Fausak had never experienced anything like it. He felt as if he were in a sci-fi movie. Initially, there was the same pale green light. It got greener and brighter. It began to glow. And through its luminosity he could see the trail of blood. The trail was solid, but with streaks in it, as though someone had taken a big wet mop and wrung it out and dragged it along the floor. The length of the bloody trail measured some 55 feet. The shimmering glow hung in the air, above Fausak's knees. It had become so bright that he could see the faces of the forensic men and the chemists.

— Peter Maas, *In a Child’s Name: The Legacy of a Mother’s Murder*
1. Forensics

When human blood reacts with luminol it lights up a ghostly blue-green. Most commonly used to detect whether violence has taken place at suspected crime scenes, this reaction combines the human and the chemical in a moment of violent transformation. According to Stuart H. James and William G. Eckert’s *Interpretation of Bloodstain Evidence at Crime Scenes*, luminol is a chemical that “produces a bright luminescence when in the presence of the most minute amounts of blood.”¹ There is a long and fascinating history of the application of luminol in crime-scene analysis. A.J. Schmitz is cited as the first chemist to synthesize luminol, in 1902, though James and Eckert claim that “a paper by Gill states luminol’s discovery to be around 1853.”² The term *luminol* was, in fact, coined by chemists Ernest Huntress, Lester Stanley, and Almon Parker in their 1934 paper, “The Preparation of 3-Aminophthalhydrazide for Use in the Demonstration of Chemiluminescence.”³ James and Eckert offer a gloss on the paper:

> Chemiluminescence occurs when a molecule capable of fluorescing is raised to an excited level during a chemical reaction. Upon its return to the ground state energy in the form of light is emitted. Only a few molecules are known to emit appreciable amounts of light, and of those, luminol is one of the most outstanding.⁴

Essentially, the reaction between two chemicals (in this case, blood and luminol) causes the “molecule capable of fluorescing”

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² Ibid., 159–60.
(i.e., luminol) to become “excited”: a state of transformation, of reaction. According to Kenneth L. Williamson:

Oxidation of luminol is attended with a striking emission of blue-green light. An alkaline solution of the compound is allowed to react with a mixture of hydrogen peroxide and potassium ferricyanide. The dianion (5) is oxidised to the triplet excited state (two unpaired electrons of like spin) (6) of the amino phthalate ion (Scheme 2). This slowly undergoes intersystem crossing to the singlet excited state (two unpaired electrons of opposite spin) (7), which decays to the ground state ion (8) with the emission of one quantum of light (a photon) per molecule.5

When this reaction is complete, luminol returns to “ground level” and the excess energy that has been created during the reaction is expressed as luminescence, as light.6 There is no direct explanation in the article as to why Huntress, Stanley, and Parker chose the name luminol, though the word has close etymological associations with other words relating to light. There are several etymologically similar words in the 2016 Oxford

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English Dictionary: *luminous* (a. Full of light; emitting or casting light; shining, bright; b. Of a room: Well lighted; c. applied to animals or plants which emit light), *illuminate* (a. To light up, give light to; b. Light to, or remove blindness from [the eyes], esp. fig. in religious sense), and *luna* (1. The moon personified; 2a. Alchemy. Silver).⁷

These etymological roots are mainly concerned with light, and it is this chemiluminescent aspect of 3-aminophthalhydrazide that the term *luminol* appears to foreground. But there are also sacred resonances (the personified moon; religious enlightenment) and even magical or miraculous overtones (removing blindness; alchemy). Luminol is assonant with *liminal* (“of or relating to a limen, relating to the point beyond which a sensation becomes too faint to be experienced”⁸), a term that describes the excavated, ghostly narratives that are revealed through the application of luminol.

Finally, the term *limn*, bound etymologically to *liminal*, as well as to *illuminate* and *luminous*, describes the process of “lay[ing] on,” “adorn[ing],” or “embellish[ing] with gold or bright colour,” with particular reference to religious manuscripts in order to (literally) highlight important passages.⁹ The term *limn* is a useful way of thinking about luminol theory as the word combines two of the meanings of *luminol*: first, the process of chemiluminescence, the “laying on” of “bright colour” to palimpsestically reveal hidden narratives; second, the annotative function of limning manuscripts allows for a careful editor to present a series of margin notes, a narrative in fragments, that can be clearly understood. Luminol theory is a textual reading strategy that mimics the excavatory, illuminating function of luminol analysis. Like luminol, the theory operates by illuminating in flashes. It requires deep thought and careful interpretation on the part of the analyst, who excavates from the known to the unknown to piece together a wider narrative.

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⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, s.vv. “luminous,” “illuminate,” “luna.”
⁸ Ibid., s.v. “liminal.”
⁹ Ibid., s.v. “limn.”
Luminol theory operates especially successfully when pairing texts with their chronological moment in forensic history. Though genre fiction, particularly crime and thriller stories, have long been concerned with forensic science, and though there already exist many novels, films, and television shows that exploit this trope, there is not yet a textual reading strategy that applies the metaphorical use of luminol to read a range of cultural texts. The history of luminol and the development of the forensic sciences have informed the choices of primary texts to be read, or excavated, in this book. The case study of Jon-Benét Ramsey is particularly relevant, having occurred in the mid-1990s, a very specific time in the rise of forensic science: just as investigators and the legal system were beginning to take forensic analysis seriously, but on the cusp of the 2000s, when further research would cast doubt on its accuracy and efficacy and demonstrate that it was possible to prove that DNA evidence could be fabricated.10

The Ramsey case is at the heart of the North American cultural imaginary, and it resonates within the history of forensic science in the United States. The American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), the foremost institute for the study of fo-

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Arising in Colorado in 1948, the Academy of Forensic Sciences was founded in the same state as the murder and because two of its prominent members, Henry Lee and Gerald R. McMenamin, would rise to fame partly as a result of their work on the Ramsey case. McMenamin evaluated the ransom note that was found in the Ramsey home hours before the body of JonBenét was discovered in the basement and included his analysis as a case study in his influential 2002 book *Forensic Linguistics: Advances in Forensic Stylistics*.\(^\text{11}\)

The earliest rise in forensic analysis, even before the AAFS was founded, was contemporaneous with the emergence of eugenics and its conception of purity. *Purity*, an idea that is perfectly functional when dealing with the possibility of contamination at the crime scene, was popularized as a racist euphemism by Francis Galton, pioneer of both eugenics and forensic technologies. One of the earliest practitioners of fingerprinting, Galton served the police state in ideological as well as practical ways.\(^\text{12}\)

His manifesto on eugenics contains the following: “The community might be trusted to refuse representatives of criminals, and

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\(^{11}\) McMenamin was asked to rule out that the note had been written by either of JonBenét’s parents. He had great faith in his findings; in the section of the case study on limitations, he was confident enough to state: “With respect to the possibility of attempted disguise, manipulation of the non request, pre-crime samples in the known Ramsey reference writings was not possible. Additionally, most variables identified in the Ramseys’ request writings, in writings used here to exclude the Ramseys as writers of the ransom letter and in those not used (e.g., dictated word lists), contain such a patterned level of consistency that the conscious manipulation of even the most carefully executed request writings is highly improbable, given the circumstances of their production.” Gerald R. McMenamin, *Forensic Linguistics: Advances in Forensic Stylistics* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2002), 4.

of others that it rates as undesirable.”

This conflation between criminality and undesirability is slippery and problematic. The statement also raises the question of who gets to be “the community” and who is classed as “undesirable.” Galton clarifies this distinction and makes his racism explicit by claiming, “While most barbarous races disappear, some, like the negro, do not.”

His call for a racist and genocidal eugenics was evangelical in nature, and he proselytised that the pseudoscience “must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion. It has, indeed, strong claims to be an orthodox religious tenet of the future, for eugenics co-operate with the workings of nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.”

This desire to purify and cleanse imagines a utopia predicated on racial annihilation. A forensic humanities, such as luminol theory, argues that we exist in teeming, bacterial, ecologies and that there is no stasis, no purity: we cannot opt out of the ecologies we are in. Luminol theory argues for a forensic humanities to counteract the ideology of annihilatory purity.


14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 5.
JonBenét Ramsey’s basement is important to luminol theory both because of the moment of forensic history that it occupies, and because it is a microcosm of larger, systemic crime scenes. Lying on the limen, or threshold, between mythic and true crime, the basement recurs throughout this book. Traces of luminol illuminate the crime scene and allow a zooming out from the Ramsey basement to the wider setting of Colorado, colonial North America, and beyond. Saturation, radioactivity, and the occult make the crime scene visible, luminous, and endless. JonBenét as absent referent haunts the scene. In Memoirs, Du Plessis uses this crime scene to interrogate the broader crime scene of Colorado, and, by extension, the North America built on genocide and eugenics.

Memoirs is an experimental, nested narrative that reimagines the life and death of JonBenét Ramsey, who is first embodied by the writer Kathy Acker and then, in a vision, by an adolescent named Tiffany, who dies of an ecstasy overdose at her sweet-sixteen party. There are also episodes that include Acker lecturing at Boulder University and scenes where JonBenét goes to tea with a male doll named Little Lord Fauntleroy. The status of JonBenét as interstitial ghost child, half adult and half vulnerable toddler, is unsettling and provocative. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the novella is the setting: the entirety of Boulder is contained within “an ugly snow globe that someone bought in a cheap airport gift store and stuck […] at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.” Memoirs exposes harms done and invites the reader to consider their relationship to those harms. Rather than occupying an easy, didactic space where violence and atrocities are othered, this novella reminds us of our complicity:

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17 As I will discuss in chapter 3, this name corresponds to that of Tiffany Johnson, a young woman murdered by Matthew Murray at a mass shooting in Arvada, Colorado, in 2007. It is likely that Michael Du Plessis was aware of this shooting which happened in the period when he was researching and writing this novella.

18 Du Plessis, Memoirs, 3.
Boulder: where eugenics couples with software to secure the reproduction of middle-class bodies, bodies that desire only perfect reproduction. Boulder: where white-collar heaven beckons under pitiless white-collar skies. Boulder: where cotton-ball, cotton-candy cirri hang over the Flatirons like the prettiest, freshest mushroom clouds ever.19

In Du Plessis’s version of Boulder, the ostensibly sweet and pretty town is secretly decaying. Kathy Acker/JonBenét says of her childhood self: “In her dream, the town was a repository of all her dreams. A town that was always decaying. In the centre of this town her father had hanged himself.”20 This version of Boulder as experienced by the fragmented narrator invokes moments of genocide and annihilation, with references to “eugenics” and “mushroom clouds” to describe the experience of being at home in the town. The overblown melding of the twee with an allusion to nuclear horror — “prettiest, freshest mushroom clouds” — is disquieting. Saturation, contamination, and death are presented as inherent to the scene. Fictional Boulder is a dead zone, teeming with decay and haunted by nightmares. Mike Kitchell describes the book as a “horror novel, but the only thing that’s terrifying is the Boulder of Middle America.”21 The purity of the community, as in Galton’s utopian fantasy, is safeguarded by violent death.

19 Ibid., 21.
20 Ibid., 5.