/Lennox/Maioranos evokes the protean tendencies of the late-Victorian adventure, in which metrocolonial travels broach the possibility of a radical cultural relativism and reassignment—as with Becke's “Martin of Nitendi” and “Deschard of Oneaka,” Lennox might become Maioranos, “permanently in Mexico” (309). Chandler hereby literalizes the implications of such itinerant shape-shifters—as he debarks down an “imitation marble corridor,” Maioranos wholly abnegates any possibility for authentic subjectivity: “an act is all there is,” he remarks “There isn't anything else” (311).
Chandler does not merely anticipate the critique of the western subject that would dominate contemporary postmodernism; he responds rather to anxieties forthrightly encountered under modern colonial discourse. Marston/Lennox/Maioranos represents for Chandler, as McCann points out, “moral decline as a kind of corruption in national, and, implicitly, racial identity” (178); but the figure also conjures anxieties about whether identity is real enough to become corrupted. In a gesture redolent of noir ideology, Marlowe attempts a modernist intervention into a postmodernist/postcolonial problem. As he returns Terry’s iconic portrait of Madison, Marlowe frankly explains his intentions:

For a long time I couldn’t figure you at all. You had nice ways and nice qualities, but there was something wrong. You had standards and you lived up to them, but they were personal. They had no relation to any kind of ethics or scruples. You were a nice guy because you had a nice nature. But you were just as happy with mugs or hoodlums as with honest men. Provided the hoodlums spoke fairly good English and had fairly acceptable table manners. You’re a moral defeatist. I think maybe the war did it and again I think maybe you were born that way. (310)

Persisting with the search-and-rescue mission evident in earlier texts, Marlowe recognizes in Terry Lennox a mutable adventurer whose fluctuations might be arrested via the recuperative mechanism of authenticating alienation. He therefore attempts to narrate Terry as an isolato who derives himself from the opposition between peculiar personal values and a hostile world. Terry’s initial defection, then, does not conclusively signal racial corruption; indeed, the “sad and lonely and final” last stand that Terry stages in his letter amplifies the noir strategy for alienated selfhood—hence its appeal for Marlowe. The final and fundamental conflict of the novel occurs when Terry returns as Maioranos, not only contradicting his drama of white alienation, but reflexively exposing that narrative as a recuperative mechanism. In the last paragraphs of *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe must abandon his rescue mission and look to himself. By returning the $5000 bill and refusing a last gimlet, Marlowe formally dissolves the gift economy and the homosocial bond that had existed between “those two other fellows”: “It’s just that you’re not here anymore. You’re long gone” (309, 311). Having cited what is, in a sense, a more successful candidate for his elegies—Roger Wade, “[j]ust a human being with blood and a brain and emotion” (309)—Marlowe retreats into his own “protective enclosure” of alienation: “I never saw any of them again—except the cops. No way yet has been invented to say goodbye to them” (312).
In order to demonstrate the centrality of late-Victorian adventure to the noir ethos, I have directed my attention to the two most celebrated practitioners of hard-boiled detective fiction. Hammett and Chandler aggressively pursue the interceptive mission inaugurated by Poe and Doyle, admitting the colonial adventure story, with all its disturbing possibilities, into their own tales of crime and detection. But while the classical detective admits otherness into his own person, the hard-boiled detective lives up to his moniker by maintaining an ethic of alienated heroism that might guarantee the borders between white domestic subjectivity and exotic otherness. “One white dick,” as he is labeled in Hammett, the noir detective seeks to perform a “continental operation” upon the breached households and embodied selves of the colonial adventurer: figures such as the Continental Op and Philip Marlowe are devoted to the task of cleaning up abjection and arresting the ever shifting mutations of the confidence man “gone na(rра)tive.” The last stand of the hard-boiled hero, however, is his own contused, coherent body, a form commensurate with his isolated ethical core. This vision of protective alienation is not peculiar to Hammett and Chandler; as I shall argue throughout the course of this study, such recuperative humanism may be found in noir novelists as diverse as William Lindsay Gresham, Frederic Brown, John D. MacDonald, and Jim Thompson. Thematics of authenticating alienation also govern film noir, where its constructive polarities would be strikingly depicted in Expressionistic mise-en-scène, as well as in narratives of beleaguered adventure.