In their seminal study, Borde and Chaumeton find in early film noir “a total submission of cinema to literature”: “The immediate source of film noir is obviously the hard-boiled detective novel of American or English origin. . . . [T]he fact that the first great film noir is *The Maltese Falcon*, adapted from one of his finest tales, underlines Dashiell Hammett’s importance” (16–17). While film scholars such as David Bordwell marginalize film noir’s fictional pretexts, most agree that hard-boiled fiction plays a decisive role in the emergence of the bleak crime movies that began to appear in the early 1940s. Whether attributable to influence or affinity, hard-boiled fiction and film noir unite in a preoccupation with colonial adventure and its attendant racial ideologies. Eric Lott accordingly contends that “[b]lack film’ is the refuge of whiteness”: “. . . the troping of white darkness in noir has a racial source that is all the more insistent for seeming off to the side. . . . Noir may have pioneered Hollywood’s merciless exposure of white pathology, but by relying on race to convey that pathology, it in effect erected a cordon sanitaire around the circle of corruption it sought to penetrate” (85). Pointing out “white critics’ blindness to the importance of blackness in a racial sense to film noir” (183), E. Ann Kaplan pursues the implications of Lott’s analysis. In *Looking for the Other*, Kaplan argues that for directors such as Jacques Tourneur and Orson
Welles, “the idea of the dark continent moves from literal travelling to lands dubbed by the west ‘dark’ because unknown and mysterious to the West, into the dark continent of the psyche and especially the female psyche.” Julian Murphet treats such anxieties as the “racial unconscious” of film noir, the residue of ideological tensions in the U.S., and an emergent French existentialism itself preoccupied with the problematics of empire and decolonization. Film noir “seeks to produce a new subjectivity, a new white man, able to withstand the shocks of . . . urban transformation. In order to do so, however, it exploits the figurai and narrative resources of misogyny—not only to dramatize a tension between traditional and consumer society—but also to displace a more profound racial antagonism from conscious expression” (30). Naremore similarly acknowledges the racial dynamics of film noir, “the other side of the street.” He points out that the Continental recognition of film noir emerged from a “European male fascination with the instinctive” and was characterized by an attraction to crime films about “white characters who cross borders to visit Latin America, Chinatown, or the ‘wrong’ parts of the city” (12–13). But Naremore is reluctant to theorize noir racism, gravitating instead toward a discussion of the progressive potential of mainstream noir films: “Although my remarks emphasize the racism and national insularity of Hollywood, my chief purpose is to show that noir, like the popular cinema in general, has a potential for hybridity or ‘crossing over’” (224). However impressive, these readings allow noir colonial discourse to hide in plain sight. Noir ideology is neither simply “off to the side” nor wholly “unconscious”; indeed, though possessed of the subtle machinations identified by these scholars, film noir is quite obviously inflected with both the form and ideology of colonial adventure.

In keeping with the preoccupation of hard-boiled fiction, many prominent films noirs foreground the white adventurer against a dark canvas of racial otherness. Focusing upon Welles’s The Lady from Shanghai, I argue that film noir, as a whole, rehearses and yet revises metrocolonial circulation between exotic and domestic. While films such as Josef von Sternberg’s The Shanghai Gesture (1941) and Macao (1950) cast the protagonist as a cynical imperial adventurer who wanders exotic lands, Rudolph Maté’s D.O.A. (1947) and Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard (1950) envision the noir antihero embattled within the “endo-Orient” of urban California. Almost epic in scope, Welles’s The Lady from Shanghai embraces both of these geographical movements. Like Conrad’s Marlowe, Michael O’Hara (Orson Welles) leaves the metropolis, adventures through terra incognita, and returns to a compromised, endo-colonial San Francisco. As in the colonial adventure, such passages open the noir protagonist to a panoply of
disturbing transgressions and dissolutions. As Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo point out, this “noir anxiety” may be warded off by “the polarization of ambiguity into extremes that can easily be located and can help reestablish lost boundaries: black or white, masculine or feminine, familiar or foreign” (xxx). True to its hard-boiled origins, film noir dampens the triumphalism of Enlightenment and Romantic imperial narratives, but only in a way that preserves the constructive alienation of rational westerner against an irrational exotic.

No single director of films noirs is more preoccupied with imperial adventure motifs than Josef von Sternberg, whose films The Shanghai Gesture and Macao together comprise point and counterpoint within the colonial discourse of noir. Like Hammett, Sternberg rehearses the trajectory of noir from late imperial adventure to the hardboiled detective formula. A seminal film noir, The Shanghai Gesture bares the late imperial roots of the noir logic as a whole: the western rational consciousness, embodied in Sir Guy Charteris (Walter Huston), fails to contain the seductive irrational metonymically posited in Shanghai. From the outset of the film, Sternberg suggests Shanghai as metonymy for both the Orient and the irrational; the film’s epigraph reads: “Years ago a speck was torn away from the mystery of China and became Shanghai. A distorted mirror of the problems that beset the world today, it grew into a refuge for people who wished to live between the lines of laws and customs—a modern Tower of Babel.” Shanghai becomes in the film a microcosmic reflection of late imperial disorder that threatens to engulf the world. The opening sequence of the narrative clearly argues for imperial decay as the cause of “the problems of the world”; we initially find a foggy Shanghai street where a Ghurka policeman calmly gives traffic directions ignored by the milling crowd. This opening image recalls that of Hammett’s Red Harvest, in which the Continental Op observes a disheveled traffic-cop who represents the entropic corruption of “Poisonville.” Sternberg racializes this tableau, presenting a happily ineffectual Indian policeman, a turbaned and uniformed remnant of empire, who embodies disorder at once metaphysical and local. When the Ghurka accepts a “squeeze” on behalf of Dixie Pomeroy (Phyllis Brooks), he confirms Shanghai as a liminal zone beyond imperial control and therefore “between the lines of laws and customs.” Sternberg hereby complies with paternalist arguments for the incapability of colonized peoples to govern themselves and the consequent “white man’s burden” of colonial management.

The Shanghai Gesture explicitly arises from anxieties about the experience of white adventurers in exotic locales. Mother Gin Sling’s casino reads
as the dark locus of Shanghai: with its circular tiers, the casino resembles a Dantean inferno where diverse gamblers torment themselves. As Victoria’s escort remarks, “Look at those faces. Half of them are Eurasians. Who said never the twain shall meet? Java, Sumatra, Hindu, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino, Russians, Malaya. What a witch’s Sabbath.” As the initial casino sequence proceeds, we become further acquainted with the denizens of Shanghai: the narrative momentarily dwells upon Boris, a Russian gambler of aristocratic bearing who, after great losses, attempts suicide. Mother Gin Sling (Ona Munson) appears to calm the gambler, giving him an extended line of credit and advising him to kill himself at home. Boris suggests of the film’s primary movements: Shanghai is a chaotic Babel where once powerful westerners are seduced and ultimately destroyed. As Said puts it in *Orientalism*, this is a Far East in which “[r]ationality is undermined by eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values” (57).

Opening sequences point to the central plot involving Mother Gin Sling, Victoria Charteris/“Poppy Smith” (Gene Tierney), and the antiheroic protagonist Sir Guy Charteris (Walter Huston). This core narrative certainly bears out the connection between late-Victorian adventure and noir. Like many imperial protagonists, Sir Guy Charteris has reinvented himself on edges of empire and changed his name in order to evade familial attachments. The narrative finds Sir Guy poised at the apex of imperial strength, head of a syndicate of western entrepreneurs bent upon redeveloping Shanghai by evicting “undesirables” like Mother Gin Sling. This is the Sir Guy we continually find in the imperial postures of mapping Shanghai redevelopments, enjoying rickshaw rides, barking pidgin at coolies, and lecturing his unruly daughter. But the noir vision of the film arises from its harsh qualification of the Enlightenment imperial project: Sir Guy is incapable of executing imperial designs public or private. Adventure has occasioned moral lapses that recur to spoil Sir Guy’s paternalist schemes. Mother Gin Sling turns out to be his abandoned wife, Victoria/Poppy their daughter. When Mother Gin Sling learns of Sir Guy’s true identity, she conspires to publicly expose him, ruin his credibility, and save her thriving business. Mother Gin Sling uses Victoria/Poppy as a pawn, captivating her with gambling and the charms of the lascivious Dr. Omar (Victor Mature). But when Mother Gin Sling unveils the corrupted Victoria to her father, she also learns the girl’s true paternity. After a bitter quarrel with her estranged daughter, Mother Gin Sling shoots Victoria and resigns herself to the law. In the powerful final shot of the film, the character known only as “the Coolie” (Mike Mazurki) reiterates Sir Guy’s condescending question to the helpless father: “You likee Chinee New Year?” We leave Sir Guy unable to respond, paralyzed before the Eurasian
giant who represents the dangers of border crossing and the impossibility of colonial control.

On one hand, *The Shanghai Gesture* seems to enact a critique of empire building. Most of the turmoil and anguish in the film has, after all, been caused by Sir Guy, whose abandonment of Mother Gin Sling catalyzes the problems of the narrative. Mother Gin Sling herself has been given voice and agency: she eloquently denounces Sir Guy and western racism in general, at one point sarcastically warning the drunken Victoria: “You’re in China and you’re white. It’s not good for us to see you like this. You’ll bring discredit to your race.” Mother Gin Sling even implicitly indicts the viewer eager for Orientalist spectacle, as she confides to her dinner-guests that lurid exhibitions like the white-slave auction are faked for tourists. Indeed, the subaltern gets the last word as the Coolie reproves Sir Guy.

Such a reading, however, seems tortured when laid alongside Sternberg’s thoroughgoing collusion with imperial/colonial discourse. Given the almost constant reminders of Shanghai’s turpitude, the Orient of the film remains true to western expectations. As with exotic settings throughout late-Victorian adventure, Shanghai becomes prime cause and refraction of the westerner’s corruption. Moreover, imperial/patriarchal constructions dominate both central women characters in the film. Mother Gin Sling fulfills at once Orientalist and misogynist expectations as she destroys herself through an act of explosive, unpremeditated violence inconsistent with her otherwise calculating demeanor. As her names imply, Victoria/Poppy also embodies “Victorian” fantasies of white womanhood and anxieties about dark women who might exert some “narcotic” effect upon the white rational consciousness. In other words, she is both metropolitan angel and femme fatale. In the end, *The Shanghai Gesture* is perhaps most preoccupied with fears of the miscegenous compromises that occur throughout the contact zone. The film virtually begins with lines which label polyglot Shanghai a “witch’s Sabbath” and concludes with the eradication of Victoria/Poppy, the conflicted product of a miscegenous relationship. As a seminal film noir (one labeled as such by Borde and Chaumeton), *The Shanghai Gesture* illustrates the centrality of colonial adventure within the noir logic of authenticating alienation. Sir Guy Charteris might fail to realize Victorian dreams of empire, but he does emerge a coherent white subject, ensconced within the “protective enclosure” of alienation from the exotic.

As Hammett’s work attests, the noir imagination is replete with motifs of colonial competition: the anxiety of influence so often attributed to Angloamerican artists plays itself out in scenarios within which the American protagonist variously defeats or rescues some exhausted “Old World”
figure, most often the British imperial adventurer. In *The Shanghai Gesture*, Sir Guy Charteris takes his place among the frustrated colonizers of late Victorian adventure. Though suffused with noir cynicism, *Macao* sounds a triumphalist strain as Nick Cochran (Robert Mitchum) assuages postwar angst with an assertion of Angloamerican superiority. Mitchum had already played a hard-boiled returning veteran in *Till The End of Time* (1946): seasoned in (Orientalist) noir endeavors such as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), Edward Dmytryk casts Mitchum here as a Marine veteran traumatized by island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific Theater and alienated by the painful return to civilian life. Sternberg perhaps remembers Mitchum’s performance in *Till the End of Time* when he directs Mitchum as a Pacific veteran who aimlessly wanders the Orient, unable to return stateside because of his complicity in a New York City murder. Throughout the course of the film, *Macao* provides Cochran with an opportunity for regeneration: like many noir protagonists, the ex-G.I. stumbles into a criminal milieu, in this case a lapsed European colony that evokes, tests, and ultimately validates his sense of self.

As in *The Shanghai Gesture*, Sternberg deploys in *Macao* the *mise-en-scène noir* within the formula of colonial adventure. The opening credits of the film mimic travelogue as “Oriental” characters appear over serial shots of sunny Macao. But these benign images, promising an Orient which yields to the western gaze, are succeeded by a conventional noir sequence: shadowy figures chase a lone white man, clad in a white suit, through a dark underworld of docks, nets, and obstructive stacked crates. One of the Asians, (Itzumi [Philip Ahn]), throws a well-aimed knife into the back of the white man, who plunges into dark waters of the harbor. Here again, the visual polarities of noir concur with the larger color-codings of western imperial/colonial discourse. Just before his death, the white figure, climbing towards escape, is foregrounded against a darkness both racial and metaphysical. These visual and thematic binaries translate quickly into narrative particulars: the murdered man is a New York police detective sent to Macao in order to apprehend Halloran (Brad Dexter), an American fugitive operating in the colony under the protection of corrupt Portuguese officials. In a sense, *Macao* begins where *The Shanghai Gesture* concludes: the dark Orient not only refuses western colonization and civilization, but seduces “defective” westerners—criminals and exhausted colonials. Westerners are incapable of subduing the chaotic Orient, and, as in the confrontation between Sir Guy Charteris and the Coolie, East and Westerner remain frozen in an attitude of authenticating alienation.

The second major sequence of *Macao*, however, promises a resolution to this dilemma: the frame is filled by a great white passenger ship sailing
into the harbor. In a conspicuous conflation of the tropics with mysterious danger, the ship’s barometer reads “Healthy for Plants/Unhealthy for Humans”; this ironic punctuation of the previous sequence declares that only westerners are human, while the inhabitants of Macao are more like rank vegetation. The establishing long-shot gives way to vignettes that introduce the principal characters of the film. Julie Benson (Jane Russell) appears initially as a stock femme fatale: clad in a dark, form-fitting dress, she negotiates a questionable relationship with a lascivious fellow-passenger. As with Dixie Pomeroy and Poppy Smith in *The Shanghai Gesture*, Julie Benson’s Eastern travels concur with moral turpitude. In a moment of foreshadowing, Benson is rescued by passerby Nick Cochran, who intervenes to save her from the masher. After a predictable exchange full of wisecracks and sexual tension, Nick and Julie part. Lawrence Trumble (William Bendix) obtrudes to flirt with Benson and to establish himself as a central and yet comic figure, subordinate to Cochran’s prestige. Posing as a traveling-salesman, Trumble is actually another NYPD detective, sent to retrieve Halloran. The successive “Customs” sequence cements the implicit hierarchy of *Macao*. At the bottom of the structure is a nameless Chinese photographer (George Chan), an innocuous ancient who takes souvenir photos of the tourists. Next comes the Portuguese officer Lt. Sebastian (Thomas Gomez); fat and slovenly, he reads as a symbol of colonial mismanagement. Our three principals are photographed in characteristic attitudes: Julie appears exotic and seductive; Trumble appears avuncular and comic; and Nick Cochran wears Mitchum’s signature mask of stoic indifference. Macao here literally forms the background against which the principals emerge, another “speck of mystery” which suggests a world beyond colonial government and imperial control.

*Macao* proceeds by sorting Nick Cochran’s relationship with Julie Benson and Trumble; and each resolution suggests the imperial/colonial investments of noir. Cochran pursues Julie, at one point proposing that they run away to Melanesia where Cochran hopes to work as the manager of a friend’s plantation. Nick’s proposal is fraught with heavy-handed ideological implications: his very desire to rescue the “fallen” Julie from Oriental turpitude reads almost as the resolution of a captivity narrative. Such race-and-gender-political implications amplify with Nick’s escapist fantasy. Julie’s ultimate refusal is based not upon aversion to plantation-life, but rather upon her doubts about Nick’s faithfulness. Cynicism, rather than social conscience, is also what drives the film’s rejection of colonial nostalgia: “it would be pretty to think” that one could return to the certainties of Victorian colonial life, but Macao itself exemplifies the dangerous fruits of such an enterprise.

Trumble resolves Nick and Julie’s dilemma by drawing Nick into the
case against Halloran. In one of two counterpoints to the opening sequence, Cochran and Trumble pursue Itzumi through the dark labyrinth of the docks. Trumble suffers the same fate as his predecessor; before expiring, however, he secures Nick’s redemption: he has cleared the charges so that Nick might return stateside. Trumble’s recommendation provides an existentially authentic alternative to plantation fantasies. Nick must clear his name before he can “make an honest woman” of Julie. This multivalent resolution, in turn, may only occur when Nick completes Trumble’s mission, a show of “good faith” which expunges the uncomfortably defective westerner. In the climactic sequence, Nick and Halloran struggle on the deck of Halloran’s yacht; clad alike in white suits, the combatants merge. Nick triumphs by throwing Halloran overboard and then diving into the dark water after him. The gymnastic suggests a second counterpoint to the opening sequence in which the murdered detective was submerged. Nick hereby rescues Halloran from a fate worse than prosecution: he redeems the colonial defector from the regression which haunts the antihero of late-Victorian adventure. With his last line to Julie—“You’ve got to get used to me fresh out of the shower”—Nick implies not only the fulfilment of the classical Hollywood love-story, but also colonial regeneration through violence. Both *The Shanghai Gesture* and *Macao* sound an elegiac note for the passing of the evangelical project of western empire: the colonist is no longer capable of changing the world. But the passing of these halcyon days does not mean that the Orient is useless. To the contrary, the category of the Orient yet provides throughout noir the dark opposing term within and against which the “white noir” hero comes into being.

**NICK COCHRAN** reads as a variation of the hapless protagonist that had already come to pervade films noirs of the ’40s. Frank Krutnik describes this central noir formula as “male suspense thriller,” a subgenre in which “the hero is in a position of marked inferiority, in regard both to the criminal conspirators and to the police, and seeks to restore himself to a position of security by eradicating the enigma.” Krutnik’s description assuredly emerges from films such as *The Lady from Shanghai*, in which Michael O’Hara must steer a course through the criminal machinations of the Bannisters and Grisby, on one hand, and the penalty of the law, on the other. *The Lady from Shanghai* is regarded as one of the most celebrated films noirs of the 1940s, a film that fully realizes subjectivity through authenticating alienation. Welles inherits and masterfully transforms the imperial adventure formula without disturbing its fundamental ideological assumptions. Recalling Welles’s 1938 radio adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, and his proposed screen version, Andrew Britton points out the plausibility
of reading *The Lady from Shanghai*, along with *Touch of Evil* (1958), “as a clandestine variation on the theme of Conrad’s novella” (221). James Naremore deems *Heart of Darkness* “a kind of *roman noir,*” which “served as the inspiration for Graham Greene’s thrillers, especially *The Third Man,*” and further suggests that Welles’s proposed film adaptation for 1940 “would probably be regarded today as the first example of the American film noir” (237). Naremore’s analyses of the 1939 screenplay reveal the ways in which Welles sought to cast himself as a Marlow whose identity is derived through frightening encounters with black otherness:

Naremore’s and Britton’s respective comments remind us that Conrad’s Marlow is perhaps the most enabling pretext for the noir subject, that most evocative of the amalgam of subversive and conservative tendencies found in modernism as a whole. I argue that *The Lady from Shanghai* reads as Welles’s elaboration of the imperial adventure trajectory of the journey into, through, and back from an exotic heart of darkness. Like Conrad, however, Welles ironizes the protagonist’s return to the western metropolis. For both Conrad and Welles, the alienated protagonist-subject arises from the collision of light and dark, east and west, rational and irrational.

From the outset of the film, Welles literally foreshadows the compromised metropolis with which the film concludes. E. Ann Kaplan suggests racial overtones of the dark *mise en scène* in the initial New York sequence:

> ... the deliberate, even heavy-handed, ways in which whiteness and blackness are contrasted in the visual style of the film references suppressed knowledge of racial blackness versus the whiteness of the majority of Americans at the time. The film opens in darkness: the titles appear across images of black water accompanied by gloomy musical tones. This is
followed by a very black silhouette of a Brooklyn skyline split between a light band at the top, and a black band at the bottom of the shot.\(^5\)

This collusion of visual style with race-politics becomes even more dramatic within the context of the adventure formula. Like late-Victorian adventure writers and the innovators of American hard-boiled detection, Welles associates modernity with imperial decay, with the compromise of the metropolis. Indeed, Welles’s handling of New York City in *The Lady from Shanghai* strongly recalls the way in which Marlow describes London in *Heart of Darkness*:

> The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. . . . The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist of the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

> And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Conrad of course adumbrates the trajectory of his novella: Europe’s entropic civilizing mission cannot hope to eradicate savagery either at home or abroad. After relating the story of Kurtz’s fall, Marlow concludes that the western metropolis “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (18). With the somber opening shot of the Manhattan skyline, Welles was able to at least partially realize his adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. And this darkness is illuminating; the “dark city” of noir derives from the corrupted metropolis of imperial Gothic, its visual darkness always racial as well as metaphysical.

Welles assures us that the city’s darkness is not merely visual; our chivalric hero does not have to travel very far into the “asphalt jungle” to encounter a figure who is both metropolitan angel and savage mistress. Conrad had hinted at such a collapse with the dark shadows which cloud the brow of the Intended at the conclusion of *Heart of Darkness*; Welles amplifies the conflation by juxtaposing in Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) a series of oppositions endemic to western culture: masculine/feminine, West/East, light/dark, rational/irrational, good/evil. Venturing into the
endo-colonial jungle of Central Park, O'Hara finds a conventional motif: the rescue of a white captive. But after repelling the attackers, Michael finds Elsa a sign of Oriental contagion. Elsa initially confides that she was raised in China, in Chi Fu, which Michael pronounces “the second wickedest city in the world” (“the first is Macao”), and has been living in Shanghai (we might recall Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who has come to San Francisco from Hong Kong). In keeping with her exotic origins, Elsa not only seduces and manipulates Michael, in the fashion of the femme fatale, but does so in a way that harnesses anxieties about a threatening Orient. She becomes not the sign of imperial domesticity (as in the conventional adventure), but rather a portal into exotic danger.

Christening the Bannister’s yacht Circe, Welles evokes The Odyssey (the Ur-text of imperial adventure), casting Michael as Odysseus and Elsa as the misandrous sorceress. Elsa is identified throughout the film with animality—verbally, as in Michael’s anecdote about the frenzied sharks off Brazil, and visually, in the aquarium scene in which Elsa and Michael tryst against a backdrop of predatory sea creatures. As she lures Michael aboard the Circe, and into the conspiracy, Elsa indeed threatens to transform Michael into a beast, a “shark” like Bannister or Grisby. Throughout the course of the narrative, Elsa persistently attempts to seduce Michael to compromise with the irrational that she represents: “Everything’s bad, Michael, everything. You can’t escape it or fight it, you’ve got to get along with it, make terms.” Far from offering a floating sanctuary, the yacht itself is the locus of danger and intrigue. But for this fact, the cruise becomes the most formulaic phase of Michael’s own “odyssey”—the underworld journey of the epic. From the moment he signs on as mate of the Circe, Michael finds himself baffled by a series of exotic spaces that underscore his consuming desires for Elsa and his inability to read and control the deepening mystery. As he attempts to win Elsa away from Bannister, Michael proposes that the couple fly to “some one of the far places.” Elsa’s ironic reply—“We’re in one of them now”—replaces one form of Orientalism, Michael’s romantic escapism, with another: the late-Victorian vision of the exotic as intractably savage. The Circe’s cruise appears a succession of strange and foreign tableaux: the dark, labyrinthine streets of Acapulco; the predatory animals of the picnic expedition; the torchlit, infernal beach scene—all accompanied by Heinz Roemheld’s exotic score (perhaps Welles here realizes his design to film Marlow’s surreal perceptions). As in late-Victorian adventures, exotic settings enable and refract the savage degeneration of white colonials.

Welles punctuates this string of exotic locales with a more elaborate reinscription of endo-colonial San Francisco. Having escaped from the
authorities in the midst of his trial, Michael is returned to the unchartable (and uncharitable) spaces of Chinatown, which represent Elsa's malign influence. Like Hammett's Op, the drugged Michael remains bewildered by the strange environs of Chinatown, with its indecipherable characters and baffling sounds (this latter especially apparent in Welles's rendition of the Chinese theater). Having “made terms” with the “badness” of the world, Elsa conversely moves with ease through the urban jungle, speaking Chinese and tracking Michael through a network of Chinese operatives. For Oliver and Trigo, this “Asian femme fatale” (53) embodies a threatening polyphony that connotes “fluid identity” (70). Even the climactic “funhouse” sequence of the film conflates Oriental and irrational, as a Chinese dragon swallows up a helpless O'Hara. With this final location, Welles problematizes the conventional structure of the imperial adventure, which dictates a return to the domestic space of settlement or metropolis. Michael neither embarks from nor returns to an incorruptible American “city on a hill.” He might have been able to elide the implications of compromise in New York City; but he returns to the U.S. to find San Francisco a backslidden metropolis that has lost its feeble grasp of western civilization. In developing the noir visual style, Welles seems to echo and revise Marlow's lament: “This also is one of the dark places.”

Michael O'Hara is in many ways as ironic a figure as the American city itself. As E. Ann Kaplan points out, Michael's “Black Irish” identity connotes darkness and “savagery.” That said, Michael inherits the tarnished chivalric ideal epitomized by Chandler's Philip Marlowe; he is, as Elsa Bannister at one point suggests, a “foolish knight errant.” Despite his protestations that he is “no hero,” Michael initiates his narrative with a recount of his gallant rescue of Elsa. Michael has indeed killed a man, but the murder is explained as an act of war, the execution of a Franco spy during the Spanish Civil War. Michael also inherits the hard-boiled characteristics of lucidity and insularity. Even as O'Hara confides to Grisby his recognition of the essential “guilt” and “hunger” that lie beneath the “fair face” of the land, he seeks to remain aloof from the naturalistic “hunger” about him: “I’m independent . . . I’ve always found it very sanitary to be broke.” As J. P. Telotte suggests, the very act of O'Hara’s voice-over represents his resistance to naturalistic disorder: “In effect it emphasizes O’Hara’s desire to arrange these strange events into a story for himself, to make a narrative of the jumble of his past, especially his obsession with Elsa, in order to render it all meaningful in some way” (Voices in the Dark 63). As in the conclusive high-angle shot, Michael appears juxtaposed against a darkness at once visual, metaphysical, and racial. Therefore, while Welles may appear to amplify the problematic transgressions of late-Victorian adventure, he
counters these possibilities with a coherent protagonist lodged once more in the “protective enclosure” of alienation.

**THE FILMS** of Sternberg and Welles obviously exploit and conserve the Orientalisms of colonial adventure, and, in doing so, point to similar motifs in “domestic” noir narratives. Both Rudolph Maté’s *D.O.A.* and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* participate in this tradition as they reinscribe coastal California as an exotic contact zone. In *D.O.A.*, Frank Bigelow epitomizes what Silver and Ward term “the truly noir figure [who] represents the perspective of normality assailed by the twists of fate of an irrational universe” (2), a characterization perhaps offhandedly implied in Bigelow’s name (“big-and-low”). Chafing under the prospect of married life, Bigelow, a notary public in the small inland town of Banning, California, makes a pleasure trip to San Francisco. Bigelow awakens from a night of hard drinking with a persistent stomach ache; doctors tell him he has been poisoned with iridium, a radioactive substance that will kill him within a week. Given only days to live, he embarks on an investigation of his own murder. And although Bigelow finds and kills his poisoner, he dies unappeased, his “need to know” frustrated by the arbitrariness of his fate (he has been murdered for unwittingly notarizing a bill of sale for the stolen Iridium).

As Macek notes, *D.O.A.* assumes an “existential outlook” (77); Bigelow’s narrative recounts his attempts to wrest meaning from “an ever-darkening nightmare world filled with grotesque and crazed people” (77). Like Camus’s Meursault, Bigelow is faced with the problem of finding a basis for action in the face of annihilation. After learning of his imminent death Bigelow runs in desperation through the streets of San Francisco, as if to escape his fate. Witnessing scenes of the domestic life now denied him—an embracing couple, a little girl playing—Bigelow resolves to find his killer, a resolution suggested both in his determined expression and in the shift in the tenor of the score. With all gestures leveled before the prospect of death, Bigelow embraces what Robert Porfirio identifies as one of the central existential motifs of film noir—the quest for sanctity, ritual, and order in an irrational universe (92–93). *D.O.A.* also resembles Camus’s work in its exploitation of Orientalism; as in *The Stranger*, Bigelow confronts an irrational world metonymically posited by the Oriental. Though already in a sense living on the colonial frontier (Banning is ground-zero for the “last great Indian manhunt in the Western tradition”10), Bigelow rehearses the last phases of Manifest Destiny as he travels from inland to coast. His very decision to visit San Francisco depends upon broadly Orientalist suppositions. As with Dashiell Hammett’s fiction, *D.O.A.* presents San Francisco
as a liminal zone infused with the excesses conventionally ascribed to the Orient; as the bellboy of Bigelow’s hotel wonders, “Why does everybody go to San Francisco to tear loose?” These rather vague suggestions of excess coalesce with Bigelow’s visit to “The Fisherman,” a waterfront nightclub. For Macek, this becomes an episode in which the atmosphere of the film is significantly reversed: “The intense use of jazz music, interpreted through the tight close-ups of sweating musicians caught up in the fury of their music combines with images of patrons lost in the pounding jazz rhythms and approaches a chaotic climax” (77). With its tropical decor and African American jazzmen, The Fisherman is inscribed as a distilled version of the endo-colonial San Francisco, an urban jungle that seduces white westerners to the irrational. The Fisherman’s bartender remarks of one patron, “He’s flipped. The music’s drivin’ him crazy”; of another, “She’s jive crazy.” Even as Halliday (William Ching) exploits this frenetic scene to poison Bigelow’s drink, The Fisherman reads as the threshold of the irrational. The clues which Bigelow derives at The Fisherman lead him south to another liminal space, the city of Los Angeles.

True to its Victorian origins, D.O.A. casts women in conventional, polarized roles. In the tradition of the metropolitan angel, Bigelow’s blonde secretary/fiancee Paula Gibson (Pamela Britton) spends the bulk of the narrative confined to rural, domestic space and consigned to ignorance and ineffectuality; at the conclusion of the film she has not yet been told the truth about Bigelow’s plight. In contrast, most of the women treated in the latter sequences of the film are “dark” Angelinas—brunettes who function as agents of mystery from whom Bigelow forcibly and violently extracts information. The most prominent of these women, Marla Rakubian (Laurette Luez) reifies the Orientalized femme fatale. Like so many noir women, she reads as a sign of the exotic (she is Armenian) and dangerous gender transgression: she seduces one man into the fatal plot and likewise threatens Bigelow, “If I were a man I’d punch your face in.” Marla draws Bigelow into the heart of a mystery clothed in Oriental signifiers. Bigelow’s interrogation of Marla attracts the attention of Majak (Luther Adler), Raymond Rakubian’s uncle and co-conspirator in the iridium scheme. A trio of heavies, including the psychopathic killer Chester (Neville Brand), who tortures Bigelow by hitting him in the stomach, return Bigelow to Majak’s “lair,” of which we see a sunken room furnished with exotic trappings: samovars, large pillows, curtains, and Persian rugs. These cues are accompanied by a sudden shift in the score to a rather obvious exotic leitmotif (a theme which follows Majak throughout the film). This accompaniment intensifies as Majak conducts Bigelow to a curtained alcove housing a shrine to the memory of Raymond Rakubian, an urn that contains his ashes and is inscribed with Armenian characters. D.O.A.
thus appears to have inherited many of the Orientalist strategies that mark Chandler’s work. Majak’s home, like Geiger’s in *The Big Sleep*, becomes a reinscription of the endo-Orient that baffles the noir protagonist. Bigelow discovers here that Rakubian, the key figure of his investigation, is dead and beyond his reach; and it is here that Majak stoically, if redundantly, sentences Bigelow to death at the hands of Chester. Recalling Chandler’s “Mandarin’s Jade,” *D.O.A.* is populated with Armenian hostiles—the Rakubians, the thickly accented Majak; even the two photographers Bigelow interrogates. One might argue that the Orientalism of *D.O.A.* is undercut by the fact that the Armenians are not, as in Chandler, the prime agents of crime and corruption: it is rather the Anglo businessman Halliday who has poisoned Bigelow in an attempt to conceal the iridium scheme. But here is another defective adventurer gone native through miscegenation and criminal collusion with the exotic denizens of Los Angeles. The final showdown between Bigelow and Halliday demonstrates that the film is ultimately about white adventurers who represent the alternatives of dissolution and alienated authenticity.

The films I have discussed so far recruit various adventure formulae toward the end of authenticating alienation. In doing so, such texts sensitize us to more subtle, though no less effective, deployments of colonial discourse throughout the noir canon. One such film is Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*, which demonstrates the pervasiveness of noir Orientalism and the persistence of the imperial adventure formula. *Sunset Boulevard* has attained the status of an exemplary film noir that pits the rational male consciousness against a psychotic femme fatale. The film follows canonical Modernist writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and Clifford Odets in its treatment of the corruption and redemption of a Midwestern artist amidst the temptations of Hollywood. Indeed, co-writer Charles Brackett was a friend of Fitzgerald and quotes both “The Crack Up” and *The Great Gatsby* in the opening swimming-pool sequence. Brackett was himself an eastern émigré who sees the westward trek to Hollywood as a literally exhaustive journey for both individual and national culture. This expansionist movement joins other imperial adventure motifs that course through the film, working in tandem with its obvious misogyny. Through judicious and strategic deployments of Orientalism, Wilder reiterates the formula of white dissolution and regeneration that operates not only in late-Victorian adventure, but also in and throughout the whole corpus of noir.

Deep in the film, Joe Gillis (William Holden) playfully suggests a cinematic formula that provides a key into the film’s deployment of imperial adventure:
BETTY. Are you hungry?

GILLIS. Hungry? After twelve years in the Burmese jungle, I am starving.

Lady Agatha—starving for a white shoulder—

BETTY. Phillip, you're mad!

GILLIS. Thirsting for the coolness of your lips—

BETTY. No, Phillip, no. We must be strong. You're still wearing the uniform
of the Coldstream Guards! Furthermore, you can have the phone now.

(Wilder 67)

Poking fun at Hollywood cliché, the impromptu lines spoof the adventure formula that had become a Hollywood staple. The central movements of Sunset Boulevard purport something different, a “realistic” alternative to the hackneyed imperial romance. Nevertheless, Wilder’s film remains dependent upon the epistemological bedrock of imperial/colonial ideologies, rehearsing an adventure narrative within which Joe Gillis wanders into the domain of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). Having made the westward trek of Manifest Destiny (from Ohio to California), Joe meets in Norma Desmond not only the Gothic decadence of Dickens’s Miss Havisham (to which he explicitly alludes), but also the dystopian California of Raymond Chandler. As Joe literally and figuratively moves from the daylight world of everyday problems into the twilight universe of Norma, architecture provides a powerful index into the thematics of the film. Norma’s mansion becomes throughout the narrative a charged semiotic space. Set amidst the rank, exotic landscaping, Norma’s mansion evokes the Spanish Revival, which, in turn, often represents California as a lapsed Spanish colony in dire need of Angloamerican recuperation. Venturing into Norma’s domain—with its ornate curvatures of stuccoed arches, wrought iron fixtures, and spiral staircase with drooping rope banister—Joe Gillis subtly assumes the jungle-adventurer pose which he playfully mocks later in the film.

Norma remains ensconced within this Gothic/exotic lair; surveilling Joe from the protection of bamboo-blinds and wrought-iron, Norma recalls the introduction of Phyllis Nirdlinger (Barbara Stanwick) in Double Indemnity, the shot in which the temptress greets Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) from behind the elaborate iron banister of her own Mission Revival home in Pasadena. Exotic signifiers intensify as Joe proceeds into the heart of Norma’s dark mansion. Conducted by Max (another lapsed adventurer) into Norma’s boudoir, Joe finds a garish semitropical milieu: Norma’s Gothic-black ensemble is crowned with a leopard-skin collar and hat which persists, later in the film, as the upholstery of her car. Norma immediately reveals to Joe another jungle denizen, the dead chimpan-
zee—given Norma's predatory “habit” (both sartorial and behavioral), the animal certainly appears, at the moment, a trophy of the hunt. Joe quite obviously remains oblivious of himself as a potential prey-item for Norma.

In keeping with silent film acting technique, Norma strikes poses that refract the exotic, contorted decor of her home: the curves, arches, and loops of both Norma and the house confront the tall vertical figure of Holden and the existential “uprightness” that he gradually develops and struggles to maintain, even in his death-throes. Norma's posturing reaches its apex at the conclusion of the film when she collapses into the role of Salome—an originary femme fatale—which she has, in fact, played throughout her life (Max offers a reinterpretation of the biblical story, in which Norma compels an Indian prince to strangle himself with one of her stockings). Norma here sheds black gown for the wispy veils of an Oriental dancer. The mansion becomes a near-eastern “palace” and Norma arches hands above head in an attitude concurrent with the elaborate wrought-iron sconce at her side. With her famous “close-up,” Norma looms over the viewer and, through a hazy iris effect, blends indistinguishably with her weird surroundings. A similar dynamic pervades the *mise en scène* of *Sunset Boulevard*: doggedly erect as he plunges into his pool/grave, Joe Gillis embodies a beleaguered western rationalism agonistically frozen against Norma's curvaceous, Orientalized figure. The thematic achieved at the climax of *Sunset Boulevard* derives from the imperialist existentialism of writers such as Conrad and John Russell: Gillis might be read in this sense as a conflation of Lord Jim, for whom the colonial world becomes both fall and redemption, and Marlow, who returns to the metropolitan center not with spoils of empire, but only a recuperative, coherent narrative.

In an interview with Cameron Crowe, Billy Wilder suggested a strange and yet illuminating eulogy for William Holden:

> He died, unfortunately. He was a drunk... He was drunk, terribly drunk, and he fell, and he hit his head on the corner of a table there. And there was nobody around, and he bled to death. When that happened, when somebody told me Holden is dead, I thought it could be only two things: either he died in a helicopter crash in Hong Kong, where he had an apartment, or he was trampled to death by a rhinoceros in Africa, where he also had a house. But that he's gonna die through a small little thing? (48)

Wilder’s commentary returns us to our late-Victorian pretexts and the lament for lost opportunities for heroic adventure. It is as if Wilder has been persuaded of the late imperial persona which Holden accrued throughout his career. In films such as *The Bridges at Toko Ri* (Mark Robson, 1954),...
The Bridge on the River Kwai (David Lean, 1958), and The Wild Bunch (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), Holden played varieties of the exhausted adventurer, disillusioned with dreams of empire and “out for number one.” As in Sunset Boulevard, however, each narrative concludes with a sudden revival of imperial zeal whereby the Holden character performs some authentic “last stand” against a savage antagonist. Wilder seems to lament the loss of adventure as much as that of Holden himself: he should have died “with his boots on,” like one of the characters in his films or, as Wilder’s latter scenario suggests, like Hemingway’s doomed but reinvigorated Francis Macomber. Wilder’s eulogy for Holden therefore proves a fit epitaph/epigraph for a tradition which seems to die, but is written anew through the authenticating alienation of noir.