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The Ecology of American Noir

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

In *The Ecology of American Noir*, I investigate the relationship between the conventions of noir fiction and film and its sub-types in relation to environmental crises. Specifically, I address questions that not only allow us to (re)read early hardboiled literature and neo-noir films, but that also help us identify a new sub-genre of noir and develop an ecocritical methodology: I call this contemporary sub-genre and methodology “eco-noir.” I trace the development of strategies of mapping urban blight and environmental deterioration in classic hardboiled fiction of the 1940s, neo-noir films of the 1970s, and eco-noir texts of the post millennial period. Moreover, in introducing the eco-noir as both a sub-genre and fictional form, as well as a methodology, I develop a new way of understanding the relationship between noir and climate fiction texts. In my close reading of hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir texts, including Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Robert Towne, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Jeff VanderMeer, I ask and address the following question: how does each sub-genre of noir map noir atmosphere of the private investigator’s natural setting in terms of environmental toxicity? I conclude that while early hardboiled and neo-noir texts map environmental deterioration as a backgrounded, fragmented element of the noir atmosphere and setting, contemporary eco-noir texts map such decay in a rhizomatic manner that represents an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Each text, in its way, indicates a connection between capitalist and patriarchal infrastructure and environmental blight. In each chapter of *The Ecology of American Noir*, I contribute to critical conversations in both noir and ecocritical scholarship, making clear how a new understanding of noir as defined through environmental and atmospheric conditions

invites readers, viewers, and scholars of the genre to generate meaningful dialogues about our decaying and deteriorating environment.

Keywords

American Studies, Film Studies, Noir, Film Noir, Neo-Noir, Eco-Noir, Ecocriticism, Science Fiction, Climate Fiction, Urban Blight, Environmental Issues, Decay, Fragmentary, Rhizome, Collective, Deep Mapping, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Roman Polanski, Robert Towne, Jack Nicholson, Kim Stanley Robinson, Jeff VanderMeer, *The Silent Sea*.

Summary for Lay Audience

In *The Ecology of American Noir*, I explore how noir, namely popular hardboiled literature of the mid-nineteenth century, neo-noir films from the late-twentieth century, and contemporary climate fiction narratives, represent urban blight and a toxic natural environment. I identify a new sub-genre of American noir, the “eco-noir,” which is a fusion of noir and climate fiction genres. The hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir sub-genres provide readers and viewers with accessible ways of representing mystery, violence, and crime in order to better grasp the poisonous atmosphere of fictional natural environments. In each of the following chapters, I examine how capitalist infrastructure, crime, and violence not only bring our attention to urban criminality, but also explore how such acts of violence are the symptoms of a more systemic and damaging relationship with the natural world. In doing so, they help readers better grasp the relationship of capitalism, crime, and the environment. American noir’s sub-genres can be regenerated in contemporary times to offer us a critical method for tackling environmental issues.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate my project to the most important woman in my life: my mom, who also happens to be my best friend, my sister, and my hero. When alive, she sacrificed everything, including her health, to ensure that future is bright and full of promise. She is the strongest and kindest woman I have ever known and will ever know. While I gained my strength from my mom, she gained all her beautiful attributes from my grandmother. Equally as strong, my grandmother supported my decision to pursue a PhD after my law degree was completed. She fueled my drive to abandon what I was trained to do and invest all my energy into this project and the program. It was in the PhD program where I encountered the third most meaningful female bond in my life: Dr. Manina Jones, my supervisor. She has guided me and helped me in ways that pushed my intellectual boundaries further. She put on display the profound difficulty in becoming a scholar as accomplished as her. I want to thank Drs. Kate Stanley, Joshua Schuster, Christopher Lockett, and Tim Blackmore: their immense knowledge in American and cultural studies, ecocriticism helped shape the core focus of my project. These three academics, professors, and wonderful people helped make the words you are about to read possible.

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Chapter 0

Introduction to *The Ecology of American Noir*

0.1 What is The Ecology of American Noir?

In this project, I focus on American noir fiction and film to explore how the popular genre can be read with ecological questions in mind. I consider the evolution and development of the genre from the 1920s to the present day, covering classic hardboiled texts, neo-noir films, and contemporary climate fiction (cli-fi). This project is about the relationship between noir and its sub-genres and environmental blight. Specifically, I examine how hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir (a fusion of noir and cli-fi genres) texts represent the ways in which urban crime and violence, amongst other conventions of noir, offer an implicit commentary on the toxicity of each text's environment. Such texts also draw attention to that which lurks in the shadows of such degradation: capitalist greed and exploitation of people and the natural environment. That which links this intricate relationship between noir, capitalism, and the natural environment, is the idea that we should consider noir as first and foremost an atmosphere. In short, in the following dissertation, I not only provide a critical (re)reading of early hardboiled writers via an ecocritical lens, and an in-depth analysis of selected neo-noir films, but I also contribute two new ideas to the subject of noir: the first involves defining noir as atmospheric and the second is the creation of eco-noir as both a new sub-genre of noir and a new tool in ecocriticism.

Stewart King, in "Climate Fiction and The Environmental Imagination of Place" highlights how

ecocritical approaches range from the study of representations of nature, understood as both wilderness and built environments (Buell, *Future 22*), to exploring expressions of environmental concerns (land degradation, pollution, species extinction, etc.) and, importantly for ecological crime fiction, environmental justice. At the center of these studies is the issue of place, as ecocritical approaches seek to foster connectedness and attachment between the human and the nonhuman world (Heise). (1235-1236)

In *The Ecology of American Noir*, I am primarily concerned with the *expressions of environmental concerns* as they are mediated through conventions of the aforementioned subgenres of noir. Urban decay and criminality is, in the examples in Chapters 1-3, a lens through which we can discern “expressions” of a toxic American landscape. Noir conventions, especially atmospheric tropes and patterns of imagery such as darkness, provide “a unique tool not only for depicting and discussing ecological crises, but also for directly exposing the criminal acts they involve and their violent effects on people and the environment’ (Puxan-Oliva 362)” (King 1236). The violence of noir, often associated with mobsters, gangster, and other criminal masterminds, can be reconsidered as a form of expression of the violence perpetuating the destruction of our Earth. Swarnalatha Rangarajan and others, in the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*, explore how literary and other fictional texts help us in “improving communication practices” pertaining to discussions surrounding environmental crises (3-4). My analysis contributes to such a discussion, exploring how conventions and examples of noir and its sub-genres provide us with lenses and tools to address issues pertaining to our deteriorating natural environment.

My aim, through what I call an eco-noir methodology, which I define below, is to investigate potential answers to general ecocritical questions such as “how do humans represent nature/environment?”, “what accounts for the development and reproduction of dominant systems of representation or discourses of ‘environment’?” and “what communication practices contribute to the interruption, dilution, or transformation of such discourses?” (Rangarajan et al. 4). Thus, not only is eco-noir a new sub-genre of noir (in its fusion of noir and cli-fi conventions), but, as outlined throughout the entirety of *The Ecology of American Noir*, eco-noir contributes to existing ecocritical discourses. I weave this eco-noir methodology in my close analysis of the relationship between urban crime and environmental damage in hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir texts. In this project, I am motivated to unravel how conventions reinforcing noir’s bleak and toxic urban landscape are diffused in the natural environment: the toxicity of capitalist infrastructure is saturated in a decaying natural environment and the characters residing in it. I pose the following questions to help us better grasp this relationship and how I address these concerns through a careful reading of the selected quintessential texts of each sub-genre of noir: what can fictional accounts of urban violence and capitalist crime tell us about the relationship between the individual/society and the natural environment? How do characters residing in major American urban spaces, such as Los Angeles and New York, amid growing capitalist endeavors, understand the interconnectedness of crime and the natural environment? How can readers perceive the significance of environmental issues through primarily atmospheric conventions of noir and its sub-genres? Lastly, primarily in relation to the concluding Chapter 4 of this project, can we adapt this eco-noir methodology and sub-genre to cross-cultural texts?

In this dissertation, I examine the aesthetic of noir and the social commentary on American life and society it makes possible, and re-direct the critical conversation to how conceptions and representations of this adumbral ethos draw attention to an aspect of America that persists in the shadows of crime and violence: urban and environmental blight. To quote Jon Tuska in *Dark Cinema*, noir is both a “style” and “a perspective on human existence and society” (xv). Thus, *The Ecology of American Noir* expands upon scholarship on noir as both a visual and verbal category, specifically the sub-genres of the hardboiled, neo-noir, and how they manifest what I call eco-noir characteristics. To do so, I trace the noir representation of environmental violence as a pervasive aspect of human existence and society—one that is situated in, and perpetuated by, the crimes, violence, and moral degeneration of American city life—in a selection of twentieth and twenty-first century works of fiction and film. As such, noir should first and foremost be understood as atmospheric, which, as you will read below, helps us better grasp the different methods of mapping the pervasiveness of environmental crises.

Most contemporary ecocritical scholars and thinkers primarily concentrate their study on how fiction that focuses on environmental catastrophe *represents* the contemporary ecological and climate crisis. However, in the early chapters of this project, I interpret novels and films that do not mention such catastrophes at all to analyze how early hardboiled American writers, namely Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, represent urban breakdown and ecological harm as consequence of capitalist structures obliquely and in the background. In the latter part of the project, I discuss contemporary neo-noir films written by Robert Towne and cli-fi texts, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017) and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021) in which the

authors self-consciously foreground environmental themes, bringing to light the complexities of how such narratives map our deteriorating environment by analyzing the ways in which they utilize conventions of noir. The texts selected for this project demonstrate how noir offers an aesthetic and ethical ecological vocabulary, allowing readers and viewers insight into the stakes of our past, present, and future toxic environment. Briefly, the structure of my discussion throughout my project follows the transformation of (1) the *method* of mapping urban crime scenes broadly writ from a fragmented to rhizomatic approach, and (2) the transformation of the *private* investigator from a lone character motivated by his own interests to a *green* environmentally conscious investigator working within unique collectives to not only solve capitalist-driven crime, but to also expose linkages between such urban structures and damage to the environment.

The American traditions of noir and its variants, the hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir, contain key conventions that, as analyzed in this project, directly or obliquely, help us confront the violence we commit against the natural environment. By Chapter 3, they also help make clear how a seemingly distant Earth suffering from rising sea levels, for example, is a more threatening reality than we might initially think. The usefulness of noir in understanding ecological issues and our climate crisis is most prominently discussed in Timothy Morton's ground-breaking 2016 study *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Morton writes that "the darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir" (9). Morton coined the term "dark ecology" and explains that it involves a gloomy and nihilistic awareness or knowing of a decaying natural environment. Morton refers to dark ecology with noir in mind to draw our attention to

how we, like the morally ambiguous noir narrator who is implicated in their story, are “narrators of our destiny” (9). For Morton, “ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal” in environmental catastrophe in the same way that the noir investigator figures out that they are one of the criminals, both the victim and perpetrator of environmental crime (9). A great example of noir’s uncanny recognition of such a “weird loop” is Alan Parker’s 1987 neo-noir film *Angel Heart* in which the noir detective, asked to track a missing person, realizes that he is the criminal he pursues and violently drives his hand into his own reflection, shattering a mirror. Readers and viewers may recognize their own implication in the noir detective’s story; we exist in a “weird loop” with the detective. Although this is the only way in which Morton adapts noir to suit the larger argument in his book, other scholars have expanded upon the relationship of noir and ecocritical thinking to include other key attributes of the genre in such a conversation.

Lucas Hollister, in his 2019 essay, “The Green and the Black,” considers the ways in which ecocritical thought may be brought to bear on political readings of crime fiction. He expands upon Morton’s argument when he lists questions such as “what is violence? How do we conceptualize networks and causalities of violence? How do we understand the distribution of victimization and guilt? What conclusions are we to draw from the violence that marks our political, economic, and social conditions?” (1012). Hollister proposes that we need “green-black” readings of crime fiction that show how noir aesthetics and ecological awareness are intimately related. While Morton’s book suggests that crime fiction contains tropes and conventions that resonate in ecological thought, Hollister demonstrates how ecological awareness affects our interpretations of noir

(1012). In this project, I expand upon Hollister's premise, specifically his argument that noir is less a noun than it is a transitive verb, "an active effort to fictionalize forms of violence that appear to defy coherent representation or explication" (1013). My dissertation supports the core argument that American noir's sub-genres map urban decline beginning in a fragmented method with hardboiled and neo-noir narratives and ending with a rhizomatic form of mapping in contemporary eco-noir narratives.

In referring to the idea of the fragmented representation, I am expanding upon Fredric Jameson's study of Raymond Chandler's fiction. I argue that early hardboiled and neo-noir texts represent environmental blight in fragments. To understand eco-noir, I turn from the fragment to the rhizome, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theories. With eco-noir, we encounter a more rhizomatic method of mapping in which such fragments are transformed into an existing set of relationships in which there is no beginning, middle, end, or totality. The core idea linking the chapters is a concern with how the complex understandings of both space and time, relationships between subjectivity and setting, and between the past, present, and future are represented in noir. By involving noir and its sub-genres in our conversation about our environmental crisis, readers, viewers, and scholars can better concretize environmental crises as those which unfold in this complex spatial and temporal dynamic.

In Chapter 1, I analyze how a disintegrating and contaminated urban milieu exists in the background of fictional narratives, or what I call the shadowy space of the core investigations typical of the hardboiled sub-genre of noir crime writing. Drawing on Jameson's important critical work in *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (2017), I argue in Chapter 1 that in two important noir novels, Dashiell Hammett's *Red*

Harvest (1929) and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), environmental corruption is represented in a fragmentary form. I selected Hammett and Chandler because the former is considered the founder of the hardboiled sub-genre while Chandler is considered to have directly expanded upon Hammett's methods in a full flowering of the first wave of literary noir. Both figures and the selected texts are foundational to the hardboiled sub-genre, but I also selected them because of their similar ways of mapping their degenerating Californian setting.

In Chapter 2, I move on to discuss neo-noir films of the 1970s and 1990s. Here, I focus on Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and its sequel *The Two Jakes* (1999), directed by Jack Nicholson. These popular films, both written by Robert Towne, demonstrate a more direct and self-conscious fusion of environmental issues with the unfolding narrative of investigation. While these films were released in the later twentieth century, their narratives are set in the past, taking place in a historical setting deliberately evocative of the first wave of noir fiction and film. The development of popular environment awareness changes the ways in which issues pertaining to our environment may be represented in noir. While the private eyes of the texts discussed in Chapter 1 draw the reader's attention to how the toxicity diffused in the natural environment exists in the shadows of the core crime plot, in Chapter 2, *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* more directly link how such toxicity is caused by patriarchal and white-supremacist capitalist exploitative practices.

In the last chapter, I conclude with a discussion of a more recent generic permutation popularly known as "cli-fi," considering two twenty-first century climate fiction narratives, namely Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) and Jeff

VanderMeer's *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021). While the texts of Chapter 1 focus on their present, and the neo-noir films of Chapter 2 focus simultaneously on the past, present and potential future, the novels of Chapter 3 focus emphatically on the near-reality, which might itself be considered a strange loop. Robinson and VanderMeer's books offer a form of "proleptic realism" that "describes the present in the way a skeet shooter targets a clay pigeon, aiming a bit ahead of the moment to reveal what is not yet present but is already having an impact. This gives us metaphors and meaning-systems to help conceptualize our moment" (Beukes 330).

In each chapter, I trace transformations in noir's sub-genres' own mapping of a blighted landscape and offer an analysis of how conventions of noir represent the links between the crimes of capitalism and a damaged environment. In Chapter 1, hardboiled private eyes draw the reader's attention to how a decaying natural environment is lurking in the shadows of urban crime. In Chapter 2, there is a more direct conversation making clearer the relationship between patriarchal and white-supremacist capitalist infrastructure and environmental crises. In Chapter 3, the core crimes become about environmental blight: a more complex relationship between capitalist exploitative practices and environmental issues is depicted for the readers. In short, each chapter makes clear the extent to which toxicity makes up the atmosphere of the environment in noir.

0.2 Defining American Noir

Many scholars claim that "film noir" or/and "noir" is not a definable genre. I specifically place "genre" in quotation marks because, as Mark Bould et al make clear in "Parallax Views," their introduction to a 2009 collection of essays, scholars cannot even agree upon whether noir is even a genre, "or a style or a theme or a mood or a form or a texture

or a cycle” (Bould et al. 3). Others, such as film scholars Elizabeth War and Alain Silver, in *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Film Style*, define noir as a complex cultural movement embedded in a historical moment. Janey Place also treats noir as an aesthetic movement rather than a genre. Furthermore, although it is “often conceptualised as a coalescence of German Expressionism, French poetic realism and American hard-boiled fiction,” there are disagreements as to “when and where it was produced in the US...from the early 1940s.... until the mid-1950s” (5, 3). Noir style is said to have originated in post-World War II American fiction and film, emerging out of, as James Naremore makes clear in “American Film Noir,” an inter-medial synthesis of hardboiled fiction and German Expressionism (12). Naremore goes further and highlights that film noir is “a belated reading of classic Hollywood that was popularized by cinéastes of the French New Wave, appropriated by reviewers, academics, and filmmakers, and then recycled on TV” (14). Noir should then be considered as belonging to the “history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema” (14).

In examining the French origins of noir, Naremore examines Paris’s noir sensibility at mid-twentieth century, one that is emphasized by French existentialism as intertwined with residual surrealism (18). While the surrealists dreamt of details from the “cinematic *mise-en-scène*,” the existentialists concerned themselves with a violent and oppressive society (18). Naremore further explains that the French invented noir because “it evoked a golden age of their own cinema” but also because of their local conditions that predisposed them “to view Hollywood in certain ways....to refashion the French art cinema along the more ‘authentic’ lines of Hollywood movies” (15). The term was initially used to describe a collection of Hollywood features made during and just after

World War II, including *The Maltese Falcon*; *Double Indemnity*; *Laura*; *Murder, My Sweet*; *The Lost Weekend*; *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; and *The Woman in the Window*. The existential consciousness evident in these films permeated Hollywood and French cinéastes “embraced” these American noir pictures, which were often based on hardboiled novels (22).

American fiction was thus at the heart of noir from its earliest instances. Noteworthy films noir are frequently adapted from literary materials or written by hardboiled authors themselves, including screen adaptations of Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1946). Other films by these hardboiled writers include *City Streets* (1931, screenplay by Hammett) and *Blue Dahlia* (1946, screenplay by Chandler). Indeed, the development of the genre of noir is inherently intermedial: both film noir and noir fiction fall under the umbrella category of noir works that are “dark” in their mood, ethos, and style. The films and novels depict a morally ambiguous noir hero “defined by fate” (Naremore 23). This hero highlights ethical and moral complexities, themes of isolation, uncertainty, ambiguity, and social issues embedded in the culture (Naremore 23). In addition, in viewing film noir or reading noir fiction, we encounter a dark atmosphere reinforced through, for example, low lighting, canted frames, and chiaroscuro effects. But this sense of atmosphere is also achieved through noir’s surrealism and exploration of themes of decay, corruption, and death. We navigate this atmosphere alongside the criminal antihero, the hardboiled protagonist, and the femme fatale.

Despite these defining features, we still encounter noir texts that do not fit these descriptions or a general understanding of noir plots. In short, despite being able to trace the history of noir, and bringing to light certain stylistic conventions, to quote Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker in their introduction to *Noir as Affect*, “noir itself foregrounds fractiousness, divisiveness, conflict, and dissension. Moreover, it is preoccupied with belatedness, retrospection, fatality, inadequacy, and intransigence. It also marks the elusiveness of subjects to definition and even to self- knowledge” (3). Noir is thus always in a state of conflict insofar as it has defining features and, at the same time, it cannot be conclusively defined. Part of the reason for this includes the subject matter of noir: one that is concerned with society, which is itself consistently in a state of conflict. The “elusiveness” of the genre as that which is shifting in response to the ever-changing felt environment in which noir exists.

Edward Dimenberg, in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, defines noir in historical terms, understanding it in terms as

a tension between a residual American culture and urbanism of the 1920s and 1930s and its liquidation by the technological and social innovations accompanying World War II, as well as the simultaneous dissolution of this new social compact of the 1940s and 1950s by the society emerging in the 1960s, in which the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary post-modern culture are clearly visible in retrospect. (3)

Keeping Dimenberg’s emphasis on noir as reflecting tension in American postmodern culture, urbanism, and technology, I define American noir, as noted, as atmospheric. Noir is an intermedial genre that is malleable and fluid, one that has the ability, because of its

generally agreed upon (yet ever-expanding) set of conventions. It is thus predisposed to merge with other genres, “to produce hybrid creations...preoccupied with the transformations of the modern city” (Breu and Hatman 4-5). Noir adapts to the atmospheric transformations of the “modern city” in which we find such narratives situated. As the city transforms, as different modes of patriarchal and white-supremacist capitalism change in accordance with technology and other factors, the types of toxicity found in such environments also change. When we consider noir as atmospheric, and when we analyze such texts through examples of atmosphere, we are equipped with a lens that allows us to discern the various scales of toxicity permeating a decaying environment.

Noir puts on display capitalism “without a mask,” whether it is in the medium of a film, play, novel, or artwork, and whether such texts are categorized as crime, detective, or mystery genres – or indeed as science fiction, romance, or fantasy (Dimenberg 4). Even when we consider the emphasis “on the mutually articulating themes (sex, crime, corruption, murder, betrayal), characters (the gumshoe, the femme fatale, the criminal, the fall-guy) and locations (the city, night time)” we can establish that, depending upon the genre or style with which noir has fused, such elements can take a different shape or appear in an alternative way (Giltre et al. 3). Thus, interestingly, despite the lack of cohesive understanding of noir, it remains, at the same time, instantly recognizable regardless of the form of the text. In a certain sense, noir and neo-noir’s mapping of metropolitan decadence and environmental damage in a fragmented way reflects how its “fragmented narration remains well attuned to the violently fragmented spaces and times of the late-modern world” (Dimenberg 6). Because noir reflects an “inability to dwell

comfortably anywhere,” as Dimenberg explains, I argue that it becomes an essential source of understanding our fraught relationship with an imperilled natural environment (7).

The first generation of films noir were, only after the fact, grouped together under the term “noir” by film critic Nino Frank in 1946. Frank first used the term in his article for the journal *L'Écran français* titled “Un Nouveau Genre ‘Policier’: L’aventure Criminelle” (cited in Tuska 149).¹ Frank used the term to identify a cluster of four thematically related, stylistically similar, and tonally consistent films of the 1940s that had recently been released in France: John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944), and Edward Dmytryk’s *Murder, My Sweet* (1944). Of these, it is worth noting, three are based on hardboiled fiction: the first a novel by Dashiell Hammett, the fourth on a novel by Raymond Chandler, and the second a novel by James M. Cain, adapted by Chandler. Frank argues that these popular crime films should be taken seriously for their somber portrayal of violence, criminal psychology, and pervasive guilt. It was not until the 1960s that noir as a coherent category began being discussed in English among film critics and historians (150). Frank writes that the essential focus of these films was not the solution of a crime, but the dark psychology of the lead character: it is “not to know who committed the crime, but what the protagonist does” (150). We can consider Frank’s comment in relation to the project’s focus insofar as when we focus on noir’s exploration of urban crime, we should also focus on how it can bring to light other societal issues incomprehensible the naked eye.

¹ Translated in English to “A New Kind of Detective Story: The Criminal Adventure.”

Another way to consider this view of noir is how, as Tuska argues, “it becomes possible to see essential cultural unities with certain literary and cinematic works” (xxiii). Noir and its sub-genres should be studied with a focus less on the technicality of *who* committed the crimes and *what* the individual crimes are in and of themselves and more on its atmospheric themes, such as nihilism and alienation, which are fluid and malleable. There lies in noir, in its “inherent reaction to decades of forced optimism,” as Tuska puts it, a dark visual style heightening dread and the importance of the nonverbal (152). These elements of dread and the nonverbal are not only quintessential to better grasping our decaying environment, but also the nonverbal, nonhuman agents, which we exist in relationship with. Film scholars Janey Place and Lowell Peterson argue that “the characteristic film noir moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view that is expressed... through their remarkable [visual] style” (65). This project focuses on noir’s mapping of the in-the-shadows elements in early hardboiled texts to understand how the early backgrounding of environmental harm in favour of a focus on individualized violence is given wider implications in neo-noir texts and transformed in contemporary eco-noir texts that try to make visible systemic crimes against our natural environment. Regardless of the degree to which such toxicity is mapped in each of the following chapters, understanding noir as atmospheric provides us with a new lens to better understand such decay.

Many scholars attribute noir’s themes of fatalism and anxieties to the social and cultural landscape of the postwar era. For example, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, in *Noir Anxiety*, discuss how the breakdown of patriarchal authority in post-war America, heightened by the men’s return from war to a domestic space that lacked their male

authority, as “the source of the anxieties and fatalism of noir” (xiii). Oliver and Trigo interpret the sense of fate or doom in film noir as a response to “white men’s sense of a loss of control and authority” (xiii). They also argue that existential anxiety “as related to the moral ambiguity of the times,” is a key aspect of noir (xiv). In short, American noir produces “free-floating” anxieties that are anchored “to a complex constellation of concrete anxieties” (xiv). In this project, I focus on how concrete anxieties of capitalist urban crime leave fragmented in the background in early hardboiled and neo-noir texts abstract anxieties about ecological disruption. By Chapter 3, in which I examine *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander*, we see the development of a rhizomatic eco-noir mapping of our environmental crisis, thus making the predicament a more concrete and fully articulated anxiety.

In Chapter 1, I examine the ways hardboiled noir novels by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler represent anxieties caused by the modernist capitalist system. As Tuska argues, film noir “has gone farthest among American films in recreating in the collective consciousness of the audience the emotional traumata and frightful sensations human beings undergo when they *really* know” (xix). Tuska’s emphasis on “really,” in referring to the kind of knowledge that American noir puts on display, is essential to this project’s own mapping of noir’s subgenres’ awareness of a degrading natural environment. Often, with the hardboiled, neo-noir and eco-noir, to *really* know about the environmental degeneration of the city is to know one of two things: how capitalist structures play a significant role in causing (and perpetuating) the death of our planet, and that we can never truly *know* or grasp the totality of such a crisis—noir makes clear that

to *really* know is to not know in totality. Themes and tropes about environmental destruction thus necessarily emerge in a fragmentary and oblique way.

While the core focus of the hardboiled texts of Hammett and Chandler involves urban crime and violence and their intersection with the capitalist structure of society, there endures, fragmented in the background, a degrading natural and urban environment. Thus, this study embarks on a close ecocritical reading of noir narratives to discern the ways in which they express capitalist and other urban anxieties that pertain to their representation of a deteriorating natural environment. Noir's bleak atmosphere persists through the various sub-genres that are the focus of this project to map ecological harm, but such mapping is undertaken in various manners. In Chapter 2, the connection between urban crime and violence in a capitalist society is more directly fused with environmental concerns, namely water and oil extraction in California. In Chapter 3, the fragmentary depiction of the connection of such anxieties is transformed into a rhizomatic one: anxieties caused by exploitative capitalist institutions is innately fused with climate change and its endemic effects.

0.3 Defining Eco-Noir

Tracing noir as atmospheric in Chapters 1-3 is predicated on an eco-noir methodology. As mentioned, eco-noir is a new ecocritical methodological framework, a new sub-category of ecocriticism, but also a new sub-genre or strain of the American noir tradition. Before delving into the latter aspect of the term, I want to explore how it is situated within ecocriticism. Ecocriticism was named in 1978 and officially recognized as an academic movement in the mid-1990s. The first provisional definition of the subject of ecocriticism introduced scholars to a cross-fertilization method of study. In *The*

Ecocriticism Reader, Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xix). To echo Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism*, we can consider early ecocritical criticism as characterized by an interest in Romantic poetry and wilderness/nature writing. In moving past poetry, Glotfelty poses questions pertaining to how nature is represented, how concepts about nature have changed over time, and, lastly, what possibilities there are in cross-fertilization pertaining to genres (for example, climate fiction and noir). Thanks to the development of ecocriticism, we can now consider eco-noir as not only a new sub-type of noir, which makes clear the usefulness of the noir genre in communicating environmental toxicity, but as also a new methodology of ecocriticism.

In recent years, academics, such those who participate in the ecocritical-dominant *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment*, have turned towards a more general cultural ecocriticism, which engages with fiction texts such as film, television, and art. Ecocriticism enables us to analyze and critically assess the world in which we live, and, in doing so, it invites us to transgress disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries to develop “ecological literacy.” In *The Ecology of American Noir*, I assess how early noir texts, neo-noir films, and contemporary eco-noir texts use a set of generic conventions in stories set amid urban disruption and embedded in social struggles, to bring awareness to, in different scales, environmentally damaging practices. To further reference Garrard, modern environmentalism, and the ecocritical framework, “relies on

the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse, pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature that may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelations, the first and last book of the Bible” (11). You will notice that, in the following novels and films, there is no real emphasis on, or a nostalgia for, an Edenic-type of pastoral environment. The following texts are devoid of a longing for a pre-existing American pastoral method of existence. Rather, the following hardboiled, neo-noir, and eco-noir texts are focused more on *revealing* the dystopic modern city.

It is important to note that, although I propose the two-fold idea of the eco-noir, “econoir” as a term is proposed by scholars Katherine Bishop and Samantha Walton in “Studies in Green” as “econoir”:

Reading environmental crime fictions as ‘econoir’ and bringing the sensibilities of noir fiction to bear on environmental issues, entails collapsing nature/culture binaries and realising that we can never look on at ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’ from an outsider perspective. Reading crime fiction ecologically may also involve adopting a radically different perspective on the genre’s defining tropes and features, and its possible future developments. (Walton 126)

King, in “*Crimite Fiction*,” further highlights the corpus of crime novels investigating “issues of environmental damage and ecological (in)justice. These novels have been identified variously as environmental crime fiction, ‘nature-oriented mystery novels’ (Murphy 143), ‘eco-thrillers’ (McKie), ‘econoir’ (Katherine Bishop 9), ‘ecologically conscious detective fiction’ (Bandyopadhyay 70), and ‘ecological crime fiction’ (Walton 115)” (1). My concept of eco-noir is to not be confused with “econoir.” I am coining eco-noir with the hyphen as there are some distinct differences between the above concept

and mine, namely because “econoir” is defined in the above article as nineteenth century crime fiction featuring botanicals as de facto killers. My inclusion of the hyphen is intended, not necessarily to draw a distinct line between the two modes of the concept (as a tool of ecocriticism and sub-genre of noir), but to highlight that I am not reading sub-genres of noir specifically dedicated to ecological issues or climate fiction narratives dedicated solely to either noir or environmental disasters. In turn, as a methodology econoir is not an exclusive tool to assessing only noir or cli-fi narratives. Texts not necessarily categories as cli-fi, for example, those belonging to science fiction, can also be considered through this eco-noir methodology. In short, we should then consider econoir, whether as a sub-genre or methodology, as that which is concerned with (re)reading classic sub-genres of noir and how their conventions can be fused with contemporary climate and environmental fiction narratives.

To understand econoir as both a methodology and a strain of American noir, it is important to appreciate different scales of representation of toxicity. Chapters 1 and 2 are concerned with what Jameson in his study of Chandler calls fragmented scales of representation. Jameson explores how Chandler’s work, especially his Los Angeles setting, is depicted as a microcosm of the United States and a “prefiguration of its future” (3). The most important aspect of Jameson’s study, for the purposes of this project, is the idea that Chandler is not a “builder” of “large-scale models of the American experience,” but rather that he paints “fragmentary pictures of setting and place, fragmentary perceptions which are by some formal paradox somehow inaccessible to serious literature” (3). The fragmented scale that Jameson discusses is essential in framing the types of mapping of urban decay and environmental degradation examined in Chapters 1

and 2 of this project. As you will read below, there are two key methods of mapping noir as atmospheric, and the embedded toxicity diffused throughout the setting and the people inhabiting it. The first is adapted precisely from Jameson's astute observation of Chandler providing readers with "fragmentary" images of the modern city.

The idea of the fragmented scale can be expanded to encompass ecocritical scalar theories. For example, Chitra Sankaran, in "Risk, Resistance, and Memory in Two Narratives by Asian Women" in the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*, discusses personal and global disasters, or "scale-framing" as a way of "communicating unimaginable catastrophes on a human, imaginable scale" (373). In the analysis, Sankaran quotes Timothy Clark's argument that "scale framing" is "a strategy for representing issues in ways that make them more amenable to thought or overview" (Clark 2015: 74)" (378). In Chapter 1, I expand Jameson's reading of Chandler's fragmented scale of depicting American life into an examination of the urban background and in-the-shadows depictions of environmental damage in Hammett's *Red Harvest* and Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. In Chapter 2, I take up an analysis of two neo-noir films of the later twentieth century that adapt noir conventions, Robert Towne's *Chinatown* and the belated 1990 sequel, *The Two Jakes*. While the private investigators of noir fiction and film are investigating urban crime, there lurks, fragmented in the background, a toxic and decaying natural environment in Los Angeles. In maintaining the fragmented scale, these texts draw attention to the lack of totality we have in our knowledge of our degrading environment, especially when considering the knowledge that the modern American would have had of environmental issues.

In explaining the idea of fragmentation, Jameson provides a useful analogy of “objects at the edge of my field of vision which disappear when I turn to stare at them head-on” (4). The “head-on” objects we read about and see in Chapters 1 and 2 pertain to the core crimes as the detective investigates. That which is at the edge of the narration’s field of vision, the elements that disappear when an attempt at a sense of totality is made, are fragments of urban disintegration. In other words, environmental harm in hardboiled and early neo-noir texts remains lurking in the shadows. We, as readers and viewers of a toxic American modernist city, are devoid of the tools necessary to grasp the totality of the toxic atmosphere in which the characters are situated. Arguably, as you will read below in Chapters 1 and 2, the idea that a “total” image of the modern city’s toxicity exists is questionable. Regardless, a careful critical reading of that which lurks behind the conventional plot involving criminality is necessary to get a glimpse of the presence of environmental blight. The private eyes of Chapters 1 and 2 move from one setting to another, investigating a crime, attempting to bring together various clues into a unified resolution. In such a movement, they are also linking, in a fragmented way with a lack of totality or finality, experiences and hints of violence against nature. The investigators in such narratives are not only sensitive to the social world around them, but also to the natural world. They can, in the words of Jameson, “feel the resistance of things” and aspects of American life because their journey is fragmented and episodic (11). The crimes and investigations of the detectives divert readers and viewers from that which is maintained in the background, evidence of more systemic and unresolved environmental guilt. The anxieties that emanate from such guilt will emerge more conspicuously in the analyses in Chapters 2 and 3.

In Chapter 3, I turn to contemporary cli-fi novels. Cli-fi fictions are speculative and feature a depiction of a changed, or changing, future-focused world. Cli-fi is considered a sub-genre of science fiction and the term itself was coined by American blogger Danny Bloom. This sub-genre tries to “reach out to people in a way that traditional non-fiction and scientific reports” about our climate crisis cannot (Mizzen). As with noir, the term cli-fi has been applied to texts that vary widely in form, style, plot, and themes. Gregers Andersen, in *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis*, maps “dominant imaginaries” in Western cli-fi (2). Cli-fi can be considered as a genre that “imagines” or puts on display “imagination of anthropogenic global warming” (2).

I specifically attend to the intersection of climate fiction and noir because of cli-fi’s dystopian visions of futurity as our near-reality. The fusion of cli-fi with noir, to form eco-noir, is consistent with Thomas Schatz’s argument that genres evolve according to patterns of increasing self-consciousness. In these works, the fragmented depiction of urban disruption and environmental degeneration is transformed into a rhizomatic mapping of such a world, one that indicates the rooted and multi-furcated nature of environmental relationships. As mentioned, however, we might even be able to expand the scope of “cli-fi” texts when considering them as “eco-noir” because some might not necessarily be categorized as “cli-fi,” but, rather, as sci-fi. Cli-fi narratives that fuse conventions of the sub-genre of science fiction (sci-fi) and sub-genres of noir, belong to the eco-noir sub-genre. The novels at the heart of this chapter, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*, and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Hummingbird Salamander*, allow the criminality involved in humanity’s desecration of the world to dominate the plot. While the declining urban and natural world depicted in earlier noir texts is found in the shadows of murder

and theft, in cli-fi depictions are comingled and integrated with the overt violences involved in environmental despoilment in Robinson and VanderMeer's narratives.

While the primary method of mapping a modern toxic environment in Chapters 1 and 2 is through a fragmented lens, in Chapter 3, I analyze how Robinson and VanderMeer map ecological harm through a rhizomatic lens. By "rhizomatic," I am drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of the rhizome found in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This concept of mapping highlights the multiplicities and openings of affiliations with nature, all of which connect to each other. Unlike a tree and its roots, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the rhizome has no single source from which all development unfolds. There is no beginning, end, or an exact centre, but rather things and beings exist in a type of circulation (7). In short, for Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome works to de-centre realms and connections, and when considered in relation to noir climate fiction, it draws attention to the idea of the collectivity of existence. In adapting the lens of mapping such toxicity, we also adapt our understanding of the conventional private eye. While in Chapters 1 and 2 the focus is on the *private* in private investigator, his individuality and self-sufficiency, in Chapter 3, we encounter eco-noir narratives that highlight the importance of collective investigators. In other words, in Robinson and VanderMeer's novels we begin to see how the rhizomatic mapping of environmental degradation reshapes our understanding of the private investigator as a figure who forms links and chains with both the non-human world and other characters, thus providing readers with a new form, an eco-noir form, of investigation. In Robinson and VanderMeer's novels, readers begin to obtain a deeper understanding of how acts of doing, such as investigating, map environmental toxicity. The urban crimes of hardboiled

and neo-noir texts create a fragmented map of ecological damage, that keep it in the shadows of the core investigations, form a component of the eco-noir's narrator's investigations: we shift to the rhizome in Chapter 3 because it provides us with a similar but different method of understanding of how American noir's categories map a deteriorating natural environment to show us the links between capitalist crimes and our planet's decay. Together, this shift from the fragmentary to the rhizome alters the method of mapping environmental crises as well as our essentialist understanding of the detective, both of which are unified through an understanding of noir as atmospheric: the toxicity of our environment resonates across time and space.

0.4 Detailed Overview of the Chapters

I structure *The Ecology of American Noir* to draw attention to the development of the fictional mapping of urban degeneration and ecological damage through genre fiction and film, beginning in mid and late-twentieth century (1940s and 1970s-1990s) to contemporary times. Early sub-genres of noir create such a map in inconspicuous ways: even though the hardboiled private investigators are concerned with who committed the crimes, they also demonstrate, however obliquely, interest in toxic attitudes to and actions against the natural environment. In these works, the endemic guilt represented in the ethos of noir carries a subtle environmental import. The dark, murky urban settings of traditional noir are sites of environmental desecration. In the case of later neo-noir film works, environmental crime enters a more conscious realm, and this dimension of crime is more overtly thematized. Eventually, with contemporary eco-noir texts, the peripheral perception of the link between crime and climate change is developed into one that explicitly acknowledges the implications of environmental crime. The structure of my

project aims to chart the history of the relationship between ecological awareness and sub-genres of noir, while also highlighting key new methodological approaches in such a relationship through examples of contemporary eco-noir texts.

The first chapter is concerned with the hardboiled literary works of Hammett and Chandler. Arguably, noir ethos and style originate in American hard-boiled fiction beginning with the 1920s-30s. In this Chapter, Hammett and Chandler indict not only the moral wasteland that is Los Angeles, but also that which lurks in the shadow of such indictment, the environmental crisis of their time, epitomized by Los Angeles. After the Depression, hardboiled and pulp writers began to dismantle the emergent fantasy of California as a sunny, bountiful place that held such allure for early tourists and developers. In doing so, these writers disrupt the mythology of California as an Eden that held a nostalgic appeal as a temporal return to a pre-capitalist garden. This mythology of return to a pre-capitalist Edenic idyll serves the ever-expanding needs of capitalist, industrial and development interests in the mid-twentieth century and the consequent desecration and exploitation of California's natural environment.

On the one hand, Hammett and Chandler's texts, to quote Jamin Creed Rowan from "The Hard-Boiled Anthropocene and the Infrastructure of Extractivism," have done their "fair share of concealing from...readers the infrastructures responsible for our planet's catastrophic accumulation of carbon" (392). On the other hand, hardboiled forms and conventions have "provided a grid upon which its practitioners have worked to expose the environmental consequences... hard-boiled crime fiction provides us with what Stephanie LeMenager (2017: 222) calls the 'patterns of expectation' and 'means of living' that are capable of helping us more carefully address our current planetary

emergencies” (392). In other words, it is important to understand how these modernist hardboiled writers map urban blight and environmental breakdown. Their narratives help us more carefully address our decaying environment. They map the trajectory of this sub-genre into the neo-noir and eco-noir, with the latter more prominently utilizing the noir’s atmospheric conventions to expose “the environmental costs of US capitalism’s extractivist [and other] infrastructure” (Rowan 393).

These hardboiled narratives tell stories of violence and corruption enmeshed in, to quote Maysaa Husam Jaber from *Criminal Femme Fatales in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction*, “urban chaos and an amoral underworld” (1). When the police, who are often themselves corrupt, do not, or cannot, help solve the mystery, these private investigators usually hand over the culprit to them. The private eye investigates crimes and mysteries in an urban setting. These hardboiled investigators leave us with a sprawling urban jungle – a phrase which is itself suggestive of the association between the city and the natural world—pressing in on us, and no guarantees of resolution. This alienation “results from the fundamental incompatibility between the private eye’s moral ideal and the unruly reality of the world he lives in” (Jaber 2). There are thus important connections between the hardboiled style and American film noir. In short, in Chapter 1, I explore how conventions of the hardboiled call attention “to the presence of infrastructure in the lives of its characters but also to the crime of forgetting the insidious social, political, economic, *and environmental* orders that capitalism’s...infrastructures impose upon its participants” (Jaber 396, emphasis added). Hammett and Chandler, through having their private investigators solve urban crimes, expose the work of structures and infrastructures of our capitalist economy in driving environmental harm.

In Chapter 2, I begin to examine the fragmented mapping of urban and natural degeneration in the neo-noir films *Chinatown* and its sequel *The Two Jakes*. In these films, there is a more direct exposure of the hardboiled private investigator to California's extractivist culture made up of mining, logging, oil, and natural gas extraction, and so on. In other words, extractivism functions primarily on the premise that the natural world has unlimited resources that can infinitely be harvested. Hardboiled texts such as *Red Harvest* and *The Big Sleep* help us to begin to see capitalism's extractivist infrastructure that traps us in an environmentally degrading environment. *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* further the representation of California's capitalist extractivist culture through the depiction of the exploitation of human and environmental resources (water and oil) as existing in a relationship with capitalist exploitation of sexed/gendered and racialized bodies.

Neo-noir emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s when "Hollywood, in financial crisis, turned to the possibilities of a genre that appeared to have died out a decade earlier" (Giltre 4). Thus, as Bould et al. observe, "Neo-noir knows its past. It knows the rules of the game" (5). Neo-noir films maintain a fragmented sense of the capitalist's exploitative and extractivist mindset but transform how this understanding is represented. Both films directly link water usage and oil extraction to capitalist criminals. Neo-noir "reworks, works up, works over, works with and works against classical noir. It knows how to be noir...but this does not necessarily make neo-noir any more knowable than film noir" (Giltre 8). While the investigators of Hammett and Chandler navigate murder, theft, and conventionally defined crimes, *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*' Gittes navigates the criminality in the exploitation of natural resources. These films represent an important trend in neo-noir and an analysis of such films can aid in a (re)analysis of other neo-noir

films. *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* draw attention to the hierarchical inequalities of capitalism and its exploitative role in perpetuating violence against nature. The films utilize the plot points concerning the exploitation of minority bodies to make clear the exploitation of our natural environment: in short, as you will read in Chapter 2, the patriarchal and white-supremacist capitalist exploitation of women and racialized figures exist in a relationship with such structures' exploitation of natural resources.

In Chapter 3, I examine how twenty-first century writers transform the fragmented depiction of ecological catastrophe into a rhizomatic way of mapping our disintegrating world. While in Chapter 2, the private investigator connects capitalism to exploitation of natural resources, Robinson's 2017 novel *New York 2140* and VanderMeer's 2021 novel *Hummingbird Salamander*, both published after the turn of the millennium, depict a near-reality that is the culmination of the effects of the exploitative practices represented in the novels and films analyzed in the preceding chapters. In other words, the core crimes of the narratives in this chapter are directly addressed as crimes against our environment. Hardboiled noir and neo-noir are "regenerated" in eco-noir to better map the criminality implicit in the exploitation of the natural environment. By "regeneration," I am borrowing Donna Haraway's idea, from her oft-cited 1985 essay "Cyborg Manifesto," that "we all have been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth" (67). Environmental injury no longer exists in the background. In this chapter, I scratch the surface of how eco-noir texts fuse the various conventions of the sub-genres of noir in Chapters 1 and 2 to rhizomatically map the corruption of the city and its natural environment.

This chapter explores the shift from the private investigator, the singular and lonely morally ambiguous hero, to a complex social network of investigators and networks of connection to the natural environment. In better highlighting the links humans have to our environment, these narratives bring to the forefront the connections between capitalist exploitation's environmental destruction that is represented in the circumstantial evidence of fragmented depictions in early hardboiled and neo-noir texts. Thus, this chapter adds to growing scholarship on the usefulness of noir conventions when incorporated into cli-fi texts. Rather than simply reworking the noir genre, by regenerating noir conventions these cli-fi narratives provide us with unique insights into environmental decline.

Scholars such as Walton and Clark demonstrate how cli-fi narratives have a natural affinity with detective fiction and crime fiction. For example, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Clark discusses how the science of our shifting and changing environments, depicted in cli-fi texts, is a kind of "suspenseful detective story, a tale of persistence, of patience rewarded, leading to a full narrative closure. The reader tends to be cast in the role of satisfied spectator" (143). More recently, Walton, in an essay titled "Studies in Green," argues that

cli-fi novels may incorporate tropes and formulas associated with crime fictions, such as the psychological thriller (as in *The Rapture* (2009) by Liz Jensen) and corporate conspiracy (see *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) by Nathaniel Rich). The intertextuality and genre-borrowing of cli-fi suggests ways of introducing environmental themes into the teaching of crime fiction, for example, through exploring how established formulas have been adapted to address new cultural

understandings of climate change and current political responses to the scientific consensus. (116)

In viewing the above examples as those belonging to the eco-noir sub-genre, I am thus contributing to noir, cli-fi, and ecocritical studies. To echo Walton, I hope that this expansion, explored in *The Ecology of American Noir*, yields a new way of teaching and addressing the death of our planet. In the Afterword, found in Chapter 4, I propose that not only can we expand upon this research to examine cross-cultural eco-noir, but it is crucial to do so: the nature of noir as atmospheric, as well as the toxic and decaying natural environment, are inherently global.

Thus, I end this project with a starting point from which we can recognize new, ecologically informed forms of noir, and develop an eco-noir methodology for teaching and research purposes. *The Ecology of American Noir* proposes to trace the development in the methods of mapping urban decay and environmental degradation in the categories of American noir: the hardboiled, the neo-noir, and what I call the eco-noir. We begin with an early twentieth century and mid-late twentieth century fragmented form of mapping such decay and degradation and end with twenty-first century eco-noir texts' rhizomatic or collective mapping of our dying environment, emphasizing the shift from the private and singular investigator in early noir texts to a collective investigative body in eco-noir narratives. In doing so, *The Ecology of American Noir* provides scholars and others with an eco-noir methodology for (re)reading noir texts and with a new category of noir: the eco-noir.

Chapter 1: The Hardboiled Eco-Awareness of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler

The reader must participate as a kind of writer himself. He must, at least, be reading between the lines; because there is such barrenness everywhere that he is forced into the position of imagining what is not given.

-David Madden, *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*

1 Introduction: The Fragmented Ecologies of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler

This chapter revisits classic hardboiled writers Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler through a contemporary ecocritical lens to consider their fragmented mapping of urban blight and environmental deterioration. Re-reading their narratives in the present day demonstrates how Hammett and Chandler's early crime writings may be considered ecological *avant la lettre*; current ecological scholarship can reveal the environmental work that Hammett's novel *Red Harvest* (1929) and Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) were already obliquely doing. Both authors are widely regarded as masters of the hardboiled sub-genre of noir. They represent the trajectory of American noir – from Hammett the originator to the next generation in Chandler; they are influential in the reciprocal development of noir between the media of writing and film. In this chapter, I focus on Hammett and Chandler's complex and suggestive eco-awareness that gave rise to such consciousness as part of the modern noir genre. Both authors shaped the modern detective story and are major contributors to the development of film noir. Hammett and Chandler leave hints of a crime occurring in the shadows of the core investigations to make the reader, to echo Chandler's words in "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel,"

“solve a mystery (since he is almost sure to solve something) which will land him in a bypath because it is only tangential to the central problem” (69). I analyze Hammett’s *Red Harvest* and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* considering each narrative as a key element of each author’s career. *Red Harvest* and *The Big Sleep* attend to the ecologically degrading California environment depicted in the shadows of these hardboiled narratives. In this chapter, I discuss the novels side-by-side and, in doing so, demonstrate how both map a deteriorating urban and natural environmental in a fragmented way: such representations exist in the background of the core crime plots, but nevertheless invite readers to investigate issues related to the environment.

Hardboiled writing and noir align because, as Eddie Duggan explains, both cultivate an “atmosphere of fear, confusion and menace” that “can be sometimes very dark” (2). Hardboiled fiction first appeared in pulp magazines (1890s-1950s), which published stories from various genres such as fantasy, science fiction, romance, and detective stories. Hardboiled narratives became staples in the 1930s pulp magazines, most famously in *Black Mask* magazine (1920-1951). The invention of the genre is associated with Hammett, whose first hardboiled story (“Fly Paper”) was published in 1929 in *Black Mask*. This popular genre is characterized by its origins in the pulps and their working-class readership paired with the kind of realism and naturalism also found in the more “literary” style of writers such as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. To echo Florian Pichon in “James M. Cain and the Naturalistic Hardboiled,” this sub-genre of noir contains a narrative with a “tough” protagonist experiencing “tough personal events and making tough choices in a naturalistic or realistic setting” (36). The hardboiled may be understood not only as rooted in the disillusionment of the “1920s Lost-Generation”

writers like Hemingway, but also in a “continuity of the roman noir, generally staging a disabused hero—often a private eye-struggling against an oppressive environment”

(36). The roman noir is a strain of popular French writing that emerged after World War II and was heavily influenced by American hardboiled writing such as Hammett’s. First published in cheap paperback collections like Gallimard’s *Série noire*, these French novels are viewed by critics as part of a “‘double’ vision” of noir “as both pulp action and contemporary urban narrative... heightened by the cross-cultural origins of the form, as well as its infiltration of other media, particularly film” (Garrara 1).

The connection between American hardboiled fiction and the roman noir is also discussed in Rachel Franks’ chapter “Hard-Boiled Detectives and the Roman Noir Tradition.” Franks notes how these two types of fiction are connected by “what they say and how they say it...the vocabulary of hard-boiled heroes” and “the belief that America is the natural milieu for murder” (591). Hardboiled narratives include slangy, clipped, and sharp dialogue, as well as “rude wit” and a “lively sense of the grotesque,” all of which present “grimly realistic depictions of crime and urban life” (591). Interestingly, Franks links the language of the private eye to a criminal urban life: the private eye then becomes a figure who, through every word they speak, comments on social and cultural experiences in the city. These narratives also contain violent, action-driven plots based on a criminal investigation in which the individual mystery may be solved, but the problem of endemic crime remains; a loner investigator (who is often the narrator); and bleak, crime-ridden urban settings, which Chandler’s essay “The Simple Art of Murder” famously identified as the “mean streets.” We can expand upon Chandler’s idea of the “mean streets” to not only include urban crime, but also how such toxic streets seep into

the natural environment surrounding them. Hammett and Chandler's hardboiled works use a realist style to critique the United States of their time: to quote Jaber, hardboiled writing engages in a broader critique "through its expansion of the focus from criminality as an individual phenomenon to a larger context that speaks to political and sociocultural factors that shaped criminality and related issues, such as social control" (36). In critiquing larger issues within their modernist cities, Hammett and Chandler can thus be (re)read for clues in how they critique, or put on display in a fragmentary scale, issues of urban and natural toxicity.

Hardboiled realism is part of the fictional sub-genre and is also a key element of film noir. Film critic Paul Schrader writes in "Notes on Film Noir" that "when movies of the forties turned to the American 'tough' moral understrata, the hard-boiled school was waiting with present conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes...the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for film noir" (56). Hardboiled fiction absorbed conventions of film noir and film noir absorbed conventions of hardboiled fiction. In *In A Lonely Street*, Frank Krutnik argues that Hollywood narrative films are extensions of a "fictional tradition established by the popular [hardboiled] novel" (33). In other words, the hardboiled fiction I cover in this chapter is not only a sub-genre of noir, but a literary form that flourished in a reciprocal relationship with film noir—many films noir adapted hardboiled fiction and many hardboiled writers such as Hammett, Chandler, Cain, Ross MacDonald, and John D. MacDonald wrote screenplays for such films. In turn, they share similar conventions. For example, both noir and the hardboiled are, in words of Janey Place and Lowell Peterson in their 1974 article on "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir", dominated by "moods of claustrophobia, paranoia,

despair and nihilism” (65). In addition, both noir and the hardboiled are marked by “melodrama and action,” and “stock or typical characters” such as an alienated hypermasculine lead/narrator (Krutnik 33). Hardboiled texts involve narratives that are written against the polite, cozy, conventions of British-style detective stories by authors such as Agatha Christie or Dorothy L. Sayers, as Chandler described in his 1944 essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” where he describes the British stories as “too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world.” Hammett paved the way for thrilling episodic, action-filled adventures that follow a private investigator’s navigation of urban settings, street violence, and systemic crime, often driven by capitalist interests.

Hammett’s *Red Harvest* and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* can be (re)read as encompassing what Les Roberts calls a “deep mapping” of environmental deterioration. In “Deep Mapping and Spatial Anthropology,” Roberts indicates that “deep mapping” is a metaphorical description of a form of performative “textual cartography that aspires to yield what a conventional map or guide cannot even come close to conveying” (2). In experiencing it, readers must place themselves within “multi-scalar locative dimensions that are opened up through the act of deep mapping” (2). Roberts defines “deep mapping,” as mappings that “offer particularly rich pickings...in that they highlight the ways in which qualitative and humanistic forays into the representation and practice of space and place as multi-faceted, open-ended and.... irreducible to formal and programmatic design” (2). Beginning with this chapter, and continuing into Chapters 2 and 3, I trace a development of the type of mapping that unfolds in the three sub-genres of noir. Hammett and Chandler’s private investigators’ fragmented mapping of a deteriorating environment takes place at a level deeper than that of traditional

cartography. I revisit and expand upon this fragmented deep mapping to analyze the neo noir film narratives of Chapter 2 and eventually trace its transformation into a rhizomatic (or collective) deep mapping of the effects of climate change in the contemporary climate fictions discussed in Chapter 3. By placing crimes, violence, and other urban-related conventions typical of noir, in a relationship with that which exists beyond what might be encompassed in conventional noir texts, we grasp a new understanding of environmental toxicity as, what Roberts calls, “multi-faceted” (2). This toxicity is not always necessarily packaged neatly for readers and viewers to grasp environmental crises. As I analyze below, and in Chapters 2 and 3, conventions of noir demonstrate the open-ended methods of communicating such environmental toxicity.

It is possible to read Hammett and Chandler’s detective stories as a way of navigating their fragmented modernist sense of existential subjectivity. Rather than finding solace in an ideal agrarian mythical place, Hammett and Chandler wrote about a realistically rendered alienated urban setting. Briefly, the agrarian myth in the American context is defined in Stephanie H. Grey et al.’s *Rooted Resistance* as “an enduring idealistic belief in the virtue of the mythic figure of the farmer and farming as a way of life,” or a “romanticizing of a natural American landscape in hopes of preserving the sanctity of the natural environment” (6). Hammett and Chandler channeled their critique of this myth through their investigators’ fictional adventures in a degrading and corrupted urban environment. A re-examination of these novels reveals how they depict harm to the natural environment in terms of the pervasive criminality of their urban milieu. Their fictional investigators weave together urban crime, corruption, capitalism, and decay into “fragmented” images of the natural environment. To re-iterate from the introduction of

this project, a fragmented scale of deep mapping urban and natural environmental blight constitutes the background and setting of the core plot. Such elements can thus never be represented in their totality. This method of mapping primarily remains in the shadows of the action; it constitutes the most basic substratum of noir. The decline of the private investigator's natural environment is continuous with corrupt urban life.

After the Depression, hardboiled and pulp writers began to dismantle a pervasive popular fantasy of Southern California as a sunny, naturally fertile, and productive landscape that held appeal for early settlers, tourists, and developers. In *Imagining Los Angeles* Fine describes, and refutes, the popular idea of California as a state whose sunshine and verdant properties can act as a physically and psychologically restorative locus for those who inhabit it. Los Angeles emerged as a city because of a land boom made possible by the construction of the Santa Fe Rail (1859) and the Southern Pacific Rail (1865) and promises of gold in an “aggressive promotion of land speculators, subdividers, city boosters, and railroad tycoons” (4). People were influenced by national campaigns promising wealth, “warm weather, open land, healthful dry air, and agricultural opportunity” (4). Furthermore, the alleged curative properties of the climate lead to the influx of Anglo-American settlers from different parts of the country. In sum, Los Angeles was represented as a type of “New Eden” for newcomers (7). Soon thereafter rich oil deposits were discovered, and the state slowly began to transform into *the* West Coast metropolis (8). Along with the economic booms mainly from the late 1800s to pre-Depression era, many tourists, migrants, businesspeople, early filmmakers, writers, and so on, perpetuated the idea of Los Angeles as a fantastical city full of opportunity and unlimited resources to the extent that “the city itself was beginning to look like a movie

set, a resemblance that the city's novelists beginning in the 1920s were to exploit for satiric effect" (13).

In a 1933 opinion piece called "Paradise," originally published in *The American Mercury*, popular hardboiled American author and investigative journalist James M. Cain² wrote a kind of exposé of misconceptions about California's Edenic landscapes that gave voice to a cynical, pessimistic attitude toward the state's idealized—and manufactured—image that would become pervasive in writing of the noir tradition. Cain characterizes California as a place with iconic flora and palm trees that are "phonies, planted by people bemused with the notion of a sub-tropical climate, and they are so out of harmony with their surroundings that they hardly arrest your notice" (Cain). Cain's essay explicitly undermines paradisiacal mythical tropes of California. His intention in this essay is to disrupt preconceptions of California that have emerged "from Sunkist ads, newsreels, movie magazines, railroad folders, and so on" (Cain). He rejects the idealized notion of California.

Instead, Cain offers readers a vision of "What Southern California Is Really Like" (as his essay was described on the magazine's cover). Cain's observations are consistent with the ethos created in his own hardboiled writing and in Hammett and Chandler's fiction. Cain demands that his reader "wash out" idealized images of "the 'land of sunshine, fruit, and flowers'" (Cain). Although all these elements are present in California, they do not emit "the lush, verdant fragrance that you have probably imagined" (Cain). Cain argues

² He wrote novels such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936)—both of which were adapted into classic films noir—in addition to his work as a journalist in the *Baltimore American* (1917-1935).

systematically in this essay that Los Angeles has “no smells to caress my nose, and no sights to delight my eye, and no food to tickle my mouth” (and that it offers “nothing” in terms of its intellectual atmosphere). Cain does something with the landscape that is similar to what Hammett’s fictional investigator the Continental Op and Chandler’s private eye Philip Marlowe do in the narratives discussed below; they rely on their human senses such as smell, sight, and taste to impugn a misleadingly alluring California atmosphere. For example, Cain describes the state’s famous seafood specialty as “frightful:” “if you can imagine a blend of fish, seaweed, copper, and pot-washings, all smelling like low tide on a mud-flat, you will have some faint notion of what an Olympia oyster is like” (Cain). In other words, while the superficial appearance may seem idyllic, the investigator’s senses give tangible evidence of the rot and decay that goes unperceived in others’ imagination. In the environment that the hardboiled investigators map for readers, we see and smell the rot permeating the environment as part of the noir atmosphere, to the extent that we can almost taste the toxicity. Cain’s exposé on California reinforces, only to question, a long-standing American tradition of envisioning and desiring a country as a lush, unspoiled, fertile environment.

The hardboiled protagonist’s investigation of contemporary urban crime in hardboiled fiction obliquely registers environmental harm. In doing so, it prompts readers to identify the embedded, founding violence that is perpetrated to manufacture such a paradisiacal space in modernist America. This “noiring” of the modernist landscape of California-- that is, the act of mapping (in a fragmentary manner) urban decay and environmental degradation--undermines the myth of the agrarian ideal. The landscapes in which these narratives take place are permeated by signs of industrial and capitalist exploitative

practices. In particular, the investigators challenge myths by depicting not just individual crimes, but the foundational crime and guilt of California itself. The state is typically made out to be a “simulacrum of Eden,” as Douglass Sackman calls it in *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden*. Hardboiled fiction brings to light—or rather, *brings to dark*—the desecration of the natural environment that was and continues to be necessary within the eyes of capitalist society to *create* an Edenic Californian landscape (23). This guilt is represented, not in the mechanics of the criminal investigative plot, but in the fragmented surfaces and settings in which the plot takes place and within depictions of characters. Although the private eyes in the investigative narratives I discuss solve mysteries, they are not “solving” environmental problems. Rather, in solving the mysteries, the novels hint at the extent of the ecological corruption of their natural environment and the human culpability for that corruption, which even extends to the private investigators themselves. W.H. Auden notes in his 1948 essay “The Guilty Vicarage” that the traditional British cozy mystery works to restore an Edenic space. By contrast, the American novels under analysis here link persistent, irredeemable crime and violence to the urban and natural environment. The association makes clear the morbidity, decay, and corruption already *present* in both the real rotting modernist landscape and the myth of the paradisiacal landscape.

1.1 Hammett and Chandler’s Fragmented Scales

To echo Lee Horsley in *The Noir Thriller*, “the tradition of the noir thriller is identified wholly with the tough, resilient individualisms of the hard-boiled detective...disorientation and nightmare...[and] the modernist crisis of culture” (2-3). As William Nolan notes, Hammett’s characters navigate a “fragmented landscape in which

sudden death existed as part of the scenery” (53). When considering this quotation, and the idea of thrill found within the hardboiled writings of both Hammett and Chandler, we can begin to discern the difference between the immediacy of the hardboiled brutality that drives the plot, the mystery, the violence, and crime, and the tenuous slow violence that sustains the novels’ noir valency. Rob Nixon’s idea of slow violence in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* is defined as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). He urges us to engage with “a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2). In grasping the violence that takes place behind-the-scenes, we can better appreciate the destructive environmental impacts of capitalist society across spatial and temporal scales. Expanding our understanding of what constitutes violence in classic hardboiled texts can help us identify their subtle representation of environmental harm. This chapter is dedicated to the often-overlooked slow violence that unfolds in the background of the core thrill and action of the mystery plot. This reading prepares us to better grasp the ways in which such fragmented mapping is brought to the forefront of neo-noir texts such as *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* examined in the next chapter and the contemporary eco-noir narratives by Kim Stanley Robinson and Jeff VanderMeer I discuss in the final chapter.

While Hammett largely depicts only urban decay, Chandler finds a way to couple the toxicity of such an urban landscape with the natural environment. There are key descriptions of the natural environment in a wide range of Chandler’s writings, many of

which are collected in Barry Day's 2014 edited volume *The World of Raymond Chandler: In His Own Words*. In *The Little Sister* (1949), Marlowe gets caught up in a Hollywood starlet's mess and the novel itself critiques the film industry in 1940s Los Angeles. A lot of Marlowe's contemplations are, as Day writes, "enlivened by a little nature study" (143). For example, in the opening of *The Little Sister* Marlowe invites the reader into his shabby office: "Come on in--there's nobody in here but me and a big bluebottle fly." Marlowe notes: "I had been stalking the bluebottle fly for five minutes, waiting for him to sit down. He didn't want to sit down. He just wanted to do wing-overs and sing the prologue to *Pagliacci*" (139). The bluebottle fly is known for clustering and laying her eggs on rotting corpses. On the one hand, the bluebottle is a subject of nature. On the other hand, the insect's presence foreshadows of the possibility of dead bodies, even though none are present in the narrative at this moment. This minutely-focused image of the small creature is contrasted when the narrative "zooms" out to the larger scale vision of "clear, bright summer mornings we get in the early spring in California....The hills are still green and in the valley across the Hollywood hills you can see snow on the high mountains...And in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are beginning to bloom" (1). This vividly rendered scenery is introduced in juxtaposition with the bluebottle.

Moments later, Marlowe returns focus to the bluebottle in the stuffy office. Marlowe's description of the bluebottle sandwiches in the ideal California early spring atmosphere only to be interrupted by a ringing machine. Marlowe's description of the scenery shifts abruptly between the beauty of natural scenery and fur retailers and brothels of the burgeoning city: "The fur stores are advertising their annual sales. The call houses that

specialize in sixteen-year old virgins are doing a land-office business. And in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are beginning to bloom” (1). Both furriers and brothels involve commercial exploitation, trafficking in pelts and young women’s bodies, respectively. The material bodies presaged by the bluebottle are not so far away. These first of paragraphs in *The Little Sister* demonstrate Chandler’s attention to nature and fragmentary descriptions of nature that shift abruptly between multiple scales—the fly, the hills, the businesses on the city street. They demonstrate both the beauty of place and the grotesque corruption that lurks in the shadows of the bright summer day. When the phone rings, Marlowe sees the fly, “shining and blue-green and full of sin. I took a deep breath and swung. What was left of him sailed halfway across the room and dropped to the carpet. I went over and picked him up by his good wing and dropped him in the wastebasket” (1). This is the first violent murder of the novel; Marlowe turns nature into trash.

In *The Long Goodbye* (1953), Marlowe searches for a location “outside the late-industrial development of Southern California” as part of his investigation:

the weather was hot and sticky and the acid sting of the smog had crept as far west as Beverly Hills. From the top of Mulholland Drive you could see it leveled out all over the city like a ground mist and it made your eyes smart ... Everything was the fault of the smog. If the canary wouldn’t sing, if the milkman was late, if the Pekinese had fleas, if an old coot in a starched collar had a heart attack on the way to church, that was the smog. (253)

A mixture of an environmental phenomenon (fog) and industrial pollutant (smoke), smog is unique to modern cities.³ This is a moment in which we see the alignment of the murky noir atmosphere, environmental pollution, and narrative action that seems to emerge directly from the smog. Chandler's narrator attributes the force of action to diffuse environmental factors: everything that happens is the fault of the smog. This passage demonstrates the way smog has both affect and effect, but also the ways in which environmental issues generate action, from insignificant action ("if the dog had fleas") and consequential outcomes ("an old coot in a starched collar" dies). There is also a suggestion of the canary in the coal mine, which, because it is sensitive to atmospheric change, acts as an indicator of early warning of possible adverse conditions or danger. Marlowe's commentary above is based not just on sight, but on tactile sensory experience, such as how the smog "made your eyes smart," hinting both that his perceptions are smart, and that the acidity of the smog stings. The description highlights how the atmosphere is doing subtle violence here. This example captures the link between not just industrialists of the oil business and how they ruin the natural landscape, but also the ways in which culpability over the damage done to the environment is dissipated amongst everyone occupying a space in California. This tactic highlights the widespread and fragmented effects we, as humans and as industrialists/capitalists, have on the environment. In a certain sense, the effects our actions on the natural world remain mostly invisible and out of sight. Hardboiled narratives are part of a genre that, in

³ The OED has its first use in 1905: "In the engineering section of the Congress Dr. H. A. des Vœux, hon. treasurer of the Coal Smoke Abatement Society, read a paper on 'Fog and Smoke'. He said it required no science to see that there was something produced in great cities which was not found in the country, and that was smoky fog, or what was known as 'smog'. *Daily Graphic* 26 July 10/2.

focusing on crime, link private and public lives. What hovers beneath the surface of the public city life is not only crime concerning humans, but also the ways through which such violence permeates the natural world.

In a 1944 letter to Charles Morton, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Chandler uses a similar approach to landscape description:

I remember the oak trees and the high wooden sidewalks beside the dirt roads and the heat and the fireflies and walking sticks and a lot of strange insects ... and the dead cattle and once in a while a dead man floating down the muddy river and the dandy little three-hole privy behind the house...I remember the rocking chairs on the edge of the sidewalk in a solid row outside the hotel. (Day 39)

This letter, in which Chandler is reflecting on his childhood in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, demonstrates the hardboiled writer's ability to remain still, observe the environment, and paint a fragmented picture. Above, the beautiful oak trees and the fireflies are juxtaposed using coordinating conjunctions with strange insects, dead cattle, human corpses, and excrement; each noun is given the same syntactic importance in his sentence despite the escalation in grotesque imagery. Chandler sees the beauty in nature and indirectly points to the destructive effects that human occupations have on the landscape. The natural scenery is troubled by abject elements as per Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject in *The Powers of Horror* as a fragmentary space from which a subject can escape only through expulsion—it involves the shock experienced at a terrifying presence such as a corpse. The mere evocation of the rocking chair at the edge of the sidewalk is suggestive of how Chandler's fiction negotiates an unstable fluctuating line between a romanticized nature and the pollution of the environment. Importantly, in "remembering" these various

elements of the place Chandler points to the beauty and decay of the environment, but also the difficulties in separating the two: the hotel and dead cattle are immersed in the same landscape as the fireflies. The letters that Chandler wrote demonstrate how the author arrived at his rejection of the ideal (green) understanding of California's terrain. Chandler's novels similarly link degradation, crime and capitalist corruption to pollution and other invasive forces that disrupt the fantasy of a pure unadulterated natural environment.

In Chapter 2, I return to issues of the representation of water usage and water supply in a desert in relation to the investigative plot of the neo-noir film *Chinatown*. This neo-noir representation is in many ways a logical and coherent extension of the way Chandler represents the California landscape in his fiction and correspondence. Briefly, Chandler's letters, assert a link between the "greening" of Los Angeles that creates the appearance of an Edenic environmental fantasy and the material conditions of water supply that underly this fantasy. This is a key irony of Chandler's green-noir: Los Angeles' lush, green, attractive appearance is the cause of its decadence, degeneration, decay, and pollution. The desert environment of Southern California requires that vast amounts of water be supplied as part of a complex infrastructure, to sustain a lush agricultural and aesthetic "green world" that has only the appearance of being natural. Chandler understood that such artificial greening comes at a high environmental cost. As he wrote in a letter to his agent Helga Greene, after the war, L.A. became "an individual city, and the climate has been ruined partly by this and partly by too much vegetation, too many lawns to be watered, and in a place that nature intended to be a semi-desert... Now it is humid, hot and sticky, and when the smog comes down into the bowl between the mounts

which is L.A., it is damn near intolerable” (Day). While too much vegetation and the water required to sustain it are visible changes that demonstrate how the climate is being ruined, things like smog and hot and sticky weather are less easily discernable as concrete objects that result from the city’s artificial greening. Noir (and its sub-types) is fitting to represent the latter because the genre is best understood as an atmosphere in fiction—it is as if Chandler takes this literally, representing atmospheric conditions and natural elements critical to California’s geography as inherent to his texts’ settings.

In Chandler’s *The Lady in The Lake* (1943), the representation of water allows a fuller sense of the continuity between urban and environmental crime. *Lady* contains key depictions of the natural environment as it exists in a prosperous urban landscape. The novel is set in a mountain town near Los Angeles and is focused on Marlowe’s search for Derace Kingsley’s estranged wife, Crystal. Derace suspects Crystal left him for Chris Lavery, but when Philip Marlowe begins investigating Little Fawn Lake and Derace’s cabin and uncovers a dead body belonging to Muriel Chess, he uncovers a series of clandestine criminal operations in which Crystal is engaged. The plot is more complicated than other Marlowe stories, primarily due to Crystal’s ability to manipulate her appearance and adopt different identities. By its end, the narrative exposes, in addition to Muriel’s dead body, the murder of Crystal and the death of a fleeing, murderous and jealous ex-lover of hers, Degarmo.

In this novel, the lake is a source of decay and pollution. While the lake appears to be a natural, Derace Kingsley suggests in passing that it is in fact artificial, a private reservoir created by “a dam three of us put up to improve the property.” Nature, specifically water, is caught up in the mystery that flows into the urban violence that ensues, thus allowing

readers to better see that which often remains invisible or lurking in the shadows. The lake itself is only superficially blue: the water is “green when you looked down into it” and gives off “a horrible, sickening smell in the air” that only Marlowe notices, highlighting the private investigator’s ability to *perceive* that which is invisible through senses other than sight (49, 58). The scene haunts Marlowe to the extent that he dreams that he is “far down in the depths of icy green water with a corpse under my arm” (99). The figure of the lake, a sort of character of its own, serves as an image of both crime and guilt. The water is polluted by the decaying body that Marlowe finds, and such a body is drowned and killed (in effect) by the same lake. Thus, there is an additional crime uninvestigated by Marlowe, but through a contemporary ecocritical lens, we can better grasp such a crime: the *reciprocal* murder involving the lake and the dead body demonstrate how ecological guilt of desecration and the existential guilt of noir are aligned.

The opening of Chandler’s letter to Greene, which references the fact that Los Angeles had become “an individual city,” reinforces what many contemporary ecocritical scholars and environmental activists rely on to drive change: rather than being individually focused, selfish, and alienated, we need to work on a collective level to address climate change. In an early story, he even uses the argot “I draw water in this town” when a character wants to indicate his position of power (cited in Day). The letter makes clear that individualism has harmful environment effects. Chandler writes to his friends and colleagues about the overuse of water for manicured greenery on private property and the intolerable smog and changes in climate that result. Likewise, Hammett and Chandler’s

novels, discussed below, capture both the superficial desired ideal landscape and the place-as-is, which is deteriorating due to human exploitation of resources.

Hammett's *Continental Op* and Chandler's Marlowe take fragmented pieces of society lacking totality and remain lurking in the setting/background of core mysteries and try to heighten the experience of each fragmented piece rather than bringing them together to form a totality. The Op and Marlowe move from one scene to another, linking *ideal* natural episodes together to the *real* lived experience, the "darkness" lurking beneath and in the shadows without ever making a whole or totality of the fragmented pieces.

Jameson asserts in *Detections of Totality* that Chandler's hardboiled style creates "fragmentary pictures of setting and place, fragmentary perceptions which are by some formal paradox somehow inaccessible to serious literature" (3). This fragmentation of perception, as Jameson perceives in his study of Chandler, conveys the "atomistic nature of the society he moves through" (Jameson 11). The investigators' perception of their decaying environment can only be fragmented because of the atomistic nature of society.

1.2 Fragmentation and Temporality

Before delving into a close reading of the two novels, I propose two characteristics to look for when examining how Hammett and Chandler's narratives disrupt a myth of California and create ecologically perceptive investigative narrators who make the connection between individualist, urban, capitalist-driven crime and environmental harm. These categories are broad enough to be used in revisiting other Hammett and Chandler works as well as those of their contemporaries. The first characteristic is the fragmented

scale of representing or mapping environmental degradation in relation to criminal activity and human-induced violence. I suggest that readers should not only focus their attention on the crimes that the private eye is investigating, but also be aware of how landscapes are represented as the scenes of such crimes. As Jameson argues of *The Big Sleep*, hardboiled fiction takes place in “a whole panoply of specifically urban spaces—*and we also live in Nature*” (49). The natural landscape may be perceived as a minor element of the scenes, existing in the shadows of the plots. To echo Amitav Ghosh in his 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, the setting of a scene is critical in fiction because “a ‘setting’ is what allows most stories to unfold; its relation to the action is as close as that of a stage to a play” (102).

In addition to the scene/setting, it is crucial to examine urban decay and environmental degradation as they exist temporally; readers must ask how they are mapped within time. In other words, one must examine how environmental change is mapped in relation to the present of the narrative. When considering this element of hardboiled fiction, the key question I ask readers to reflect upon is: how are urban crime and violence linked to a toxic urban and natural environment? How is the environment mapped as a scene of past, current, and ongoing *environmental* crime?

In considering the fragmented scale of representing and mapping the natural environment, readers might attend to some key patterns of imagery such as descriptions of smog/fog, and other atmospheric conditions. This is what Jameson refers to in *The Big Sleep* as “keeping an eye on the weather” (49). It is also important to pay attention to representations of nonhuman subjects. Overall, the first characteristic is the broadest one to consider in revisiting classic hardboiled narratives for the purposes of examining the

mapping of a decaying urban and natural environment. It is important for readers to act as investigators themselves, reading the geography and place of each narrative as they serve as a backdrop to urban crime and violence across time.

In noir narrative, the scene of the crime is not neutral, as it is in Golden Age mysteries, but an intrinsically “crooked” space, fractured, broken, corrupted, poisoned because of its history, present existence, and potential to become a future dystopia. As W.H. Auden indicates in his well-known 1948 essay, “The Guilty Vicarage,” the “milieu” of the English Golden Age detective story is an Edenic “Great Good Place,” whereas American writers like Chandler were writing “serious studies of a criminal milieu, the ‘Great Wrong Place’” (408). This first framework of fragmented scales of representing ecological issues, and the act of bringing the fragmented pieces out of the shadows, produces a new avenue through which scholars of crime fiction can link urban crime and violence to environmental concerns and, eventually, embedded issues such as racism and gender inequality across time.

The second critical element includes a close reading of the investigator’s perception of their bleak landscape through senses such as touch, taste, and most importantly, smell. Smog, fog, smoke, humidity, and other atmospheric conditions in California are important to the Op and Marlowe in their navigation of a worsening natural environment. These natural elements and characteristics are pervasive noir conventions. In the representation of the natural world in the following novels, there lurks in a near-invisible sensory depiction, the ways in which such scenery is altered by toxic urban practices. Humans created the myth of California—they fabricated a space that is so overpowering to the human senses that it masks the foundational toxicity.

The link between the detective's olfactory observations and environmental degradation has not gone unnoticed by scholars such as Jesse Oak Taylor (*The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*, 2016) and Melanie Kiechle (*Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America*, 2017), who build on Alain Corbin's 1982 *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. Most compelling is Hsuan L. Hsu's 2020 book *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics*. Hsu dedicates the opening chapter to "the literary detective's hypersensitive nose," and although the analysis is mostly concentrated on Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes, the mere passing mention of Hammett and Chandler makes it worthwhile to expand upon in the analyses of such hardboiled authors in the chapter below (28, 18).

In his Los Angeles exposé, Cain calls out California's verdant mythology, asking his readers to "wash out the cool green that seems to be the main feature of all illustrations got out by railroads," and identify the real barren desert environment as it exists: Cain begins with the *atmosphere*, telling readers that "the main thing to remember is the sunlight, and the immense expanse of sky and earth that it illuminates: it sucks the color out of everything that it touches, takes the green out of leaves and the sap out of twigs, makes human beings seem small and of no importance" (Cain). When one begins to dismantle the utopian ideal, the vision of an agrarian landscape over which many modernist writers tried to regain a grasp, one also begins to see how small and imperfect human beings are in understanding their actions and the world around them.

The hardboiled private investigator touches, tastes, and smells, which makes evident corruption that can be better understood and processed through sensory thresholds

beyond sight. Urban spaces often smell vile, like rotting corpses, a visceral image both of the morbidity of the landscape itself as a once living environment now subject to decay, and of the ways the corruption at the heart of the crime plot permeates the setting. As Chandler remarks in “The Simple Art of Murder,” the harsh realist world he conveys “is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in” (“Simple Art”); smell is both a metaphor for corruption and a literal descriptor. An eco-reading of Hammett and Chandler’s novels through fragmented scale and sensory mapping designates their private eyes as investigators of the urban and natural setting, or “green PIs.”

My idea of the “green PI” can be considered a variation of Nibedita Bandyopadhyay’s notion of “the green sleuth” in her 2018 article “‘The Green Sleuth’: An Analysis of the Environmentalism in the Selected Detective Fictions of Sunil Gangopadhyay.” Although Bandyopadhyay’s analysis is concerned with environmental justice in relation to Gangopadhyay’s recent young adult mysteries, her article makes the link between fictional investigations and existential threats faced by Indigenous peoples “in the form of environmental injustice” (67). This association is useful when considering how non-climate fiction writers such as Hammett and Chandler portray an investigator who, in his inquiry into urban crime, is also mapping the decaying environment. In short, the “PI” of the term “green PI” reflects the classic noir element of Hammett and Chandler’s investigator as individualistic and private, while the “green” emphasizes the investigator’s ecological sensibility and his often-overlooked mapping of ecological issues as they intersect and fuse with urban crime.

I show how the green PI is developed and transformed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this project. In Chapters 1 and 2, the green PI maps environmental concerns on a fragmented scale via

their senses. However, in Chapter 3, the character transforms into a more rhizomatic green investigator, no longer merely private, helping readers to perceive and understand interrelated social networks in our ecological crisis. Together, the two characteristics add a new layer of coexistence in hardboiled narratives: noir and green can be discerned in classic hardboiled writings, and the genre itself can be re-visited as a “green-noir” genre.

1.3 *Red Harvest* (1929)

Red Harvest and *The Big Sleep* represent the commodification of the environment through their descriptions of industrial capitalist practices. The Continental Op in *Red Harvest* is hired (or, in effect, exploited as a resource) to “clean up” a city poisoned by a mining operation run by industrialist Elihu Willsson and his gang. The factory and practices therein are toxic insofar as they poison the natural environment and because they create exploitative and unfair working conditions. Elihu Willsson, as Deborah Cafiero puts it,

embodies the marriage of savage capitalism with political power and initiates a cycle of violent corruption that permeates the city from top to bottom. In this novel the structure of crime and corruption mimics a sewer: those at the top create rivers of shit in the form of dirty money that flows down through the channels of power and feeds the violent criminals below. (164)

There is, as Cafiero makes clear, a brutality that unfolds directly before the reader: political power’s cycle of corruption infects the city and is manifested in gang violence. The novel also offers a more fragmented mapping of violence directed at the environment by mining practices. In *The Big Sleep*, Philip Marlowe is also faced with an employer whose wealth depends upon capitalist practices of environmental exploitation. Marlowe

is employed by oil-industry businessman General Sternwood, whose empire is both endangered and epitomized by his daughters' ungovernable immoral behaviour. Each novel's examination of the crimes at the heart of industrial systems allows readers to better grasp the connections between capitalist practices, the ruthless misuse of labour, and the exploitation of the environment; industrialists treat employees and the environment as extractable resources. These issues are embedded in a murder mystery in which the threat to both the individual victim's life and *life itself* at a wider scale is at the heart of the narrative. My below analysis helps readers gain a better understanding of the dark side of the modernist capitalist practices and industries that gave California its image as a state with infinite resources.

Red Harvest, published in 1929, is inspired by Butte, Montana's historical Anaconda Road massacre (Cline 59). In April of 1920, there was a miners' strike for better wages and working hours, which resulted in a death and over a dozen injuries. Hammett, as a Pinkerton agent,⁴ was dispatched to Butte to quell the labour conflict and drew on his experiences in Butte and with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to create the novel's narrative. Scholars such as Andrew Pepper analyze this novel using a Marxist methodology, considering it in relation to the real-life strike. I take a step further and identify not merely the culpability of the corporation itself (The Anaconda Copper Mining Company/ACMC) against the miners, but its longstanding systemic guilt as a

⁴ The Pinkerton National Detective Agency was founded in 1850 as a form of private police force and was deployed in anti labour union activities. Hammett began working for Pinkerton's in 1915 (Nolan 7). Biographer William F. Nolan writes that while Hammett was on this assignment, he refused an offer to assassinate a union leader, who was later murdered: "[Hammett's life partner] Lillian Hellman came to believe that this was the key that opened his mind to what he saw as the corruption of the system. The assassination ... helped lay the groundwork for Hammett's shift to radical politics in the thirties" (14).

pollution-driving agent, beginning in 1884 with their ore processing and smelting facilities. The ACMC was purchased by the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARC) in the 1970s until its mining operations permanently stopped in the 1980s (Montana.gov). Butte and a river in the area became contaminated primarily due to smelting operations in the 1980s, with mining and smelting operations producing “uranium, arsenic and other pollutants” (*The Guardian*). This area is the nation’s largest Environmental Protection Agency “Superfund” project, which required companies like ARCO to take responsibility for cleaning up land they had contaminated. As of 2020, multiple news and media sources describe how residents are still waiting to learn how the Environmental Protection Agency will finish its clean-up project (Reese). The connection between ARCO’s devastating environmental impact and Hammett’s novel is important to consider as an aspect of a perspective loosely identified as “social ecology.” This term, Timothy Clark writes in “Derangements of Scale,” is associated “with arguments that human violence against the natural world has its origins in human social and economic institutions based on oppressive systems of hierarchy and elitism” (89). In other words, the idea of social ecology, the study of human-induced violence against the natural landscape, identifies such harm as directly connected to a hierarchical and oppressive social system. The hierarchized and exploitative industrialist-employee labour relationship is a useful framework from which to expand upon environmental and ecological issues in *Red Harvest*.

In *Red Harvest*, we read about the kind of toxins and noxious human activities that permeate the air, land, and water, though they are often invisible and only discernable through smell or mystery illnesses. Often, real consequences of human-induced actions

are difficult to grasp as reality. Thus, and rather ironically, fictionalizing real environmental catastrophes can aid in grasping what might have been unfathomable at the time the novel was published. This early hardboiled novel's coupling of individual murders and industrial crime with environmental toxicity is useful in bringing such environmental wrongdoing out of the shadows and into the dark world of popular noir fiction.

Pepper argues in his essay "Hegemony Protected by the Armour of Coercion" that *Red Harvest* both "dramatizes the massive bureaucratic intervention to monitor the poor and working-class terrain" and "embodies the explosive aggression that inheres not in crime but in the operation of law itself" (335). I am interested in Pepper's latter comment, specifically how legally sanctioned aggressions by ACMC against not just their workers, but against natural and residential areas are manifest in Hammett's novel. Thus, while the focal point in Hammett's novel is the strike, it is nevertheless important to (re)read *Red Harvest* as a text that deals with how greed-driven industrialist actions, which take the shape of providing employees with low wages for risky work, harm natural resources, poison the environment, and are injurious—even deadly—to people living within the place.

1.4 From Personville to *Poisonville*

Hammett's nameless investigator is called over to the Montana town of Personville by newspaperman Donald Willsson. The novel opens with the Op's explanation that he first heard Personville called Poisonville by "a red haired mucker⁵ called Hickey Dewey,"

⁵ "Mucker" is a term in North American usage for "A person who manually removes excavated material from a mine, quarry, etc." (OED).

who also calls his shirt a “shoit.” The employee’s working-class accent offers unintentional insight into industry’s exploitative practices, which transform a centre of human community into a literally and figuratively toxic landscape. Willsson is murdered before the Op can meet him. In investigating this death, the Op meets with the victim’s father, an industrialist who controls the city:

For forty years old Elihu Willsson—Father of the man who had been killed this night—had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts. He was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the *Morning Herald* and *Evening Herald*, the city's only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance. Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature. Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state.

(8)

This passage equates a corrupt character with the place. Willsson is depicted as the epitome of toxicity: he is a father, president, stockholder and most importantly, an owner of both enterprises and human beings.⁶

Elihu Willsson is threatened by competing gangs, initially brought over by the industrialist to forcefully end a labour dispute. Elihu hires the Op to clean the city up for him: “I want a man to clean this pig-sty of Poisonville for me, to smoke out the rats, little

⁶ The imagery of contamination that comes with the nickname Poisonville is so powerful in understanding urban and natural degradation that, Italian novelist Massimo Carlotto published a noir novel 2009 called *Poisonville*, highlighting corruption in an industrialized twenty-first century Italy (Pepper 241).

and big” (42). The image of “smoking out” pests is interesting because it both reinforces the toxic environment of Poisonville and makes the atmosphere of corruption visible. Just as an exterminator purposefully kills pests through toxins, the Op intentionally cleans the city by, in the words of Cafiero, “deliberately setting the gangsters and corrupt policemen to murder each other” (155). Along the way, “as he sets up Poisonville as a model of gangster capitalist brutality,” the Op himself becomes contaminated, highlighting the widespread and often, at first, undetected consequences of ‘smoking out the pests’ (Cafiero 155): “this damned burg’s getting me,” the Op remarks, enumerating the sixteen murders that have taken place since his arrival. “I’ve arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I’ve ever got the fever. It’s this damned burg. You can’t go straight here. I got myself tangled at the beginning” (154). This quotation expresses the Op’s contamination as a kind of sickness. It perfectly captures what Morton means when he says in *Dark Ecology* that “just like in noir fiction: I’m the detective *and* the criminal!” (9). The private investigator is not an objective observer immune to the corruption of the world in which he functions. The Op is both exterminator and vermin. The private investigator can fall victim to the poisonous environment that he is hired to remediate.

Willsson’s highly masculinized description by the Op, associating capitalist patriarchal values and practices with environmental exploitation, is contrasted to Dinah, the femme fatale of the novel. Dinah helps the Op because she has power over the gangs, criminals, and gamblers of Poisonville. Dinah tells the op that evidence she has can “nail” “Max Lew Yard, Pete, Noonan, and Elihu Willsson—the whole damned lot of them” (38). But Dinah is not exempt from being exploitative, as Noonan tells the Op that she is “a soiled

dove, as the fellow says, a de luxe hustler, a big-league gold-digger” (22). Not only does he refer to Dinah using a euphemism that represents prostitution as the contamination of a natural creature (“soiled dove”⁷), but his remarks make clear that as a “big-league gold-digger” she is her own kind of miner of human weakness (22).

As previously mentioned, one of the sources of toxicity characterizing Poisonville is Elihu’s mining business. The Op, upon seeing Poisonville, describes it as an “ugly notch between two ugly mountains...dirtied up by mining” (4) and the “factories that filled most of this part of town” (211). The two ugly-looking mountains are part of one of two key scenes concerning nature in the novel. The second is Mock Lake—a lake that, nominally, is not even a natural lake per se, but a *mock* version of one. Readers are introduced to Mock Lake when Dinah tells the Op about Silver Arrow, a drinking establishment halfway between Personville and Mock Lake. Dinah says that “it’s not a bad dump,” but “a dump” that is “cool in summer” (133-34, 87). The word “dump” is used 11 times in *Red Harvest* and signifies both a divey place and a pile of earth/ore that accumulates during mining operations. In the novel, “dump” not only highlights the lack of aesthetic appeal in the natural environment in Hammett’s hardboiled argot, but also obliquely suggests the literal dumping of toxins into a place and the consequent poisoning of the natural landscape.

The natural environment is mapped as desecrated space. For example, the scene in which the Op and others, including Dinah, are forced to spend a night in a farmhouse, focuses on how the natural world is littered with humanmade objects:

⁷ The OED recognizes the phrase “soiled dove” as American slang for a prostitute.

a deal table with a deck of cards and some gummy poker chips on it, a brown iron stove, four chairs, an oil lamp, dishes, pots, pans and buckets, three shelves with canned food in them...On the hillside above we found a little hollow from which road and shack could be not too dimly seen through foliage thick enough to hide us unless we showed a light. (138-139)

This inventory technique of listing of objects is a stylistic rendering of the concept of “dump.” The items are background objects (oil lamp, dishes, and so on), and the hillside and shack are background settings (and the shack is difficult to see); syntactically, the objects are given equal status with the elements of the background/scenery. Rather than providing readers with a description of the natural environment, we are provided first with material objects. The characters in this example find themselves isolated in the novel’s natural world, simultaneously away from and in the middle of an urbanized space. The movement in setting, from the core urban Poisonville to the farmhouse, dislocates the characters and forces them into a natural environment that is just an extension of Poisonville, a place for urban dumping of objects, waste, and people of capitalism. The natural is often overlooked or treated like an object akin to the oil lamp or mass-produced canned food, one that is valued only as it can be used by humans.

Sometimes nature is only obliquely suggested through an application of natural labels at one remove (inanimate mass-produced objects and settings). Examples include the fact that the Op notices Donald’s wife’s green crêpe dress and her “green-slipped feet” stretched toward a burning coal fire, with one slipper’s “green toe” containing a “dark and damp” spot (5-6). The slipper, perhaps alluding to the plant “lady slipper,” is a clue for the Op because the green of the slipper is stained “with something that could have

been blood” (6). The image of the green slipper is akin to the title of the novel itself: “red harvest,” which highlights an agricultural image, but corrupts it into a violent one.

Likewise, the slipper is green, but it is despoiled by a dark, bloody stain, evidence of corruption.

On his arrival, the Op says that he “dumped [his] bags” in the hotel room and surveyed

Personville:

The city wasn't pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining. (3-4)

Hammett transforms the yellow smoke into a verb of active contamination. It pervades the whole scene and carries both visual and olfactory associations with sulphur and its rotten smell. The repetition of the word “ugly” without variation also helps to map a setting that is relentlessly banal and obnoxious to the eye. The sky itself, the literal atmosphere of the natural world, appears to be an industrial product: “spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out of the smelters’ stacks” (4). The capitalist practices of Personville create a Poisonville that is the inverse of paradise – it is a kind of infernal nightmare world.

The Op can only process the pollution and decay in Poisonville through a fragmented lens, meaning he can only bring to the forefront fragmented (pieces of) images and descriptions of his environment. The Op sees a Personville as “Poisonville” due to the

corrupt and toxic individuals who shaped the city. Sally Cline notices the similarities in plot between “Red Harvest” (the short story sequence that appeared monthly from November 1927 to February 1928) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*: “‘Poisonville’ is a savage tale of shameless sleaze in high places, and like *The Great Gatsby*, it exposes corruption at the center of American life” (58). In *Gatsby*, the green electric beacon at the end of Daisy and Tom’s dock can be understood as a representation of how the industrial development disrupts the natural and thus the dream of a return to the pastoral. When Gatsby is drawn to the green light, he “is drawn to images of pastoral felicity” (362). But the green light is artificial. Thus, in *Gatsby*, we find a desire for an agrarian ideal that can never co-exist with current reality. In Hammett’s dystopian view, the Op perceives the corruption of the pastoral ideal: the toxic environment around him is an outcome of the mining industry and its exploitation of human labour and natural resources.

The type of pollution occurring in *Red Harvest* is capitalist and people-driven and this is evidenced by Hammett’s descriptions of characters. For example, Elihu is sick (15), and his face is “an unhealthy dark red” (42). When Noonan “planted his fat hands on the desk top,” the Op describes him leaning “over them toward me, oozing delight from every pore” (23). Other characters are represented as both noxious and subject to the endemic toxicity of Poisonville. These sickly-seeming characters include the “weedy” chauffeur, Dan Rolff, a “lunger” who suffers from tuberculosis, an airborne disease that spreads from person to person (17, 33). Rolff’s illness, which gives him “a sick man’s” voice, highlights the level of noxiousness of Poisonville: the people of Poisonville are breathing in harmful substances (32). There are other examples that do not necessarily draw on a

specific illness or disease, but nevertheless make clear the physical manifestations of the consequences of living in Poisonville. There are Dinah's "blue and a bit bloodshot" eyes, which call attention to the level of irritation her eyes are suffering; the compound word (blood + shot), used several times to describe her eyes, evokes a kind of violent vision (71). We also have MacSwain's "yellow teeth," Miss Jennison's "lifeless yellow hair" and Helen Albury's yellowish face (92, 184), the colour of which seems continuous with the sulfur-infused environment of Poisonville. The above characters are sick in a kind of environmentally induced malaise. The unhealthy colours, the yellow teeth and lifeless hair, and the weakly, gangly, and weedy (almost wild plant-like) chauffer are akin to the yellow smoke that permeates Poisonville. Now, the yellow smoke that poisons the city is slowly poisoning the people who live there. Both criminals and non-criminals alike are described as sick, highlighting the complexities in evaluating culpability in relation to environmental harm and its consequences on people and beings. We can think through this idea by way of analogy as per Clark's reading of Christa Wolf's novel *Accident: A Day's News* (1997) in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and The Environment*. Character Victor investigates "the secrets of life" by putting together "putrid fragments of dead bodies" only to discover that there is no 'secret' as such, but that "the biological is itself the material horror that can seem entirely to constitute us, a fluid and manipulable biological machine" (Clark 68-68). Similarly, the Op's task of cleaning up the city, with a seemingly clear-cut criminal being Elihu Willsson, changes as the novel progresses, revealing how pernicious criminality can be when we consider criminals as agents driving environmental deterioration.

When the ambulance crew brings “a litter into the room, ending Reno [Starkey]’s tale” they are described as tired looking, and the Op blames Poisonville, which “gave them plenty of work” (215). The stretcher (described as a “litter,” a word associated with refuse) becomes one more item associated with human waste—and humans *as* waste, when Reno’s body is carried out. Blame is not placed on one entity for the crimes behind the broader scene of the crime of poisoning the natural environment. In turn, the toxic atmosphere becomes part of characters and the natural environment. Even though Elihu’s eyes are blue like frost and watery like the ocean, he is the one who built “Personville brick by brick with his own hands and he was going to keep it or wipe it off the side of the hill. Nobody could threaten him in his own city, no matter who they were” (43). The Op is there to help Elihu clear out the thugs and put a stop to their violent actions, but the poison created by Elihu, and his capitalist mining practices continues to sicken the people and the city. To Elihu, nature is property to be protected from “rats,” an object to be exploited for personal gain. In short, this novel demonstrates the importance of hardboiled noir texts’ mapping of urban and natural landscapes through crime.

1.5 *The Big Sleep* (1939)

The Big Sleep opens with private eye Philip Marlowe being summoned to the Sternwood mansion for a potential job. Elderly patriarch General Sternwood first approaches Marlowe to deal with pornographer Arthur Geiger’s blackmail of Sternwood’s daughter Carmen, who has posed for nude photographs. When he first meets Sternwood one can read similarities between the General and Elihu from *Red Harvest*; both men are invalids, corrupt patriarchs of industrial empires. The General’s mansion is literally located in the middle of a profitable oil field which becomes a metonymy for Los Angeles: at the heart

of the oil field is the Sternwood mansion and at the heart of the mansion is a green house, specifically an artificially created simulacrum of an “Edenic” environment that is in fact the site of decadence, corruption, and death. The extraction economy depicted in this novel produces the illusion of a “natural” ideal, but it is in fact a completely unnatural environment.

In *The Big Sleep*, oil surrounds (and is found underneath) the mansion, emphasizing the novel’s “oily aesthetics.” Oily aesthetics, a term coined by Delia Byrnes in “‘I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here’” speaks to the representation of oil as both a loved and feared resource: it can both create and disrupt. Byrnes focuses on oil’s intimate ecologies in HBO’s popular neo-noir television series *True Detective* (2014-), specifically the “omnipresent spectacle of the petro-industrial complex” as well as oil as an “aesthetic strategy for representing the ambivalent pleasures and anxieties of US fossil-fuel modernity” (86). Drawing on Morton’s idea of dark ecology, as well as scholars such as Stephanie LeMenager, Byrnes examines interconnected and superimposed images of human bodies, decay, and corrupt human actions with oil. As in *The Big Sleep*, petroleum circulates as “capitalism’s lifeblood” (87). Petroleum plays a crucial role in “shaping cultural life” and the representation of the oil industry complex in a hardboiled narrative riddled with urban crime highlights the aggressive and corrupt underlying capitalist structures in this industry. The hardboiled private eye’s investigations emphasise in a fragmented manner what Byrnes identifies as “ecologies of violence” set in motion by petrochemical regimes (87). In other words, in *The Big Sleep*, there is a deep yet fragmented mapping of urban crime and oil and its infrastructure. Nathan Ashman explains in “Hard-boiled Ecologies” that, as he delves deeper into the “sordid secrets of

the Sternwood family,” Marlowe becomes “infected” by the revolting aspects of the city itself in ways, I argue, similar to the Op in *Red Harvest* (3).

There is a piece of greenery amid the dark oily aesthetics surrounding the Sternwood mansion. The greenhouse in which Marlowe meets the General is “heavily misted” and has light of an “unreal greenish color” (2). The greenhouse has a forest of plants, but it is the orchids specifically, an introduced species to California, that Marlowe notices: “the air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom” (20). The General uses orchids as “an excuse for the heat” and when Sternwood asks him if he likes such flowers, Marlowe responds “Not particularly” (28). Furthermore, General Sternwood calls the orchids “nasty things” because “their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute” (28). The novel thus makes an analogy between the corruption of human and plant decadent bodies. The General’s description elaborates on the motif of smell as a sense that helps to map the diffused noir atmosphere of urban and natural spaces in hardboiled texts. Not only were orchids popular amongst the wealthy at the turn of the twentieth century, but they also highlight decay and disease: some contemporary research even claims that the flower mimics the odor of decomposition of a decaying mammalian carcass.⁸ The plants in Sternwood’s greenhouse, correspondingly, have “nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men” and are described in terms of their odour: “they smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket” (20). Orchids are also, typically, flowers that survive in California only under artificially humid “hot house”

⁸ For example, please refer to Geoff Williams’ 2021 book *The Flowering of Australia’s Rainforests*.

conditions atypical of southern California's semi-desert climate. When Marlowe leaves the house at the end of Chapter 4 (and again in Chapter 30), he refers to the Sternwood mansion as the "orchid house" with air that is as "still" as that which is outside (72). In other words, it is a house that reeks of death.

The Sternwood wealth in all its superficial glory—paintings, greenhouse, flowers, and so on—conceals the underlying decay stemming, not simply from the misbehaviour of Sternwood's daughters (a corruption which at first seems central to Marlowe's investigation), but from the family's oil-related practices. However, Marlowe's exposure to the family's criminal and immoral acts in their oil extraction business allows readers to better understand the toxicity underlying legally sanctioned crimes harming the environment. Oil can be considered in a positive light because it is a resource that not only makes certain machinery and infrastructure possible, but it also makes the Sternwood family wealthy. However, oil is also dirty and toxic. Despite the family's effort to clean their hands of their oil empire, their dirtiness manifests in different ways, such as when Sternwood's daughter Carmen poses for "dirty" pornographic photos, and the dirty ivory colour of their mansion, which suggests the tainted opulence associated with the exploitation of animals characteristic of the colonial ivory trade: "the ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out" (44). Even the clean lines of modern styled chromium features, typical of Art Deco furniture, are implicitly affected: the shiny surface of chrome plating covers over a brass base.

The effect that the Sternwood oil empire has on the population is emphasized through both an individual and a more widespread understanding of victimhood. For example, on the one hand, there are Carmen's seizures, and, on the other hand, there is a sense of illness dissipated over the city and exemplified by Sternwood's own infirmity and patriarchal impotence. Marlowe ultimately deceives General Sternwood and allows the dying man to believe "that his blood is not poison, and that although his two little girls are a trifle wild... they are not perverts or killers," but this concession has the force of an assertion, coming as it does at the end of the novel, stressing family's inherited toxicity, perversion, and murderousness (448-449). Marlowe indicates, inadvertently, that this diffused illness is infectious. When he first encounters Carmen he remarks, "to hell with the rich. They made me sick" (154). Even the urban locale is ill: observing Santa Monica Boulevard, Marlowe describes a run-down streetscape which includes "small sick businesses that had crawled there to die" (346).

The inability to fully separate the natural from the mechanical and industrial, or to internalize and embody the natural (to try to preserve it), may also be understood through descriptions of inanimate objects. For example, when Marlowe first meets Sternwood in the oppressive atmosphere of the greenhouse, there is a description of a light:

The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. The glass walls and roof were heavily misted and big drops of moisture splashed down on the plants. The light had an unreal greenish color, like 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. (20)

The light in *The Big Sleep* is both a real and unreal green, a natural colour of the environment, but also unreal in being artificial and filtered. This example is akin to the artificially created natural environment discussed in relation to Hammett's *Poisonville*.

The investigator maps this real-unreal urban and natural space in multiple ways, mainly relying on his senses. Marlowe's preoccupation with the senses is noticed by scholars such as Will Norman in "The Big Empty: Chandler's Transatlantic Modernism":

The preoccupation with climate, atmospheres, and smells that we have already noted in Chandler's oeuvre also provides the opportunity for similar variations on this imagery of replete emptiness, ways in which hollow spaces can nevertheless be understood as full—of light, moisture, odor, or the smoke particles emitted by the endless cigarettes and pipes smoked by his characters. (764)

As noted in the introduction of this project, the idea of noir as atmospheric is essential to my understanding of the genre and its sub-types. The above quote, specifically the focus on "climate, atmospheres, and smells," emphasizes the importance of atmospheric conditions, in texts like *The Big Sleep*, as methods of mapping a deteriorating urban and natural environment. Marlowe maps the natural and the urban through his perception of not only characters and objects, but also of the place's atmosphere. One might recall here the preceding quotation from *The Big Sleep* on the vegetation in the hothouse (specifically, the orchids); the space is attributed with decaying and gruesome characteristics.

The "decadent" atmosphere of the Sternwood family oil dynasty in which Marlowe investigates extends to the narrative's depiction of modern Los Angeles, especially its architecture. Marlowe arranges a meeting on Wilshire Boulevard, at the site of the well-

known department store: “the violet light at the top of Bullock’s green-tinged tower was far above us, serene and withdraw from the dark, dripping city” (364). Bullock’s, a high-end department store was an art-deco icon when the novel was published. One can read this scene to trace a toxic trail ending in the city going back to Bullock’s tower. In the annotated edition of *The Big Sleep*, there is a footnote in Chapter 27 that acknowledges how Chandler’s novel, specifically the passage regarding Bullock’s, echoes *Gatsby*. The dream in Chandler’s novel, and in *Red Harvest*, is, as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, a “tawdry and morally bankrupt” one (365).

In this novel, Bullock’s is a site of a money transaction for information in an automobile. The meeting takes place following Harry’s death by cyanide poisoning. Although I discuss this gas below, to briefly explain, cyanide is a gas commonly sprayed on citrus groves to fumigate them and is reminiscent of the Op’s metaphorical act of exterminating ‘rats’ through poisonous gas. The cause of death, as well as its association with Bullock’s, is significant as it exemplifies the central motif of poison: the very chemical that allows the vigorous growth of the California citrus paradise garden is precisely what kills Harry. Harry’s death extends beyond his decaying body and into the atmosphere, which is, around Geiger, “poisonous and unreal” (226). This extension exemplifies the extent to which the poisonous and toxic environment permeates the atmosphere.

In *The Big Sleep*, the city is literally “dripping,” saturated with toxicity. Chandler’s descriptions paint a picture of a city ridden with toxicity and decay, one with a “dark sky,” “rain-clouded lights of the stores” that are “soaked up by the black street,” “sodden trees” that “dripped all over the landscape” (72, 84, 86). Marlowe, looking over the smutty photos of Carmen absorbs their moral poison, and his cigarette smoking is

suggestive of the fact that he is implicated in the toxicity: having examined the photos, “I sat there and poisoned myself with cigarette smoke and listened to the rain and thought about it” (80). Marlowe is both an observer of, and an active driving agent, decay in the same way the Op is in Poisonville.

Moreover, the city, and its atmosphere, is mapped as toxic through the private investigator’s sense of smell, specifically as he distinguished the scents at the site of Geiger’s murder among “an odd assortment of odors, of which the most emphatic at the moment seemed to be the pungent aftermath of cordite and the sickish aroma of ether” (93). Cordite is a smokeless firearm propellant dating back to the 1800s, a low explosive, meaning its burning rate is as slow as contemporary gunpowder. Its scent is the atmospheric trace of a gunshot; it is the diffuse remains in the air of a violent event. Ether, on the other hand, is a scent associated with dissolute behaviour, since it was inhaled as a recreational drug, which the intoxicated Carmen shows signs of having used. Later, Marlowe steps into a garage and experiences the effects of a kind of architectural exhaling: “the breath of the garage was sweet and sinister with the smell of hot pyroxylin paint” (372). Pyroxylin is a highly flammable nitrocellulose mixture that was also used as propellant in firearms. In this context, however, it is paint often used on motor vehicles, giving it a “satin-like’ effect” as Ford Motor Company published in a July 1926 article (Treace).

Marlowe also speaks of fog that “dripped from the Monterey Cyprus that shadowed off into nothing towards the cliff above the ocean,” which makes more prominent the veil of toxicity that hangs over the city (294). Specifically, Marlowe continues to rely on his keen sense of smell to map the poison in the urban space when he describes the “stale

sweetness” of the night air that smells like it “still remembered automobile exhausts and the streets of the city” (326). It is no coincidence that, as the annotators of *The Big Sleep* perceive, Bullocks was the first department store with its entrance onto a back parking lot and was “designed to be a beacon to motorists.” The world of the automobile, of course, is driven by the oil and gas that the Sternwood family extract.

When Carmen asks Marlowe to teach her how to shoot near the oil wells, just before Carmen attempts to kill him, he remarks on the derelict oil-coated machinery and the “oil-scummed water,” asking “are they going to make a park of all this?” Earlier, we had been told that the toxic wasteland of the non-productive oilfield had been donated to the city as a “public park” (54). Again, the superficially “natural” environment is underlaid by the toxic by-products of the oil industry. Carmen responds with an awareness that Sternwood’s so-called public-mindedness could constitute another form of killing perpetrated against the natural world: “the smell of that sump,” she remarks, “would poison a herd of goats” (430). The Sternwoods live up high on the hill above this wasteland, where “they 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. If they wanted to” (54). While the orchids in the greenhouse mask the heat, they cannot mask the smell of decay because they in and of themselves mimic such a scent. The opening example, coupled with the exhaust and other powerful scents in the novel, demonstrates the ways in which the environment of Los Angeles is saturated in toxins that over time pose a threat to life itself; in this sense, the Sternwood family are slow violence murderers.

The Big Sleep depicts a city that is dripping, figuratively and sometimes literally, with oil. Just as the fog makes prominent the toxic particles that ruin the natural environment, the oil is described as dripping (or leaking) from the city to attribute a visual image that highlights the ubiquitous presence of chemicals and the exploitation of resources and their role in slowly destroying the natural environment. Even when a little bit of utopian greenery peaks through this grotesque picture of Los Angeles, such as in Marlowe's description of the trees on Laverne Terrace that have "fresh green leaves after the rain" and are observed "in the cool afternoon sunlight," these peaceful moments are interrupted by violence and darkness. In this case, the scene is disrupted by gunshots and the disappearance of the killer into the shadows (152). As Trott explains, Chandler emphasizes a tension between the "pastoral and the urban" (102). Even the oil-dripping field is going to be turned into a park. The sound of that prospect makes Marlowe listen to "the hum of the traffic...like the buzzing of bees" (430), an aural simile that overlays sound of the urban world over nature.

The depiction of cyanide gas, previously mentioned, is the most direct and concentrated representation of the continuity between diffuse environmental contamination and intentional individual murder in *The Big Sleep*. In Chandler's narrative, cyanide is manufactured locally for use in industrial citrus growing. Agnes tells Marlow that "smack up against the hills there's a cyanide plant where they made the stuff for fumigation" (364). When he finds Harry's body next to a bourbon bottle, Marlowe recognizes the scent of poison: "I breathed shallowly, from the top of my lungs, and bent above the bottle. Behind the charred smell of the bourbon another odor lurked, faintly, the odor of

bitter almonds. Harry Jones dying had vomited on his coat. That made it cyanide” (356).⁹ Cyanide is also used as a deadly inhalant in the gas chamber. Having restrained Geiger’s boy, Marlowe tell him to hold his breath and imagine he is sitting in “the clean little gas chamber up in San Quentin and when you take that breath... it won’t be air you’ll get, it will be cyanide fumes. And that’s what they call humane execution in our state now” (222). In sum, the use of cyanide is both crime and punishment, just as the poisoning of the environment constitutes a crime against nature that produces deadly conditions for its perpetrators. It produces a strange loop in which crop fumigation allows flourishing agricultural production even as it kills the environment.

The story is an example of a chain of industrial practices that begins with the actions of powerful men like Willsson and General Sternwood: all these practices, whether in production or distribution, emphasize how hierarchical-driven contemporary business enterprises create and perpetuate a toxic environment at every step of the capitalist and industrial process. The previously mentioned violet light highlights the toxicity of the city, and the fact that it stems from the Bullock’s tower, an aestheticized capitalist setting for transactions to take place, is significant. While the tower is withdrawn, the violet light becomes a filter through which readers can better understand the link between the decaying city and the actions of industrialists and corporations. While in *Gatsby* it is a beckoning green light, drawing the eponymous character towards an unattainable dream of the agrarian myth, in *The Big Sleep*, it is a weird and uncanny violet light on a green

⁹ It is perhaps coincidental that the almond agriculture, based on species imported in the 19th century, burgeoned in California in the 1930s, when farmers applied irrigation, and has been the source of environmental problems, especially because of the crop’s high demand for water.

tower that brings out of the shadows the toxicity permeating Marlowe's Los Angeles atmosphere.

In short, Hammett and Chandler transform place into not a "peculiar urban space" but a weird space that is "stimulated by and constitutively dependent on our sense of the natural ecology of the Los Angeles basin itself" (Jameson 50). At the end of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe asks: "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 were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you" (452, 454). The marble tower on the top of the high hill is both literally and figuratively built on a sump, which refers to both a swampy cesspool and excavation made underground. Furthermore, this quotation makes clear the weird loop that ecological degradation exists in in Chandler's and Hammett's novels. Although the mysteries are solved, there is no end or no solution to the exploitation of the natural environment as an entity with endless resources. Scholars like Trott argue that the hardboiled investigators want to escape their decaying landscape and go to a peaceful pastoral such as the one in Chandler's novel *Lady in the Lake*. I suggest that the green private eyes do not have a pastoral impulse—they map inherent tensions surrounding the American pastoral and bring to light the despoiled American environment through urban violence, crime, and decay.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides readers of Hammett and Chandler's hardboiled texts with a new lens through which they can understand the fragmented scale of mapping the toxic Californian landscape. These writers honed a genre that continues to be adapted to reflect

social conditions and concerns such as environmental degradation. To borrow Clark's words, the seemingly "trivial" or "small" interactions that the private investigators have with their environment become "enormous" when considering what is at stake as we continue to industrialize and urbanize (Clark). The darkness of noir "compels us to recognize the melancholic wounds that make us up," the oddly nonsensical yet logical world in which we live in (Morton 110). An "implosion of scales," meaning the large-scale representations of crime and the small-scale representation of urban decay and environmental degradation, illuminate that which lurks in the shadows. In his 2022 book *Climate Lyricism*, Min Song looks at Iranian-American poet Solmaz Sharif's work, stressing the importance of how although a writer's or artists' work does not "seem all that interested in environmental concerns," such texts may nevertheless ask the "reader to look at the ways in which language disguises violence" (161). Violence and urban crime in Hammett and Chandler's novels can be understood not only as depicting death and decay in an urbanized city, but "as a way of understanding the world" and concerns over the natural environment (Song 175). Urban crime is marked not only by capitalist structures, gang violence, and so on, but it is also marked by growing anxiety and fear about the environmental impacts of modern cities. The Op and Marlowe are useful figures through which readers and scholars of crime fiction can map environmental decay. When a cartographic scale is inadequate (Clark), one can turn to fictional private eyes as mappers of an urban and natural decay that is diffused in the atmosphere. To echo Stephen Laycock: "the most authentic way to approach a mystery is not to seek, vainly, to dispel it, but to become more open to its resistance and challenge" (cited in Clark 196). There is an advantage to not solving the environmental issues in the writings of Hammett

and Chandler: it makes the reader more open to the resistances and challenges within the mystery of environmental crises.

While in these hardboiled novels the natural is mapped in a fragmented scale secondary to the core crime, in Chapter 2, specifically in the neo-noir films *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*, violence against the natural environment is more closely linked to violence against and amongst humans. Although the private eye of *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* maps urban decay and environmental degradation in a fragmented scale, elements of the natural environment are more directly linked to the investigative plot than in the early private investigators covered in Chapter 1. Thus, Chapter 2 contains examples from the films that both reinforce the fragmented scale of mapping such spaces, but also demonstrate a shift in thinking about the interconnectedness of crime, violence, and the natural environment in American noir.

Chapter 2: Exploitation and Extraction in *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*

Los Angeles fiction has been no less concerned with forging ties to the past.

Mystery tales, by definition, are tales of historic reconstruction... Reimagining the past has been a recurring concern of present-day Los Angeles writers.

-David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*

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*Chinatown* places the hard-boiled detective story within a view of the world that is deeper and more catastrophic, more enigmatic in its evil, more sudden and inexplicable in its outbreaks of violent chance.

-John G. Cawelti, “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation”

### 2.1 From Noir to Neo-Noir

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks elaborates her concept of “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (which later became “transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”) to talk about “interlocking” systems of oppression, exploitation, and domination in the contemporary Western world (171). In this chapter, I adapt hook’s concept and relate it to the ecocritical concept of “petroculture” to explore neo-noir films *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Two Jakes* (1990), both written by American screenwriter Robert Towne. I argue that the films, in their reflexive mode of regenerating film noir and its offshoots, display their self-conscious perception of the interlocking relationships between white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. In addition, they bring to light an increasing awareness of Western society’s impact on the environment.

*Chinatown* uses a variety of tropes and other formal means to analyze these relationships. The incest plot of the narrative analyzes the connection between capitalism and patriarchy; and the visual spectacle of Asian-American difference analyzes the connection between capitalism and white supremacy. The gender-based violence implied in the incest plot and the race-based violence implied in the visual spectacle of visible minorities, together stand in metaphorical relation to the slow violence in the scenes of environmental blight. For a writer like Towne, noir's toxic atmosphere helps show the systematic connections between gender and race-based violence, and human violence toward nature. The prevalence of capitalism's toxicity as it permeates the films' natural environment is represented through the exploitation of minority bodies—sexed/gendered and racialized bodies. Thus, these films push the boundaries of the depiction of noir's toxic atmosphere as found in the hardboiled narratives of Hammett and Chandler, inviting viewers to understand how systems of oppression and guilt are tied to an oppression of the natural environment.

*Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* develop the environmental rhetoric found in hardboiled fiction and early noir film. For Jennifer Fay, noir's environmental rhetoric is a pessimistic and extinctionist one. As she puts it in "The Ecologies of Film Noir," noir is "devoted to the pedagogy of death" and this pedagogy is an elegy "to a deadly and damaging civilization to which characters and viewers are nevertheless drawn" (2). Films noir, much like the hardboiled narratives of Hammett and Chandler, confront viewers with a corrupted "order of things" that can persist forever (2). Rather than solving environmental crises, or offering a solution to a fallen humanity, noir texts simply depict mournful stories "in habitats soon to disappear" (3). In short, like with Hammett and

Chandler's texts, film noir places us in "a consuming capitalist culture without the promise of renewal, redemption, or hope for regeneration" and their narratives are played out "in the genre's bleak landscapes" (4). Film noir puts on display environmental crises befalling America, and it intricately connects these crises to the criminality of its fallen social order.

In particular, the atmosphere of noir is saturated with the criminality of postwar "petroculture." The concept of petroculture helps us understand the contradictory ways in which oil shapes our society, culture, and imagination. Sheena Wilson et al. open their book *Petrocultures* with the comment that "oil transformed everyday life in the twentieth century" (i). Take for example, as Matthew Pangborn points out in "Lessons in 'Bad Love,'" how some films noir "took shape" alongside the dramatic rise in oil consumption in the 1930s "to surpass coal's rate of consumption after the war, at the genre's height" (787). As a result, much of the imagery of film noir relates directly to American petroculture. For example, Edgar G. Ulmer's 1945 film *Detour* opens with Al Roberts hitchhiking in a dead man's suit. He catches a ride and arrives at a diner in Reno, Nevada, where he has a flashback to his previous New York City life as a pianist and boyfriend to Sue Harvey. In this film, the automobile is American petroculture's sign of hope: characters imagine a "better life promised by products like the automobile," a brighter future with possibilities (Pangborn 795). For Pangborn, *Detour's* noir atmosphere thus offers "an insightful exploration of the changes brought about by oil, an experience that it, like others, imagines to be a dark and fated, if unintentional, criminal act" (783). In the dawning consciousness of the catastrophic future that is in store for American society if environmental crises are real and irreversible, film noir also displays an emergent

awareness of the underlying historical circumstances driving such destructive consequences: the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” of modern petroculture. *Detour* hints at the dark seductiveness of oil not only for industry executives, but for everyone in the culture. In the film’s noir atmosphere, the appeal of oil is depicted as a desire for death and the urban decay depicted in the setting shows the danger of capitalist expansion unfolding at the time and the consequences for a diminished future (Pangborn 787). To further quote Wilson et al., “in the twenty-first century, we are finally beginning to realize the degree to which oil has made us moderns who and what we are, shaping our existence close at hand while narrating us into networks of power and commerce far, far away” (i). Human life has come to depend on oil, and as such oil permeates every aspect of existence, including our atmosphere. In looking back at the role of oil in the twentieth century, we are examining such a society’s usage of this resource with a critical lens that allows us to better grasp its complex and contradictory position.

Towne’s films pick up on and develop noir’s dawning consciousness of the systematic ills of modern petroculture, *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* illustrate the self-awareness or reflexivity of neo-noir in general. As some scholars argue, neo-noir emerged in the 1960s-1970s when Hollywood was in a financial crisis, thus turning to “the possibilities of a genre that appeared to have died out a decade earlier...but which was gaining attention in popular and academic critical writing about classical Hollywood” (Bould et al. 4). By the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s, film noir of the 1930s and 1940s had become an influential and citable artistic form. Some filmmakers updated the settings of films noir, and many “took inspiration from the French New Wave’s revisioning of Hollywood crime films and sought to revitalise the American crime film, often also

incorporating modernist film techniques derived from European arthouse cinema” (Bould et al. 4). *Chinatown* belongs to the first cycle of neo-noir production, alongside films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Charley Varrick* (1973). In the second cycle, in the 1980s, we encounter films such as *Body Heat* (1981) and the 1981 re-make of the 1946 noir *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. As all these films show, neo-noir “reworks, works up, works over, works with and works against classical noir” (Bould et al. 8). In his essay “The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*,” Richard Gilmore argues that neo-noir is different from film noir because it involves a “level of self-reflexivity that classic noir lacked,” *Chinatown* thus acts “as a kind of philosophy of noir” in its ability to reflect on and re-create the genre of noir” (120).

## 2.2 Chinatown and The Two Jakes

Because it “knows how to be noir,” Towne’s duology is better equipped to explore the relationship between crime and environmental issues than the fiction of precursors such as Hammett and Chandler. In contrast to the narratives of the preceding chapter, *Chinatown* and its sequel self-consciously utilize tropes and metaphors that connect patriarchal lust, capitalist greed and white supremacist racism to environmental blight and destruction. While the toxic environment was mapped in the shadows of the core crime plots of Hammett and Chandler’s novels, *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* puts a damaged environment in the foreground and depicts it as not just the scene, but the ongoing victim of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy of America’s postwar petroculture.

*Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*, set in the 1930s-1940s, pay lavish homage to the setting, visual style, and narrative conventions of classic noir fiction and film. *Chinatown*,

according to Robert Towne, is based on Carey McWilliams's *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (1946) and an illustrated *West* magazine article on "Raymond Chandler's L.A." In an interview with Scott Myers, Towne recounts how he saw a copy of *Old West Magazine* that was part of the *L.A. Times*, this was about 1969. In it, was an article called 'Raymond Chandler's L.A.' I don't remember the copy that well, but the part that got me were about half a dozen photographs taken in 1969 meant to represent L.A. in the '30s. There was a shot of a Plymouth convertible under one of those old streetlamps outside of Bullock's Wilshire. There was a shot of a beautiful Packard outside of a home in Pasadena. There was another shot of the old railway station downtown. I looked at them, and realized 'My God, with a selective eye, you could recreate the L.A. of the '30s.' Then owing to a number of other experiences — walking on the Palisades and things like that which brought back a lot via sense memory, I began to realize and reflect upon how much I felt had been lost about the city in the intervening 30–35 years. '37 was just beyond my recall, but the '40s weren't, and pre-1945 they were basically the same thing. So I thought about that, and then...I went to Jack (Nicholson) and said 'What if I wrote a detective story set in L.A. of the '30s?' (Qtd. in Myers)

As part of their neo-noir vision, *Chinatown*, and *The Two Jakes*, set in Los Angeles, reproduce Hammett and Chandler's dismantling of the paradisiacal myth of sunny California, to depict a city always awaiting some next human-caused environmental catastrophe. Both films are about the exploitation of natural resources and their disastrous consequences: *Chinatown* is focused on crimes related to the municipal management of

water resources and *The Two Jakes* is concerned with crimes related to oil extraction and privatization of land. Neo-noir emerges in American postwar white culture as an aesthetic for a new society, a new capitalist and consumer petro-society that exists in a poisonous atmosphere of guilt, mortgaging the climate and threatening all future life on the planet to satisfy its unquenchable consumer needs, with each atomized individual aware of the guilt but unable to affect an unstoppable social apparatus of power and resource consumption. These films' nostalgia for the noir setting and style of the 1930s-1940s is thus inflected by a modern environmental awareness. Neo-noir is noir that has learned of the literally poisoned real world from the cultural impact of works such as Rachel Carson's famous 1962 *Silent Spring* (discussed further in Chapter 3 below). As Arnett echoes John Cawelti in the latter's essay "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," neo-noir films invoke the hardboiled mythical world of private eyes such as Hammett's Op and Chandler's Marlowe. But neo-noir adjusts the conventions of the earlier genre to fit an increasing cultural awareness within capitalist petroculture of its dangerous overconsumption of resources.

In *Chinatown*, the extraction industry's past, present, and future is reflected critically in both the incest plot and in the visual imagery of Asian racial otherness. Set in 1937, the film's narrative is inspired by the historical California water wars of the early twentieth century, which involved disputes over the management of water in Southern California. Specifically, the film depicts the Los Angeles municipality's plan to take water from Owens Valley through an aqueduct. This bigger social event is introduced in the narrative by the private eye Jake Gittes' investigation of an individualized intimate moral transgression. In the film, Gittes is duped to believe that he has been hired to investigate a

marital infidelity. The lie of the initial case is exposed, and the case becomes about an entangled set of transgressions, private and public, and moral and criminal, that eventually show how exploitative white supremacist patriarchal capitalist practices create increasing intergenerational and environmental damage.

Similarly, in the less commercially and critically successful 1990 sequel *The Two Jakes*, as the narrative unfolds, viewers are shown the environmental costs of capitalist fuel extraction and the effects American petroculture has on its current and future environment.<sup>10</sup> Important to both films is the narrative pattern: both open with the inquiry into a routine private affair that transforms into an investigation involving a set of transgressions that have an impact on a much larger scale. In *The Two Jakes*, Gittes' investigations into infidelity and murder once again reveal that capitalist resource extraction can only produce a toxic atmosphere, biologically and morally speaking. The film, set in 1948 Los Angeles, opens with Gittes being retained by real estate entrepreneur Jake Berman to catch his wife in an act of infidelity. This turns out to be a ruse intended by Berman to dupe Gittes; thus, the film opens with a similar narrative pattern to *Chinatown*: the detective is tricked into a private investigation that turns into something more socially momentous. It is also more personally meaningful for Gittes, as he is essentially duped into a reunion with Katherine Mulwray, Evelyn's daughter, whom Gittes last saw being driven away by Noah Cross at the end of *Chinatown*. With her presence, the story comes back around to the connection between patriarchal crimes with capitalist ones. In one respect, the narrative presents a kind of redemption of the

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<sup>10</sup> Towne's dedication to *Chinatown* as its writer, as well as the film's triumph, motivated him to work with Jack Nicholson on a sequel. However, issues faced during production for several years resulted in the delay between the two films.



patriarchal crimes of the past. Berman essentially sacrifices himself for Katherine, and Gittes ends up perjuring himself for her sake as well. However, Katherine's rejected quasi-incestuous seduction of Gittes at the end of the film signals that the personal, social, and environmental damage wrought by capitalist patriarchy remains. Katherine's escape is too late, and changes nothing.

Both *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* were written and produced in a time when American society was becoming more aware of environmental degradation and the fragility of natural resources. In a *Macleans* interview from 2009, Towne states that he

had always been concerned with the environment. It was just an ongoing concern of mine. The destruction of the city had been affecting me even then. That city was so naturally beautiful, seeing it indiscriminately chewed up. . . I mean, Los Angeles, more than most cities, seems to me to have always been a place where people never thought they would come to live but had to strike it rich and get out of there. It was a place to be mined, whether for gold or oil, or fame and Hollywood. You make your bundle and get out regardless of the collateral damage that's done to the city. I thought, 'My God, it's my home. It's disgusting. (Johnson)

Towne's attitude suggests the general influence upon the era of what Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess calls the "deep ecology" social movement of the 1970s, which was based on the premise that "to kill another creature is in some sense an act of violence against oneself" (quoted in Clark 24). In any case, Towne clearly saw the usefulness of noir as a means of environmental critique. His films both pay homage to, and revise, noir

conventions to draw the viewers' attention to the exploitation of our natural environment and point to the inherent violence in treating nature as an object with infinite resources.

### 2.3 Resource Extraction in the Films

*Chinatown*, taking its historical inspiration from the California Water Crisis or Water Wars, remains a cautionary tale about water usage in 2023.<sup>11</sup> Evelyn's husband Hollis Mulwray is loosely based on William Mulholland who was, beginning in the 1920s, head of the municipal Water Department. Mulholland began searching for a new water supply with a plan to set up an aqueduct system to transport water from the Eastern Sierra to Southern California (the first Los Angeles Aqueduct and Owens River system). After the plan was approved by President Roosevelt, water transportation began, and Los Angeles continued to flourish. An issue of concern about Mulholland's actions is who suffered because of the new system: "there is a widely held view that Los Angeles simply went out to the Owens Valley and stole its water. In a technical sense, that isn't quite true. Everything the city did was legal (though its chief collaborator, the U.S. Forest Service, did indeed violate the law). Whether one can justify what the city did, however, is another story" (Reisner 129). The effects of the system became more prominent by the end of the Great Drought in the 1930s:

the farmers had so badly depauperated the groundwater that the depletion curves were precipitous. Twenty thousand acres had already lost their groundwater and gone out of production; hundreds of thousands more overlay a groundwater table that was becoming dangerously low. Suddenly, the valley's reserve of

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<sup>11</sup> These wars are still unfolding. For example, see Bacigalupi's stories.

groundwater, which had so recently seemed limitless, had only a few more decades of economic life. (Reisner 616)

The film “altered the facts of the case”: “the site of the conflict was moved 200 miles closer to the city, the events were advanced by thirty years to the depression-era LA of Raymond Chandler and the story was reconstructed as a murder mystery revolving around conspiratorial land speculation” (Walton 47). *Chinatown* not only alludes to the historical water wars, but it does so in a way that brings to light patriarchal and white-supremacist toxicity underlying the exploitation of the natural environment.

While the film is set in the 1930s, in being produced in the 1970s, it draws on environmental issues more contemporary to the filming’s timeframe. We can consider this a form of environmental déjà vu in which there is a strange noir loop whereby contemporary events become the background to history. During the 1970s, the issue of water usage and drought made public headlines again, which made it the ideal time for the film creators to merge the earlier water crisis with their contemporary water usage concerns:

the Owens Valley–Los Angeles controversy was revived as the result of a new local citizens’ movement which was enabled by federal and California environmental legislation. It was in this context that Polanski’s remarkable film *Chinatown* appeared to an enthusiastic commercial and critical reception. For Los Angeles and national audiences who knew little of the historical background, *Chinatown* became the LA water story – the political intrigue that made urbanization possible.... The ironic effect was that the critical narrative underpinning the screenplay was appropriated by environmental activists and a

new citizens' alliance in the 1970s and 1980s. That struggle ultimately succeeded in recovering an important share of Owens Valley natural resources, community control, and local dignity. (Walton 48-49)

Issues that existed during the hardboiled era of Hammett and Chandler were "revived" in the 1970s because of local citizen's upheaval in response to legislation changes.

*Chinatown* not only speaks to such citizens' movements and the importance of natural resources to the community, but also that which is beneath the landscape: something that is, to quote Mike Davis in *Ecology of Fear*, "sinister" (16). That which is "sinister" is the patriarchal and white-supremacist capitalist forces exploiting the natural environment, driving future ecological harm. As we (re)watch *Chinatown* in contemporary times, the water resource allocation and management issues are, to borrow Pat Brereton's works in "Environmental Ethics" on Hollywood tales, "more relevant than ever...evidenced by the 2018 summer major fires across the Californian region" amongst many other environmental disasters across the state (10).<sup>12</sup>

The natural environment tries to fight back against the "sinister" forces driving its desecration. Gittes' investigations involving infidelity and murder are usurped by far-ranging concerns over water usages in the area. This is reflected in John G. Cawelti's essay "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation" when he argues that Gittes' "initial and deceptive charge involves him in the investigation of a murder, which in turn leads him to evidence of a large-scale conspiracy involving big business, politics, crime, and the whole underlying social and environmental structure of Los Angeles" (284). Gittes faces

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<sup>12</sup> Sue Grafton's hardboiled alphabet mysteries (set in Southern California), over the course of the last few installments, tell an ongoing story of the slow violence created by drought conditions, the creation of a new dust bowl.

off with “a depth of evil and chaos so great that he is unable to control it” or solve it (Cawelti 284). Not only does this “depth” include the underpinning “sinister” capitalist forces perpetrating environmental blight, but it also includes water itself as it exerts its agency and retaliates against such forces. Eventually, the film makes clear that water *can* fight back. Water is an explosive element of many scenes in the film and its representation asserts a sense of agency the resource has. This assertion is exemplified in a scene involving Gittes in which “the force of the stream batters him and carries him with it until he's brought rudely to the chain-link fence. It stops him cold. He's nearly strained through it” (Towne 43). Here, water, almost anthropomorphized, seems to overpower Gittes, hinting at the idea that this natural resource is capable of outrage at the misuse of it by exploitative forces. The seemingly retaliative emotions, highlighted by the way water is represented in the film, extends to the farmers who are in danger of being displaced from their land by drought. Former Mayor Sam Bagby notes that:

you can swim in it, you can fish in it, you can sail in it—but you can't drink it,

you can't water your lawns with it, you can't irrigate an orange grove with it.

Remember -- we live next door to the ocean but we also live on the edge of the desert. Los Angeles is a desert community. Beneath this building, beneath every street there's a desert. Without water the dust will rise up and cover us as though we'd never existed! (Towne 7)

The above is Bagby's justification for stealing water from farmers. In a town hall meeting, one farmer objects: “you steal the water from the valley, ruin the grazing, starve my livestock -- who's paying you to do that, Mr. Mulwray, that's what I want to know!” (Towne 9). Thus, in a certain sense, the contrast between the imperilled farms and the

manicured pond in Mulwray's lavish and green backyard epitomizes the tumultuous and violent conflict between the Water Department and the farmers. The disadvantaging of farmers continues when the chief deputy of the water department Russ Yelburton says: "we have been diverting a little water to irrigate avocado and walnut groves in the northwest valley. As you know, the farmers there have no legal right to our water, and since the drought we've had to cut them off—the city comes first, naturally" (Towne 58). The explosive behaviour of water emphasizes its antagonism at being misused by the city. The priority is clear: the city's agenda is more important than the farmers. This demonstrates the level of control that the Water Department has in that they can, at any point, divert water from the farmers to the city, perpetuating the misuse of the resource.

Although *The Two Jakes* is not inspired by a true event in the same way that *Chinatown* is, it makes clear the prevalent and dangerous practice involving oil extraction in California. Like water, oil is everywhere, it permeates the entirety of our social fabric. In April of 2021, for example, there were pipeline spills of over 1,600 gallons of oil near Los Angeles communities. Emily Denny wrote on the issue in *EcoWatch*, noting that the oil spilled in the Inglewood Oil Field, "the largest urban oil field in the country, where more than a million people live within five miles of its boundaries" (Denny). Oil spills at the Inglewood Oil Field occurred in 2005, 2006, 2010, 2018, 2019 and now 2021 (Denny). With each spill comes the threat of exposure to residents to toxins and carcinogens. James M. Cain's essay, "Paradise," discussed in Chapter 1, also focuses on the importance of the oil industry in California in the 1930s. For example, Cain writes that Californian "oil wells flow right along, so do the orange trees, so does everything. It is terrifying... Oil production is enormous: I must say that a trip through the well forests,

for all their dreadful reek, hands you something” (Cain). In this passage, Cain demonstrates the extent to which the ubiquitous oil production consumes the natural environment and everything around it. Cain makes clear that this exploitative practice is enormous, terrifying, and has a dreadful reek. Rather than having the reader “flow right along” through the orange trees and experience a pleasant sight, Cain shows these trees coexisting uneasily with the “well forests” using a natural trope ironically to describe the technology of oil. He further situates the Californian desert and mountains alongside “a placid oily-looking ocean that laps the sand with [virtually] no sign of life on it,” highlighting the destructive influence oil has on the environment.

As Joshua Schuster writes in “Where Is the Oil in Modernism?”, “oil is a trope and a condition, a substance and a spectacle” (198). For Cain, oil is everywhere. Schuster investigates the “absent presence” of oil in modernist art and draws our attention to Upton Sinclair’s 1926 novel *Oil!* as the “great exception” of modernist art that directly incorporates oil into its narrative (199, 197). Like Cain’s 1933 essay, *Oil!* contains descriptions of drilling practices, “the spread of capitalist fever and risk” and the overall land transformations of the oil discovery” (Schuster 203). Sinclair’s novel also brings to light an issue of the resource in Southern California. As we saw in the previous chapter, Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* is another exception, investigating the corrupt world of an oil industrialist family. Chandler himself had worked as an oil executive in Los Angeles before he began his career as a fiction writer, so was well placed to appreciate the milieu. Furthermore, as Sharae Decard powerfully notes in “This Oil Touches Everything,” oil is a “metonym for the hierarchical inequalities of capitalism” (Decard 4). As such, oil, crime, capitalism, and environmental crises are interconnected (Decard 6). An

investigation of criminal acts, as seen in Towne's film, can lead "to the revelation of larger contexts of structural or accumulative violence unfolding more slowly over time" (Decard 6). Because oil permeates every aspect of our society, for the arts, as Amitav Ghosh remarks in *The Great Derangement*, oil is "easy to aestheticize—as in images and narratives of roads and cars...its sources are mainly hidden from sight, veiled by technology, and its workers...invisible" (129).

*The Two Jakes* not only depicts products of oil, but oil extraction concerns themselves. In a sense, the film brings to light underlying issues pertaining to land and resources. In *The Two Jakes*, most of the action concerns the real estate company, and its relationship to the extraction and production of oil. Although not directly inspired by them, there are many case examples concerning oil in the area that unfolded prior to the production of *The Two Jakes*. Take for example the Santa Barbara oil spill of January 1969. The well blew out and spewed oil and gas: "the explosion cracked the sea floor in 5 places and released 1,000 gallons of oil in an hour" (Daspit). There was a second blow out the next month and "eventually, the California coastline would be devastated by 3 million gallons of crude—the largest oil spill in the nation's history until the Exxon Valdez 20 years later" (Daspit).

The spill was so destructive and visible that it sparked a huge environmental advocacy movement: "the spill led to the signing of the *National Environmental Policy Act*, which required the creation of environmental impact reports on major projects," something that was lacking with the water crisis (Daspit). Canadian-American hardboiled writer and environmental activist Ross Macdonald writes on the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill that "it triggered a social movement and helped to create a new politics, the politics of



ecology...it brought to a head our moral and economic doubts about the American uses of energy and raised the question of whether we really have to go on polluting the sea and land and air” (326). Macdonald remarks that the oil crisis “crept up on us in near silence” (327). But the effects were disastrous as thousands of birds died and “the quality of human life in the area was being threatened.” In a particularly compelling environmental formulation of the language of noir, he writes that “The beaches were black” (327-328). *The Two Jakes* makes visible both the silent creeping up of the oil crisis and its disastrous prospective effects, highlighting Macdonald’s comment that “the odor of crude oil reached us like the whiff of a decaying future” (Hunter).

Oil wells, derricks, and so on, are fragmented in the background of various scenes in the film. For example, in the opening sequence, Gittes “lights Berman’s cigarette with a lighter shaped like an oil pump on his desk—and in Rawley Petroleum’s blue and gold colors” (Towne 3). Shortly after, a Los Angeles Street is described in the screenplay: “an oil derrick pumps away on an island in the center of the street, a wooden skeleton with late afternoon sun streaming thru [sic] it. The pump itself is partially obscured by demure fencing and a billboard” (Towne 12). Even Jake’s office’s parking lot is “on the corner with the oil well background” (Towne 12). Oil derricks and oil wells are found inside Jake’s office as well:

...Gittes’ hand as it opens his office window to the fading twilight. The last spears of sun can be seen poking thru the tinkertoy latticework of the oil derrick in the center of the street. Gittes in shirtsleeves wrinkles his nose with distaste for the smell of oil, jiggles the ice cubes in his scotch and soda. Gittes takes a drag on a

cigarette. The derrick-pump sounds like a lazy horse switching its tail, kicking softly up against its stall. (Towne 20)

The last notable reference to oil-related products and items near or inside Jake's office is a "POV from Gittes' window" with "the cross-hatched outline of a portion of the derrick but dim and blurred. There is the sound of steady breathing, then light scraping. The sharp silhouette of a head breaks into frame, obliterating the blurry lines of the derrick" (Towne 23). The prevalent representations of the industry in such ways makes oil a component of the neo-noir atmosphere of *The Two Jakes*. Furthermore, the ubiquitous practice of oil highlights the inescapability of the industry.

The result of such extractivist practices is earthquakes, which not only affect the private investigator's office, but also Berman's residential housing development in the Valley. Eventually, the focus of the investigation is no longer solely on the murder of Berman's partner but includes an investigation into the seismic activity on Berman's real estate land. Our understanding of land is both literally and figuratively destabilized in this film, which is in keeping with real estate development in which the value of the land is determined by capitalist economics. Gittes unravels that Earl Rawley is drilling under Bodine and Berman Development and that the mineral rights to the land are owned by Katherine/Kitty herself. The film ends with the fatally ill Berman committing suicide as he lights his lighter in one of his natural gas-infused model houses. The "volatile" housing market is much more than an economic threat – the petrochemical gas results in a spectacle of self-inflicted domestic violence.

In short, both films focus on the misuse and exploitation of natural resources in California. Gittes' investigations into infidelity and murder transform to include issues

pertaining to the misuse of water and the extraction of oil. These issues's interruption of the initial investigations disrupt Gittes' traditional role as a conventional private eye. In the inclusion of the investigation of the exploitation of natural resources destabilizes Gittes' sense of perception, widening his awareness of widespread environmental crime and its consequences.

#### 2.4 Neo-Noir Perception

In Chapter 1, I argued that, in hardboiled fiction, a private investigator's use of his senses is often emphasized, and that moments of sense perception draw attention to the epistemological questions driving the private eye, such as "what happened?" or "what is happening?" In this Chapter, I extend the argument to these neo-noir films. In *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*, perception at different scales—intimate, social, and ecological—relates tragic familial crimes of sexual abuse to the corrupt political and environmental crimes of America's white supremacist capitalist patriarchal elite. The importance of the theme of perception is signaled by the film's repeated use of perceptual devices, including eyeglasses, binoculars, and cameras—tools that allow perception at different scales. Meta-diegetically, these are aligned with the film camera itself, which allows viewers to be conscious of how the film itself may shape their view. As with hardboiled fiction, these neo-noir films offer fragmentary perceptions of environmental blight. Some of these are literal, with a blasted environment forming the visual backdrop of a scene otherwise foregrounding an intimate or social drama. In attending to this destabilization of perception, we can better understand how other issues such as incest and race relations, relate to humans' imperfect perceptions of environmental issues.

*Chinatown* opens with a claustrophobic scene: an enclosed private investigators' office space occupied by a group of employees (unlike the Op and Marlowe, Gittes has assistants because he cannot do everything himself).<sup>13</sup> In the first sequence, there are there are venetian blinds that cast barred shadows across bodies, further confining the characters, an iconic noir film device in interior shots. Many objects are also enclosed, including the office's booze, which is stored; the books, which are kept in a door-controlled bookcase; and pictures, which are confined in frames. In contrast, in *The Two Jakes*, the office space is more open: the windows are open, and the curtains are drawn apart. An argument can be made that Gittes' mindset in *Chinatown* is akin to that of a conventional hardboiled private eye, while, by the sequel, having experienced the complexities involved in the narrative of *Chinatown*, he has gained a greater sense of the flexibility involved in being a private investigator. Unlike the mysteries in the narratives of Chapter 1, because of Gittes' "inability to fully detect the truth of the ongoing situation," in *Chinatown*, the investigator is unable neatly to solve a crime this complex (Brereton 12). The sense of claustrophobia and enclosure reflects the complications involved in the hardboiled private eye knowledge that Gittes first invokes. The complexity of the situation in *Chinatown* hinders Gittes' ability to investigate, hence the claustrophobic scenes reflecting such confinements, while, by the sequel, Gittes has by necessity acquired knowledge to tackle such intricacies.

The intricacies of perception are communicated through point of view. While in the novels of Hammett and Chandler everything is described for the reader, the audience of

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<sup>13</sup> This detail is important as I trace the development of the PI from the lone hardboiled one to the rhizomatic one in Chapter 3.

*Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* must examine the settings themselves. Consider Caputo's comment that *Chinatown* lacks "camera angles" and "lighting indicative of the expressionist influence on many noir classics," thus persistently aligning the viewers with Gittes' point of view:

although there is very little 'noir' in *Chinatown* (*Chinatown* is, for the most part, a very bright film), its sense of ambiguity remains rich. Where the dark corners of film noir remind us that our perception of the world is limited, by reflecting on the overlooked (habitualised/institutionalised) aspects of perception, *Chinatown* highlights that it is not only the absence of light that inhibits perception. (Caputo 195)

There are many interesting shots and other uses of the first-person associated camera movements, a signature of film noir.<sup>14</sup> For example, there are Gittes' binocular shots in the first film and his camera in the sequel, which force the viewers to see through the lens Gittes sees through. Another example is from the opening images of *The Two Jakes*, which capture a double lens perspective. In the opening of the sequel, we hear moaning and see a blurred image of supposedly two people engaging in intercourse. When the camera zooms out, we see that the blurred image that film opens with Gittes' camera capturing a scene of what we later discover is infidelity. There are also some extreme long shots, evoking a sense of agoraphobia, suggestive of the viewer's incremental realization that the film is scaling up its environmental emphasis. In short, the audience is first exposed to a claustrophobic and constricting space which can highlight our limited perception of environmental toxicity.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, please refer to Robert Montgomery's film *Lady in the Lake* (1946), adapted from a Chandler novel, which uses an exclusively first-person camera.

Not only does the film utilize camera angles and the set to reinforce the human (especially the private eye's) imperfect sense perception and knowledge,<sup>15</sup> but it also “plays on the instability of vision” by exploiting “the image of the detective as the ultimate figure of an ostensibly perfect vision that turns out to be fundamentally and fatally flawed” (Polan 118). Polanski has “his hero outside of the frame, to make him utterly fallible and capable of tragic error, a man whose judgment is flawed by a crucial breakdown between perceiving and acting” (Orr 16). Hammett and Chandler's fictional private eyes change in *Chinatown* as “Polanski sticks to the human scale,” which includes humans' imperfect senses and Nicholson does the same in *The Two Jakes* (Orr 10). Furthermore, Polanski registers “the human dimension of things seen, usually keeping the focal length of the shot close to the perspective of the eye, then varying it at key moments” (Orr 10). Polanski maintains the importance of the connection between the setting, the characters, and humans through the mobile camera, which “adopts and embraces the speed of human movement” (Orr 10).

Gittes has limits in his ability “to perceive and comprehend the world” (Caputo 189). The films demonstrate that nothing can be truly brought to light, or accurately perceived. In other words, the films make clear that nothing is “obvious to the eye” (Orr 16). Part of this idea involves making clear the complexities of perception by incorporating seemingly distinct plots and elements (namely, as I discuss below, the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of gendered and racialized bodies). While private investigators in the hardboiled narratives mobilized superb human senses, the neo-noir

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<sup>15</sup> Clute refers to this as a “regime of optics.”

investigator's senses are less reliable, thus, relying on other plots and elements when senses fail.

Issues of perception, especially sense of sight and smell, are emphasized throughout the narrative. For example, the right lens of Gittes' eyeglasses is broken for an extended stretch of the film, signalling his imperfect sense of sight and inability to grasp things in their totality. Interestingly, while it is the right lens that is broken, it is Evelyn's left eye that is shot in the final sequence. The damage to Evelyn's eye highlights two key ideas: first, it makes clear how the severing of the link connecting Evelyn to her incestuous father can only occur with death, and second, it contributes to the theme of the complexities of perception. In short, eyes and their ability to *see* are placed into question. Similarly, the broken eyeglasses found in the Mulwrays' backyard pond further reflect the shattered human sense of perception. We can consider the broken bifocal lenses found in the pond, which constitute a key clue to the identity of the murderer, as furthering this issue of the fragmentation of vision. While the destruction of Evelyn's eye comments on the incestuous and sexual exploitation involving Noah Cross, the uncovering of the broken glasses in the pond, in relation to the necessity of cross-cultural communication with the Japanese gardener, comments on the racial tensions in the film. Albeit the issue of the Japanese-American accent (the gardener notes that salt water is bad for the gLass/gRass), it is only with the help of the gardener that Gittes finds this critical clue.

Gittes' sense of smell is also placed into question when he is attacked by some male thugs (one of whom is played by the director Polanski in a cameo role). These men hit and cut Gittes' nose, and while some critics see this as a Freudian image symbolic of Gittes' castration, "the threat to perception is even more menacing... leaving Gittes not

sexually impotent, but perceptually limited” (Caputo 187). The thug cuts Gittes’ nose because as an investigator he was “sniffing around” crime in Chinatown, but he initially lacks the ability to make sense of the clues with which he is presented. Gittes “is no longer master of his domain, and the sights (and sounds) that now surround him are no longer informative, but perplexing” (Caputo 185). In Chapter 1, the importance of a private eye’s ability to interpret atmospheric and sensory clues is made clear, but here his sensory skills are thwarted.

These examples demonstrate how the film evokes the concept of a destabilized perception of events. While some examples are more embodied, namely Evelyn’s eye and Gittes’ slashed nose, other examples are “mechanically mediated images (photographic or created by way of mirrors or binoculars)” (Caputo 183). Both natural and artificial examples that reinforce the complexities of perception point to how the full story is never told, meaning that in not being able to concretely rely on our human senses, we cannot grasp the totality of the situation (Caputo 183). Even when the mysteries are solved, the revelations are thrust upon Gittes: “the ‘clues’ are collected by Gittes, but he has no better understanding of them than the spectator” (Caputo 196). In other words, Gittes does not grasp the mystery in its totality. Gittes utilizes binoculars and a camera, “to augment and record what he is able to see” (Caputo 185). What he gains because of sight mediated through artificial enhancement is not whole because he has an “inability to discern what is being said (not done)” (Caputo 185).

There are two dominant capitalist structures that the films incorporate into the plots concerning water and oil: the patriarchal capitalist structure, highlighted through the incest plot, and the white-supremacist capitalist structure, highlighted through the



representation of racialized bodies. The narratives of *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* do not “highlight” these systems as part of the resolution of the investigative plot. Rather, both structures are brought into the emphatic shadows of noir so that they may be felt in their overwhelming consequence, though not in their totality. They underpin the toxic neo-noir atmosphere of the films and allow the audience to witness pervasive problems that their senses cannot grasp and for which there is not immanent solutions. By representing intimate and historical scales of violence, the films work across generational and historical notions of inheritance: the films gesture toward the legacies of environmental harm that follow on the wrongful acts of the patriarchal capitalist system. To echo Walter Benjamin’s essay “Capitalism as Religion,” “the idea of sin, is capital itself” (289). I argue that in Towne’s noir duology, the sin of incest is capital itself. While Gittes cannot solve the crimes of capitalism, his investigation exposes a comprehensive capitalist guilt indexed by both incest and exploitation of racialized bodies.

Sarah E. Fredericks’ 2021 book *Environmental Guilt and Shame* focuses on how guilt and shame are “relational emotions because the harm upon which they are grounded is harm to another entity in a relationship with the feeling agent” (3). While guilt can inspire the guilty to change, shame usually results in an “existential reflection” or paralysis. By predominantly displaying issues of guilt in relation to environmental crimes in *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*, we can understand these as texts that can implicate audience members in an existential guilt: by putting on display the violence embedded in the exploitation of the natural environment, the films make clear our responsibility for the environment. Audiences may be empowered to see beyond the nostalgic retro appeal of

these neo-noir films to understand how the issues raised in the films are proleptic: the neo-noir plot casts a shadow on future.

## 2.5 Incest

Both films derive their plots from intimate and political mysteries. In the devolution of these plots, they indirectly figure the consequences for the environment of America's overconsuming white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal petroculture. The films draw such perceptions both from the narrative elements and from the audiovisual mise-en-scène of the film. The otherwise incongruent representations of sexual violence and the racial abjection of Asian Americans are each turned into "lenses" through which the viewer can further "see" the temporal dimensions of the slow violence wrought by capitalist society against the environment.

*Chinatown* has been described as having a 'double plot' that places in binary opposition the incest plot and the water plot. I argue that the crimes of incest and water diversion are intimately related: they do not exist in binary opposition. I further argue that the film has a third, more understated plot, which includes the exploitation of racialized bodies. As quoted, hooks identifies "interlocking" systems of oppression, exploitation and domination, when she coins the phrase "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (171). Noah Cross, whose first name ironically registers his role in the Abrahamic tradition of antediluvian (or pre-flood) religious patriarchs, is the epitome of "capitalist patriarchy" in his exploitation of his daughter and the natural environment, while the representation of racialized bodies hints at the crimes of "white-supremacist" capitalism. Noah's sexual exploitation of his daughter, his raping of Evelyn, comments on a future in which such a system of oppression and exploitation prevails. Briefly, a key plot of both films is how

Noah raped his daughter Evelyn, resulting in the conception of Evelyn's daughter/sister, Katherine. Gittes' investigation, which involves Noah, becomes closely intertwined with this dark past involving Cross and his daughters/granddaughter. In addition to issues of incest and guilt, which are indicative of a future environment infused with toxicity, viewers are exposed to the oppression of Asian American characters, making clear that we also need to understand the diverse history of exploitation in America. The triple plots come together not only to draw attention to the capitalist infrastructure's misuse of natural resources, but also the "interlocking" systems of guilt on a temporal scale.

The idea of the film's double plot is examined by Vernon Shetley in "Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*." Shetley re-iterates the two perspectives on the two plots: "for most critics who focus on the daughter plot, the water plot is a distraction, a kind of screen that obscures the real workings of the film, whose conformity to Freudian paradigms is taken for granted. The writers on water policy, conversely, treat the daughter plot, if they notice it at all, as a sensational distraction from the main interest of the film" (1093). To quote Caputo, *Chinatown* makes clear "the manner in which authoritative structures (religion, the government, media) use tenacity to shape our perception through the construction of conceptual frameworks, such as the inherent benevolence of those in power" (192). Thus, rather than being a distraction or "the main interest of the film," the incest plot is a lens through which viewers may perceive capitalist, patriarchal power.

Noah's family suffers from his incestuous act and the public suffers from his privatization of water. He is a deeply corrupt capitalist whose actions—far from saving the natural world like his Biblical namesake—destabilize the fruitful potential of future generations and their environments. In the Biblical story of Noah (Genesis, Chapters 6-

10), God destroys the world in a flood after seeing “that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5) but saves Noah because he was “just” and “perfect” (6:9). After the Flood, God makes a promise to Noah and his family that He will never destroy the Earth again, and enjoins them to “be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth” (9:1). Moreover, God also promised human dominance over nature: “and the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered” (9:2).

Noah owns the water supply with Hollis (as opposed to it being owned by the public). Hollis’ altruistic mindset to utilize water for public projects is opposed to Noah’s decision to limit the control of water and to profit from it. He is the epitome of the capitalist incomer, invoking “a distinctive western myth, the crusty, determined, plain-spoken pioneer, whose gruff manner is the outward sign of the quintessentially American qualities of self-reliance, independence, and enterprise” (Shetley 1096). He attempts to both break “free of the boundaries of a decayed society, and at the same time brings a civilizing order to the wilderness” (Shetley 1096). Ultimately, “rather than bringing civilization to the wilderness and making the desert bloom, Cross undermines the social order and blights the landscape (as his confederates dump water and poison wells). He does not repent for his crimes, and, in fact, looks forward to a “future in which he can repeat his darkest crimes” (Shetley 1097). At the conclusion of the film, he is poised to continue both his legacy of incest by taking custody of his daughter/granddaughter and to perpetuate his control of the city’s resources. The fact that Noah’s motive for murdering

Hollis is not revealed, that is, whether it has to do with his plans for water usage or because of his incestuous crimes, demonstrates how the two plots intersect: there is a continuity of guilt that “blurs the distinction between the two” (Shetley 1097). In turn, viewers are invited to investigate the relationship and similarities of the two plots.

As Shetley asks, “in what way, then, are Cross’s relations with his daughters like his relations with the water? In what way can incest and land fraud function as metaphors for one another?” (Shetley 1098). As noted, both are linked to the future and capitalism, as epitomized by Noah, who is the creator of a bleak future with an environment saturated in decay resulting from patriarchal and capitalist corruption:

both daughters and water represent the possibility of fertility, of the growth and renewal of life; and so both are significantly linked to the “future.” Each is a means of projecting oneself into the future, either through bloodlines, or the creation of wealth, for what is capital but wealth that has outlived its creation, even its creator? Noah Cross’s incestuous acts and his land swindles turn on his desire to monopolize for himself the possibilities of life and fertility that water and daughters represent; in both cases, what ought to be exchanged is instead hoarded, what should circulate is instead entrapped and held back. (Shetley 1098)

To Noah, diverting water is a simple municipal task: “just incorporate the Valley into the city so the water goes to L.A. after all. It's very simple” (Towne 122). The depiction of water helps us “see” the violence embedded in Noah’s actions in the same way that his incestuous actions help us “see” the ripple effect of his exploitation of water as a resource to supply Los Angeles has on others. Incest becomes a lens through which one can gain a better understanding of the capitalist and patriarchal infrastructure’s violent acts that

permeate the environment and perpetuate crises. When Jake asks Noah why he is “doing it...What can you buy that you can't already afford?” Noah responds: “The future, Mr. Gittes—the future” (122, 123). This line is pivotal, first because it commoditizes temporality itself, and second because the audience of *Chinatown* is *in* the future and can assess the full ironic implications of Noah’s statement. Environmental exploitation is an *ongoing* crime in their time, not one that is resolved by the retro neo-noir detective plot. And Noah’s rapacious sexuality will correspondingly continue incestuously into the next generations with his daughter/granddaughter. Indeed, the creation of a sequel to *Chinatown* in the long-delayed *The Two Jakes* is one filmic way of gesturing towards the continuing sequentially and consequentiality of *both* crimes into the future.

Evelyn’s ocular birthmark can be understood as a defect she inherited from her father, serving as a sign of his incestuous actions and the future of the environment. As Gittes observes, “there’s something black in the green part of your eye” (91). Noah’s incestuous relationship with daughter Evelyn is an act through which one can better recognize how the capitalist and patriarchal infrastructure is screwing over future generations. Noah’s incestuous crime becomes a trope in which to better understand or “see” invisible and violent rapacious acts against the environment. To quote Polan, Jake’s “investigation of local (which is originally sexual) infelicities within the city becomes a political path to deeper discovery of a corruption seemingly inherent to the social space of the urban as such” (Polan 109). Gittes’ investigations and the relationship between incest, murder and theft become interlinked, suggesting that “that understanding” (in this case, harm against the environmental) “is a deeper process than mere sensory perceptions” (Polan 118).

Evelyn's birthmark and the contrast of green and black colours in her eye insinuate that there is both harm and decay but also the opportunity for things to grow, flourish, and change. Unfortunately, because Evelyn's birthmark is genetic, there is no chance or way for the green to overpower the black and her own daughter/sister is at risk of harm, which suggests a bleak near-future of our natural environment. When Evelyn dies a senseless death, such violence mirrors the capitalist infrastructure's senseless behaviour in exploiting the environment as an object with infinite extractable resources. The meaninglessness also contributes to the audience's feelings of incomprehension and reaffirm my previous analysis of perception: "the terrifying revelations at the end of *Chinatown* lead not to final comprehension but final incomprehension, stupefaction that what has come to pass has indeed come to pass, accompanied by total bafflement at its genesis and secret lineage" (Orr 12). The lineage of the films suggests a necessity to continue to supplement the record of environmental desecration and political corruption.

The structure of the sequel extends the narrative and is a further indication of the ways the environmental themes of the first film extend into the future. Take for example the following from *The Two Jakes*'s screenplay: "the theme music of *Chinatown* bleeds into the off-screen sounds of children, home buyers and housing construction, muting them" (Towne 40). This scene takes place on the land that Katherine/Kitty sold to Jake Berman for housing development and highlights the ways in which the themes of the first film "bleed" into the sequel (Towne 45). This land containing domestic subdivisions is also where industrialists are drilling for oil, as Gittes notes: "That's oil! That's what Bodine and Rawley were after, they've been drilling under your subdivision to reach it" (Towne 137). There is an explosion resulting from Berman deliberately igniting a lighter in a

house full of gas, literalizing the volatility of the development. Earthquakes, tremblors, and explosion, all of which highlight the disruptive effects that extraction of oil has on the land. In having Noah's grand/daughter as a core character in the sequel, in her close association with toxic land (land she owns, and which wreaks havoc, death and destruction), *The Two Jakes* extends the incest plot to comment on patriarchal capitalist exploitation of oil. Incest, weaved throughout the plots involving water, and oil, represents the structure of capitalism: power and wealth and the ability to monopolize minority bodies, natural resources, and the future.

Other critics of *Chinatown* have already noted the film's symbolic treatment of the incest plot. Walton, for example, notes how the film extends "the sexual symbolism of rape to the vile association of money and political power" (56). What is missing in this insight is how sexual symbolism also has an intergenerational and therefore futural dimension. The temporality of the incest plot allows the viewer to see the temporal scale of the film's environmental concerns. The films thus present the plot, traumatic and devastating, as a symbol or analogy: as intergenerational incest has a destructive impact on the future of the victim, so capitalist extractivist practices will have a destructive impact on the future of the environment.

In *Blue Revolution*, Cynthia Barnett writes that "if people could see how closely their children's and grandchildren's well-being is tied to the health of the land, personal ethics would drive them to cooperate not only on behalf of their families and communities but also for the natural world they inhabit" (29). *Chinatown* illustrates the obverse of this idea: the sickness of the family and the sickness of the land are of a piece. The incestuous relationship between Cross and his children thus provides a figurative way of perceiving



the slow violence of America's white supremacist capitalist patriarchy's destruction of the environment and the future of its own society.

## 2.6 Race

While the correspondences between patriarchal and capitalist abuses are explored in *Chinatown's* neo-noir plot, correspondences between America's white supremacy and capitalism are posed in its visual presentation and coding of racial difference, specifically Asian American racial difference, and the subjection of Asian Americans to positions of precarity in white supremacist capitalist society. Jonny Coleman argues in "Chinatown is the Story of White Supremacy and the Gentrification in L.A" that:

The original Chinatown is where Union Station now sits. Chinatown One was eventually razed to build the station after a protracted public battle over the future of L.A.'s transportation. The railroad interests won out — after some nasty race-baiting in local publications — and the whole Chinatown community was displaced and forced to relocate to the Chinatown we're familiar with today. Yet even Chinatown Two is holding on for dear life as the heaving pressure to gentrify mounts with each passing day. In that sense, *Chinatown* is as relevant as ever, as so many of our neighborhoods are fraught with fighting against the fallacy that gentrification is inevitable. In the pocket of developers, the leadership of Los Angeles is actively pushing to extinguish its ethnic and poor enclaves to deliver us to some sanitized, whitewashed and artwashed vision of the future, like the antiseptic, gentrified vision of L.A. in the film or something equally revolting. (Coleman)

Thus, *Chinatown* is relevant in relation to how the water crisis, and evolving issues pertaining to natural resources, intersect with concerns of racism and justice: the Los Angeles representatives are “whitewashing” a space to reinforce an Anglo-Edenic ideal that is built on exploitation. The inclusion of oppressed minority bodies in the films, in close relation to the natural resources being exploited, draws attention to the deeply rooted history in which this turmoil (and future crises) unfolds. The film’s historical consciousness thus links capitalism and white supremacy, just as its consciousness of the future linked capitalism and patriarchy.

Reflecting on *Chinatown* in an interview with Amy Glynn, Japanese-American poet Garrett Hongo notes that “water, wealth, and narratively weaponized racism all flow together in film” (Glynn). As elaborated below, water is not only, to quote Hongo, “everything in California politics,” but it is also, in many Asian cultures, “*the* power element. It can extinguish fire, move earth, suffocate air” (Glynn). Just like the patriarchal-capitalist structure, white-supremacist capitalism flows throughout the film in close relation to the water crises. I conclude this chapter with a focus on white-supremacist capitalism in *Chinatown* and its sequel as further elaborating on a way of perceiving environmental crises when conventional methods of perception fail. The seemingly unimportant, and non-prominent, representation of Asian American characters in the films further draws attention to the “exploitation” of resources (Luhr 186). Part of the myth of “the quintessentially American qualities of self-reliance, independence, and enterprise” that Noah invokes, and that Shetley explores, includes the vicious mistreatment of Chinese immigrants (1096). This additional plot element, in addition to the exploitation of gendered/sexed bodies, allows us to perceive California’s white-

supremacist capitalist historical development as based on the exploitation of Asian American bodies.

In recognizing the ways that the film *Chinatown* represents LA's Chinatown as "symbolic of darkness, strangeness, and catastrophe," it might seem that the film's representation of Asian immigrants is racist. However, I argue, alongside Glynn, that both *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* critique the performance of racism in American society (Cawelti 285). The films put on screen, in an uncomfortable way, how Asian immigrants are "undervalued mocked and manipulated by the wealthy and the powerful" (Glynn). Considering the amount of labour Chinese immigrants, specifically, put into the forming of Californian infrastructure, the films' representation of racial inequalities is helpful to understanding white-supremacist capitalist practices of exploiting the natural environment. Chinese immigrants, beginning in the nineteenth century, worked as labourers on transcontinental railroads and for other physically demanding projects such as mining. They were treated as resources of exploitable cheap labour. Eventually, as Erika Lee details in *At America's Gates*, California became hostile towards Chinese immigrants and in 1882, the *Chinese Exclusion Act* was passed, prohibiting immigration from China for a decade. It was not until 1965 that large-scale Chinese immigration unfolded. In the film, this history of exploitation is depicted in how Cross' affluence is supported by the exploitation of Chinese labour.

Just as we understand incest as a trope for understanding the bleak future in store for our natural environment exploitation of natural resources, we can understand the representation of Chinese immigrant bodies to sense the history that has made such a future possible. Eric Lott comments of classic American film noir: "relentless

cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks... constantly though obliquely invoked the racial dimension of this figural play of light against dark” (543). Lott argues that “not to call attention to film noir’s fairly insistent thematizing of spiritual and cinematic darkness by way of bodies beyond the pale is to persist in a commonsense exploitation enacted by films” of the classic period (543). I argue that it is important to attend to this latent racial dimension as it is evoked in Towne’s neo-noir films of the later twentieth century. The films envelop these bodies in both silence (the Chinese characters rarely speak) and invisibility (they are relegated mostly to the visual background). As Luhr notes, Chinese characters “are largely ignored as socially “invisible”” (181). For example, white characters repeatedly make racist jokes about Chinatown, “revealing their blindness as to what is really going on” (Luhr 181).

In fact, Gittes’s inability to perceive the exploitation of racialized bodies proves to be detrimental to his investigation. Consider, for example, Gittes’ racist jokes in *Chinatown*, which, as Luhr observes, “leads him to misinterpret and ignore a major clue that, had he pursued it earlier, might have saved Evelyn’s life” (183). Specifically, we can refer to the scene of the pond at the Mulwray’s house, in which Gittes speaks with an Asian American gardener who is removing moss from the pond in the garden. This example draws our attention to Gittes’ inability to read visual and verbal clues related to the environment and race, linking the emphasis on the green environment with problems of perception. The gardener not only provides Gittes with a key clue about Mulwray’s death, but his fascination with the horticulture of the pond, demonstrates his ability to exercise an environmental perceptiveness that exceeds the investigative skills of the private eye. In other words, the gardener engages with the pond on a “deep” literal and

metaphorical level. Gittes meets the gardener after he is met at the door by Khan, Mulwray's Chinese butler, and after he is ushered through a room with a Chinese domestic cleaner. Both Khan and the unnamed cleaning lady are represented in the film as bodies performing labour for a white family (and Khan continues to protect and care for Kitty in *The Two Jakes*). In a certain sense, the gardener is performing a form of labour for Gittes, providing him with a key clue to solving a mystery. When Gittes eventually meets him, the gardener notes that the moss is "bad for glass" and Gittes "mockingly repeats it" thinking that the gardener means "grass" (Luhr 183). Much later, Gittes and the audience learn of the pair of spectacles in the pond that are key to the discovery of Mulwray's murderer. It is at this moment that Gittes realizes that the Asian American gardener was referring to the salt water in the pond being bad for the glass, not grass.

The most concentrated representation of Asian American characters is the famous concluding scene of *Chinatown*, following the death of Evelyn and Noah's taking custody of Katherine, when the signature jazz musical theme takes over and the camera rises in a crane shot to observe the whole scene. As Luhr notes, "after Gittes leaves, dozens of anonymous Chinese faces crowd in, curious about what has just happened in their neighborhood. The white police quickly shoo them away, telling them to get off the street and onto the sidewalk. The message is clear; they don't count" (184). In this scene, the Chinese men and women, appearing in long shot, are silent extras, diffused into the atmosphere of the film, but with a force almost like that of water in a river. To echo Amy Glynn in the previously mentioned interview, what do we make of this scene? "Are they judges? Are they window dressing? Are they symbolic? They seem something a little

other than human” (Glynn). The most striking element of this scene is how these characters are flooding the street like water. If they truly are meant to be Chinese immigrants, it is worth noting that in *Daosim*, as James Miller notes in a 2004 conference paper on “The Symbolic and Environmental Value of Water in *Daosim*,” life is a “water-based proposition” (5). The additional link between water and the Chinese immigrants adds to the preceding argument in this chapter that water has a sense of agency in its ability to retaliate against capitalism.

Miller makes clear that “in contrast to the abstraction of Western philosophical terms, Chinese philosophical terms remain embedded in the particularity of nature and environment” (3). In Daoism, water denotes flowing and easy wandering (*xiaoyou*) (6). As such, water is ubiquitous in everyday life, with its motion mapping the environment and our biological dependence that “transcends culture” (6). If Qi (the energy within a body that can stem from air or water) is blocked, “humans develop symptoms of illness which are to be treated by restoring the flow of Qi within the body” (7). Thus, the inclusion of the representation of racialized bodies in analyzing these neo-noir films helps our understanding of water’s presence: the importance attributed to water in Daoism, its attributes of preserving or destroying life, to a certain degree, contributes to the power involved in the resources. This allows us to better perceive water as that which is not a resource to be infinitely exploited by capitalist, patriarchal and white-supremacist, practices.

When Evelyn is killed, specifically by being shot in the same eye as her genetic birth mark, by a random police officer in Chinatown, the different plots, metaphors and tropes intersect: Evelyn, Cross, and Asian Americans (Chinese immigrants) are all present.

Cross remains “free to continue his rapacious depredations on the land, the city, and the body of his own daughter-granddaughter; and the one person who might have effectively brought Cross to some form of justice—his daughter-mistress—has been destroyed” (Cawelti 284). Although Cross’s threats continue, Evelyn, by literally having her sight removed by a bullet, “is no longer able to look upon her ‘monstrous’ offspring...it is sight, not smell, which proves most deadly in *Chinatown*, as manifested by the bullet that permanently does away with Evelyn’s (‘flawed’) eye” (Caputo 171, 187).

### 2.7 Looking Ahead: What *The Two Jakes* Tells us About The Future

Cross’ future is tainted by his double exploitative acts: incest and exploitation of natural resources. This is the noir future with which *Chinatown* leaves its audience. While Gittes’ colleague famously counsels, “forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown” (the final line of *Chinatown*), but the addition of a sequel, however belated, emphasizes the ineffectuality of this advice, as it pertains both to *Chinatown* and *Chinatown*. The audience is left with a persistent memory of the film’s ambivalent conclusion. *The Two Jakes* uses the motif of illness to hint at a future of decay. This motif is aligned with the type of illnesses we see in characters in Hammett and Chandler’s narratives. Moral, physical, and environmental sickness are closely linked in the sequel. In the opening of *The Two Jakes*, even the room seems sick: “the room has shuddered as if shivering from a chill,” indicate the stage directions, describing an earth tremor caused by gas extraction. But the most concentrated event of illness in the film is Jake Berman’s diagnosis of cancer (Towne 2).

The exploitation of natural resources is depicted in *Chinatown* as an act that is ‘screwing over’ future generations; this is Noah Cross’ perverse legacy. The mismanagement of water as a natural resource is depicted in such a way as to hint at the effects these

capitalist practices have on future generations, just as the narrative promises that Cross will abuse his grand/daughter, perhaps even begetting more inbred offspring. In *The Two Jakes*, oil extraction and pollution are depicted as crimes that can cause illness, death, and destruction to both people and the environment of the present and future generations. For this concluding analysis, I focus on the display of oil extraction and its consequences, which include earthquakes/tremblers and Jake Berman's illness.

The drilling literally undermines the domestic plans for prospective homeowners. To quote Berman, "how can I sell homes with the gas company drilling wells like gopher holes?" (Towne 39). Not only does the drilling interfere with Berman's plans, but it leads to his ultimate demise. Although it is not necessarily true that Jake Berman's illness is a consequence of drilling, we are invited by the film to see them in juxtaposition with one another, and the unfolding of the narrative associates Berman's death with the self-destructive risks of extraction. Berman does not die of cancer: he takes his own life in a model house being invaded by gas by intentionally causing an explosion. As noted, the prevalence of illness involving characters in *Red Harvest* and *The Two Jakes* is arguably another tool that further draws attention to the destruction that exploitative capitalist practices, targeting the natural environment, have on people. The toxic environment in which Berman finds himself and his real state in permeates his physical body, resulting in the diagnosis of cancer and his ultimate suicide.

Berman's development site is thus an important space in the film. It is not only a site in which the neo-noir toxic atmosphere prevails, in which this toxicity invades the body, but it is also a place that connects the history that is *Chinatown* to the sequel's present-day. The juxtaposition of the first film's theme music with children, prospective home buyers,



and construction noises on Katherine/Kitty's (former) land, links the disruptive and threatening past portrayed in *Chinatown* to the present and future, especially as represented in families. The model homes, the children and the prospective buyers highlight the façade of an ideal and green future that exists as part of a capitalist suburban landscape. The model homes are "the only homes in the subdivision sporting any green around them whatsoever" (Towne 33). The *Chinatown* theme's overpowering of the sounds might signify a future outside of the one prescribed by Cross on Katherine/Kitty. However, Berman's illness disrupts this dream. The film's elemental force (oil/gas) threatens the ideal, artificial, garden that the model homes and children embody. Katherine/Kitty's selling of the land emphasizes a certain awareness of the toxicity that permeates the artificial greenery at the property.

Her act of selling can be viewed to represent her desire to see a future different than the one that her grandfather/father Cross forced upon her when he violated Evelyn. Because Cross' incestuous act can be understood as a way through which viewers can interpret the patriarchal capitalist violence against the environment, Katherine/Kitty's selling of the land, and Cross' future for her, is a way to try to gain a greener future, a garden without the capitalist cult machinery that imagines the environment as an infinitely exploitable object. Unfortunately, that garden space remains artificial and is akin to the cultivated lawns we encounter throughout Marlowe's investigation. Thus, Katherine/Kitty exists in a subliminal space: she remains stuck between an artificially green environment, but also in a toxic and poisonous environment that destroyed Berman.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Noir is a continuously evolving genre that yields fruitful analyses of environmental degradation and urban decay. While Hammett and Chandler keep the natural environment mainly in the shadows, fragmented in scale in the background of crime, *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* make the exploitation of natural resources key environmental concerns. Their attentiveness to the futures of environmental damage runs counter to their nostalgic stylistic appeal, and their inability to solve such damage contradicts the resolution of the detective plot.

In Chapter 3, I develop the idea of the private eye as a collective and the rhizomatic scale of mapping urban and environmental toxicity in eco-noir texts. I point to two key transformations in American noir and its sub-genres. The first is what Jameson calls in his essay on postmodernism “the end of individualism,” specifically pertaining to the green private eye (Jameson 5). With the end of individualism comes an alternative to the fragmented scale of depicting environmental degradation and urban decay. A rhizomatic green investigative figure in eco-noir texts replaces the hardboiled one in the earlier incantations of the noir genre. The cli-fi genre utilizes conventions of American noir to illuminate on the horrors and mysteries of environmental blight.

Chapter 3: Rhizomatic Eco-Noir Visions of *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird*

*Salamander*

Landscape isn't fragile. It's what we impose upon it that's fragile.

We must be ruthless about the foreground. We must trust the backdrop.

*-Hummingbird Salamander*

3.1 “What is Happening?” and “What Happened?”

At the beginning of each chapter of *Dark Ecology*, Morton asks “what is happening?”

Morton asks readers this question before delving into a story or a theory pertaining to his ecological framework. In doing so at the opening of each chapter (or what he calls “thread”) of this book, he is inviting readers to answer the question through a careful examination of the contents of each “thread.” As readers quickly discover, and as T. Jake Dionne points out, humanity and nature (or the nonhuman) are fused or entangled, but the former will never fully know the latter (Dionne). Thus, Morton opens each chapter with a question that the reader cannot fully answer because we can never fully know what is happening. Questions about what happened, what is happening, and what is going to happen, plague climate fiction (cli-fi) narratives. This generalized set of questions is developed in my investigation of post-millennial eco-noir novels *New York 2140* (2017) by Kim Stanley Robinson and *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021) by Jeff VanderMeer. Specifically, I follow the threads of Morton’s questions to come to an understanding of cli-fi’s redeployment of the conventions of noir. In doing so, I argue that these narratives provide us with a persuasive “eco-noir” narrative mode that makes environmental blight

and its obscured human criminal causes more visible. Certain cli-fi texts borrow their realism, obscure atmosphere, and a set of tropes, characters, stylistic devices, and narrative conventions from noir and its literary and cinematic sub-genres. In Chapter 1 of this project, I examined Hammett's and Chandler's hardboiled style as a fragmented method of mapping a toxic urban and natural environment. Limited by their place in an atomistic capitalist society, Hammett and Chandler's early twentieth-century private eyes represent the environment only in scattered pieces in the background of the main narrative. In Chapter 2, I examined how the later twentieth-century self-conscious neo-noir mode makes crimes against the environment more apparent, but still can only represent them in a fragmented way through tropes and metaphors. In Chapter 3, I argue that when noir conventions are deployed in the contemporary cli-fi sub-genre, the method of mapping changes because nature and society are no longer viewed as atomistic. All aspects of the environment are understood as relational, in what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify as a rhizomatic existence. The narratives of Chapters 1 and 2 investigate the structure of capitalism and use the conventions of noir to represent its rotten core. The more recent narratives under analysis in this chapter represent "eco-noir," a strain of crime fiction that more assertively points the finger at the damage caused by capitalism's crimes against the environment and imagines the possibility of anti-capitalist collective action.

As I discuss it, "climate fiction" is a subcategory of science fiction that uses the speculative capacity of science fiction to explore the environmental consequences of environmental crises in a near-reality setting. I utilize the term 'near-reality,' which contrasts with the seemingly distant futures of some cli-fi fiction, to emphasize how eco-

noir narratives rely on the realism of noir to make environmental disasters immanent. The term “cli-fi” creates a resonance between science fiction and climate fiction. It was coined by climate activist Dan Bloom who defines it as,

a new genre term for novels, short stories and movies that stands for works of art and storytelling that deal with climate change and global warming concerns: ‘cli’ stands for the first three letters of ‘climate,’ and ‘fi’ stands for the first two letters of ‘fiction.’ Just as sci-fi stands for science fiction, cli-fi stands for what might be called ‘clience fiction,’ or novels and movies where climate change is a major theme, although not always the main theme (Thorpe).

In the same way that we must understand the general category of noir to better grasp its sub-genres of hardboiled literature and neo-noir film, we must understand cli-fi’s umbrella category, science fiction, which often speculates on an imagined future and the effects of technological and scientific developments. Fredric Jameson explains in *Archaeologies of the Future* that popular science fiction has “a complex and interesting formal history of its own, and with its own dynamic, which is not that of high culture, but which stands in a complementary and dialectical relationship to high culture or modernism as such” (283). In this it resembles noir. Jameson concludes that science fiction “enacts and enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the ‘pessimism’ or ‘optimism’ of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization” (288)

Jameson asserts that sci-fi puts together “our wildest imaginings” as “collages of experience,” constructing “bits and pieces of the here and now” (xiii). While Jameson does not specifically talk about cli-fi, his ideas can be adapted to this emergent genre.

Cli-fi can be defined as a form of “environmental communication” in a creative form, as highlighted by Mathew Schneider-Matterson and others in “Environmental Literature as Persuasion” (35). They further explain that such imaginations of climate futures are not new, but emerged in the 1990s, when “the number of novels that feature anthropogenic climate change as a central element began to grow. By the late 2000s, as climate change impacts became more evident and public concern intensified, there were dozens of English-language novels published” (36). Cli-fi has been elevated to the public consciousness in popular works by celebrated contemporary authors including Margaret Atwood (such as the dystopian trilogy beginning with *Oryx and Crake* in 2003), Cormac McCarthy (such his 2006 post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*) and Barbara Kingsolver (such as her realist 2012 novel *Flight Behaviour* which tackles extremes weather events caused by climate change). I specifically focus on Robinson’s *New York 2140* and VanderMeer’s *Hummingbird Salamander* cli-fi novels because of their unique deployment of the conventions of noir, namely the fusion of noir with themes of environmental crisis. The intersection of genres unfolding in these novels makes use of the atmospheric conventions of noir, including the representation of crime as not just as an individual act, but a systemic phenomenon, to provide us with an “effective mode of communicating” the environmental degradation that may not be immediately visible (36). The fusion of the conventions of noir and its sub-genres with cli-if allows such an escalated near-reality threat to be “seen, felt, and imagined in the present” (36).

In this chapter, I consider two recent cli-fi novels and their adaptation of the conventions of the American noir sub-genres discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Specifically, I examine the relationship between the fragmented scene-making of hardboiled and neo-noir

narratives in relation to the eco-noir rhizomatic mapping of environmental space, characterization, and crime investigation in contemporary cli-fi. I take the concept of the rhizomatic from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. The rhizome, as these critics discuss it, provides a new model of society apparent in recent cli-fi writing, in contradistinction to the atomistic society of the hardboiled and neo-noir detectives. The solitary, individual investigator in these eco-noir works is replaced by a new kind of investigator: a collective and sometimes weird detective. In the speculative near-reality narratives discussed in this chapter, the deteriorating environment is mapped rhizomatically, as a non-linear network of connections occurring simultaneously on multiple temporal and spatial scales, as opposed to in delimited representations of the past, present or/and future.

Although early hardboiled and neo-noir texts have the capacity to draw the reader's attention to the setting of their environment as a scenic space, they do so in circumscribed ways. The environmentally damaged landscapes in the texts under study in Chapter 1 are depicted on a fragmentary scale as background to the core crime plot, while the toxicity of the landscape in *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* is represented through an investigation and exposure the crimes of the past. In contrast, *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* re-envision conventions of noir to depict near-reality environmental disasters as implicated in the economic crimes of the present. These novels are, I argue, uniquely eco-noir. Stewart King examines the intersection of cli-fi and crime fiction through the idea of "climate" fiction, "narratives that both narrate the climate catastrophe through the popular conventions of the crime genre and apply the genre's central ideological concerns with culpability and criminality to the climate crisis" (122-23). This idea, albeit

hospitable to ecocritical approaches to the crime genre, contrasts with my eco-noir reading of Robinson and VanderMeer's novels because my eco-noir reading focuses on how these authors specifically regenerate noir and its conventions. These novels produce a persuasively realistic speculative narrative of a bleak near-reality that is deliberately coded in noir terms. As such, the cli-fi narratives I examine do something different than climate fiction. While climate fiction narratives focus on ecological injustices and environmental damage, they do so by utilizing general generic conventions of crime fiction. In contrast, eco-noir narratives offer a unique way to perceive our deteriorating environment through the conventions of hardboiled and neo-noir. The dismal future hinted at in *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes* (the dismal future being the present day of the film audience) has more or less come to pass in Robinson and VanderMeer's eco-noir narratives. In Robinson and VanderMeer's novels, the toxicity that permeates the environments of Hammett, Chandler, and Towne's texts exceeds the realm of the private and has become prevalent and pervasive.

Perhaps the first rendering of an eco-noir sensibility can be found in the opening of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Often cited as initiating a key moment in public environmental awareness and activism, Carson's book begins with a speculative fiction that is noirish in its depiction of a near-reality of environmental blight. In a section called "A Fable for Tomorrow," the title demonstrates how the knowledge it conveys has a temporal dimension; the story outlines the destruction of an American town in hopes that in the world of those who read it, this history will not take place "tomorrow." It begins with an idealized fairytale world—"there was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings"—but moves to urgently warn



readers of the imminent destruction that threatens the green idyll at the centre of the national allegory: “a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change” (1). The story projects a near-reality like cli-fi, but what makes it eco-noir is its representation of systemic environmental poisoning as a crime that it is too late solved. The unnamed narrator mentions a “strange blight” that “settled on the community” and caused “mysterious maladies” (2). Chickens, cattle, sheep, adults, and children begin to die. In short, this “evil spell” casts “a shadow of death” all over the town (2). The shadow saturates the townspeople’s natural environment, creating an atmospheric noir setting. The most striking line in the story is a question about the birds: “where had they gone?” (2). This question emanates from a “strange stillness” felt by the townspeople. The event that causes the mass deaths is unknown, but it is rooted in a dark reality and not the “witchcraft” typical of fairy tales: “no witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world” (3). Rather, the narrator recognizes that the inhabitants of the town are responsible: “The people had done it themselves” (3).

As in cli-fi, Carson’s “A Fable for Tomorrow” depicts environmental disaster as the result of systemic violence of a capitalistic society. The puzzled townspeople are simultaneously the investigators, the criminals, and the victims of their own destructive actions. There is thus a “strange loop” at the heart of *Silent Spring*’s opening fable.

Carson’s fable anticipates Morton’s argument in *Dark Ecology* about noir’s protagonist as both criminal and victim. Her fable also resonates with Chandler’s comment in a 1949 letter to James Sandoe that his idea of “*mystery*...indicate[s] that type of story in which the search is not for a specific criminal, but.... a meaning in character and relationship, what the hell went on, rather than who done it” (57). And the title of Carson’s book title

hints, long before climate science was popularized, that seasonal disruption and climatic change will be among the consequences of environmental poisoning. Carson's successors in cli-fi, Robinson and VanderMeer, extend the use of noir in imagining a deteriorating environment.

The question in Carson's fable, "where had [the birds] gone?", is a question about what happened, about the disjunction between present and past. For Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the question of "what happened?" is central to nineteenth century Anglo-American crime and mystery fiction. Narrative action in detective fiction gets its impetus from seeking the answer to this question. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "something happened, something is going to happen, can designate a past so immediate, a future so near, that they are one...with retentions and protentions of the present self" (192-193). Like nineteenth century investigators, the investigators in eco-noir are immersed in mystery, forced to assess what happened, how it happened, and what might happen in the immediate and near reality. Unlike their precursors, however, eco-noir protagonists discover the crime and guilt of the society itself. Regarding Robinson and VanderMeer's narratives, there is no clear linearity: there is no clear beginning to what happened, no clear indication who the culprits are, and no clear indication as to what might happen in the character's lives beyond the narratives. In the texts considered in Chapters 1 and 2 of this project, the central mystery is resolved, and the questions surrounding the crimes are largely answered. The toxicity diffused in the novels and films' environments is a constant element (it permeates the atmosphere of the narratives) that "places us in a relation with something unknowable and imperceptible" (Deleuze and Guattari 193). Moreover, there is a sense that this crime scene, understood as our

environment, is persistent and ubiquitous. Cli-fi texts rely on the techniques of noir to represent the cause/effect and actors/consequences of environmental blight. However, the mystery embedded in the various components of such deterioration is multi-temporal and multi-scalar, and the investigator—whose agency itself is dispersed—cannot clearly answer what happened, how it happened and what is going to happen.

I rely on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the rhizome to highlight such multi-components of eco-noir mysteries. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use a series of botanical metaphors to conceptualize three types of books: the root-book, the fascicular root-book, and the rhizome-book. The root and fascicular books both depict nature as a unity, but the latter can only show the unity as shattered into fragments. Modernist texts, for Deleuze and Guattari, are fascicular books. For them, the ideal rhizomatic book presents nature as a rhizome, that is, as a non-linear multiplicity of "retentions" and "protentions" of past and future events. Eco-noir differs from Hammett and Chandler's noir and Towne's neo-noir by rejecting in advance the "fascicular" idea that the world is a unity in pieces. For writers such as Robinson and VanderMeer, the world of crime and mystery the protagonists investigate is a rhizome, a mass of connections reaching into past and future that speak of changing complexity rather than a lost unity. In analyzing the selected eco-noir texts for their rhizomatic approach, we can better grasp how such narratives, in communicating the multiplicities of environmental deterioration through mystery and other hardboiled and neo-noir conventions, make visible our soon-to-be reality. In addition, such multiplicities provide us with a clearer idea of the extent to which toxicity is inescapable, diffused in the noir atmospheres of Robinson and VanderMeer's eco-noir texts. I rely on this rhizomatic, or collective approach, to

demonstrate two core ideas: (1) how the following narratives re-envision what it means to be an investigator, one who is now working with other characters and nonhuman subjects in a collective detective role, (2) and how such eco-noir texts provide us with a shift from a fragmented method of mapping the investigator's surroundings to a rhizomatic form of mapping the intricate links between the environment, nonhuman, human, and the complexities of noir as atmospheric. There is, in the rhizomatic approach, a simultaneous epistemological effect: in making clear the unknowability of various aspects of such an environment, there is a certain knowledge being acquired, namely the multi-faceted and rhizomatic relationships of human agents not only with each other within the systemically poisoned atmosphere of their society, but also with what lies outside of that society. In drawing on hardboiled and neo-noir conventions, eco-noir has the advantage of expanding upon the investigative and mapping skills of the "green" detective, as introduced in Chapter 1 of this project.<sup>16</sup> To re-iterate, the idea of the "green detective" can be considered a variation of Bandyopadhyay's notion of "the green sleuth," which highlights the investigator's role in linking fictional investigations and existential threats faced by Indigenous peoples "in the form of environmental injustice" (67). It can also be considered an adaption of the previously mentioned notion of the "green PI" in relation to Hammett and Chandler's narratives.

The eco-noir narratives under study here re-envision the mapping of the unknowability of the environment through the depiction of a form of green detective "agency", which

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<sup>16</sup> Critics such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argue that green is not the only eco colour, that there could be a sort of "dirty" or multi-colour ecocriticism.

involves a collective human and nonhuman network tackling mysteries.<sup>17</sup> I categorize the characters discussed below as forming a collective detective-ship because of two key attributed: (1) their working in a network involving human and nonhuman characters (2) and their more intimate connection to, and perception of, their eco-noir atmosphere. *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* develop the figure of the private investigator from a lone protagonist to one who works in a human-non-nonhuman collective to better grasp our multifaceted relationship to nature. This collective detective-ship implicitly understands the world rhizomatically, as a changing multiplicity rather than shattered unity. To quote programmer Jeff from Robinson's *New York 2140*, "self-reliance my ass. We're fucking monkeys. It's always about teamwork" (Robinson 541).

### 3.2 Methodology

*New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* manifest a rhizomatic relationship between violent capitalist human actions and a toxic, noir atmosphere. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome can be considered in conjunction with Les Roberts' notion of "deep mapping" by spatial anthropologists (considered in Chapter 1). I expand on deep mapping as "an object of discourse" in this chapter in relation to the rhizome: both are concerned with a "multi-scalar and multi-layered spatial structure" (Roberts 5). In addition, "*deep maps* and *deep mapping* ... highlight the ways in which qualitative and humanistic forays into the representation and practice of space and place [are] multi-faceted, open-ended and.... irreducible to formal and programmatic design" (2).

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<sup>17</sup> I share this focus on the exercise of collective agency with the authors of *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-boiled Tradition*, Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome is like Roberts' concept of deep mapping. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is important to "[p]lug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari, 14). The rhizomatic mapping of the environment in *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* make such connections between large-and small-scale events, bringing awareness to the reader of a "'deeply' configured spatial knowledge" (Roberts 3). Through putting environmental blight at the forefront of the narratives, and in relying on noir conventions to stress the immediacy and toxicity of such a reality, eco-noir narratives communicate a "deeper knowledge" of environmental crises. The communication of this deeper knowledge unfolds in *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* through the collective and the rhizomatic: the collective of investigators/narrators working together to demonstrate how acts of *doing* (investigating) are acts of deep mapping, the mapping of rhizomatic complexity. The rhizomatic method of mapping is both spatial and temporal; it represents a multi-scalar understanding of past and near-reality futures, retentions and protentions of the environmentally endangered present. The rhizomatic approach in understanding eco-noir tackles some of the problems posed by fragmentation in early American hardboiled and neo-noir texts. In *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander*, the reader encounters multiple connections among human and nonhuman characters, linkages between crimes and environmental disasters, and endings that emphasize continuously growing and non-linear effects of environmental crises. But American writers such as Robinson and VanderMeer are not the first to adapt the atmosphere of noir to a more complex understanding of the environment.

### 3.3 The New Nordic Noir

One way to highlight the importance and profound effect of eco-noir as both a new sub-genre of noir and a new ecocritical tool, is to consider it as the American literary response to the new form of noir developing later in the twentieth century in the Nordic regions of Europe, Nordic noir. Nordic noir is a precursor to the noirish cli-fi of Robinson and VanderMeer. As an atmospheric phenomenon, noir exists, as Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton articulate it in “Towards a Definition of Film Noir,” “in response to a certain mood at large” in a “particular time and place” (19). Nordic Noir captures the atmosphere of concern in postwar and later twentieth century northern Europe around pressing environmental issues, particularly that climate change is a result of human violence wrought upon nature.

The turn to noir by certain Nordic writers to examine environmental issues may have something to do with how noir depicts violence. As Anthony Hoefler argues in “Violence, Spectacular and Slow”:

Despite their common associations, noir (whether film or fiction) requires neither a mystery nor a detective, but simply a crime or an act of violence—and, most often, one that is spectacular, even lurid. However, noir is distinct from other crime fiction in the way it contextualizes even the most spectacular violence: from its cynical perspective, a particular criminal scheme or a singular act of violence is almost always the consequence of systemic corruption and injustice. Noir is interested in crime and violence as the manifestation of something sprawling, pervasive, and unseen, rather than the result of singular, individual evil. In noir, the lurid and the spectacular offer access to something otherwise unintelligible—

the complexities and contradictions produced by (late) modernity. The genre's shared textures, of course, are not just strategies for accessing complicated truths; they are exciting, titillating, and fun. (489-490)

For Hofer, violence in noir is always the consequence of "systemic corruption and injustice." This insight resonates with Hollister's own insistence that systemic violence against the environment is a suitable topic for crime fiction, and his insistence that Nordic Noir has made crime fiction "black and greener" (Hollister, 1020).

According to K.T. Hansen and A.M. Waade in *Locating Nordic Noir*, the term Nordic noir "was coined by the Scandinavian Department at the University College of London" in 2010 and is "developed out of a literary crime fiction" (5,8). Hansen and Waade trace the introduction of the "socially sensitive sleuth" to Swedish co-authors, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, whose ten Martin Beck police procedural mysteries were published in the 1960s and 70s (5, 8). By the early decades of the twenty-first century, dark, socially-aware crime fiction set in the emphatically bleak landscapes of the Scandinavian countries had exploded in fiction, film, and television gained "immense international success" thus re-branding this "cross-media trend" as Nordic Noir or Scandi-Noir.<sup>18</sup> In recent Nordic noir, the depiction of the "toxic" environment serves as a metaphor for moral and criminal corruption and represents the literal destruction and poisoning of the environment: this involves not just the individualized crime of homicide, but is a slow, systemic form of ecocide.

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<sup>18</sup> See Wendy Lesser's *Scandinavian Noir* (2020).



A recent example is Sveriges Television AB's 2015 Swedish sci-fi noir series *Jordskott*. Nordic noir takes up environmental and societal issues and attempts to draw out the guilt and darkness of the capitalist aggressors against nature. I examine such issues in a 2021 article titled "The Animistic and Uncanny Representation of Nature in *Jordskott*." In season one of the show, police detective Eva returns to her hometown of Silverhöld to handle her late father's affairs but is soon faced with not only the task of uncovering the exploitative capitalist practices of her father's logging company, but also the mysterious disappearances of children. Our assumption that a human is the culprit is undermined when we learn that mystical forest creatures kidnapped the children in retaliation of the logging company's practices. Thus, the show links the logging company's actions with the crime of kidnapping to unveil the relationship between the natural environment and capitalist exploitative practices. Furthermore, in representing nature as having nonhuman agency, viewers are further exposed to the idea of the natural environment as rhizomatic as opposed to atomistic. This understanding of nature in *Jordskott* literalizes the idea that violent acts against the environment are in fact crimes targeting sentient beings, subjects with intrinsic value as opposed to object-value imposed upon nature taken as a homogeneous whole by the ideology of a capitalism. *Jordskott* expands upon the treatment of violence in noir from human-on-human violence to human-on-nonhuman violence that harms the environment. Seeing violence in a "greener" light reduces the "bloody thrills" that the popular genre promises and makes realities of a toxic environment accessible to audiences and thus prompts responsive action (Hollister 1020). In the rest of this chapter, I examine the American equivalent of Nordic noir, eco-noir, taking *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander* as examples.

American noir's "run-down urban space, impersonal yet threatening alike" can be exaggerated in eco-noir texts about dystopian and utopian futures that are not too unrealistic or futuristic to shape our ecological thought (Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 317). Jameson's focus on sci-fi as the "future world's remote past" demonstrates both how our lived socio-economic experiences are translated into a future, and how different conventions of literary genres can shape ecological thought (288). For example, Jameson argues that in noir "we find the most 'realistic' development of the narrative unit in question, a development which offers some useful clues as to its ultimate historical meaning or content" (317, 322). The realistic urban blight that appears in the varieties of noir highlights the near-reality of dystopian wastelands. While mostly realist work emerges out of noir, we can begin to see how this toxic atmosphere can be exaggerated in eco-noir settings that are not too unrealistic or futuristic. The conventions of early noir and its sub-genres issue slowly forth "like the growth of an organism" transforming the traditional violence of the urban city into an "unimaginable yet inevitable 'real' future," or near-reality (287-288).

In regenerating noir into eco-noir, authors create a new method of communicating environmental issues. Eco-noir regenerates noir to provides us with a new method of understanding the immediacy of the effects of the toxicity in our environment in the same way that the Nordic regions took up noir to comment on social and environmental crises. In *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander*, a rhizomatic formulation is form of mapping that adapts the fragmented scale discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 and serves as a tool to extend our understanding of the complexities of an eco-noir atmosphere.

### 3.4 *New York 2140*

Kim Stanley Robinson is an American sci-fi writer known for his *Three Californias* Trilogy (1984-1990) and the *Mars* trilogy (1992-1999). *New York 2140* is a more contemporary novel, published in 2017, and is specifically a cli-fi narrative set in a New York City facing an extreme rise in seawater levels. The novel traces the separate, yet connected, lives of residents in one of Manhattan's nearly fully submerged skyscrapers. This ensemble of characters put on display their difficulties in living in their new reality. They also expose the human-induced forces driving environmental disasters and the potential for change through collective action. Robinson's narrative, albeit set in 2140, is represented in such a way that readers feel as if the fictional New York City will be a near-reality to them. Part of this effect is a result of the novel's fusion of noir and cli-fi conventions.

When a minor character, Mr. Hexter, from Robinson's *New York 2140* talks about a novel he has written, he describes it as "mostly a detective novel, I guess you'd say, or an adventure novel where it's just one damn thing after another" (392). This is a self-reflexive moment in Robinson's novel insofar as *New York 2140* itself is a both a detective and cli-fi adventure novel. It relies on the realism and cynicism of noir as well as dystopic imagery found in cli-fi narratives to make visible our planet's near-doom. *New York 2140* regenerates the conventions of hardboiled and neo-noir texts and integrates them into cli-fi, blurs the boundaries of such genres, and makes a conversation about our deteriorating environment and potential outcomes (depending on human agents' actions) more impactful. In *New York 2140*, Robinson shows readers what Earth could soon look like if we do not change our behaviour. Robinson depicts a planet

suffering from a rising sea level due to a warming climate. In this novel, canals replace streets in New York, and we read about how people adapt. The New York that Robinson depicts is a new Venice, with characters ditching cars for boats to maneuver the streets that have become waterways. While water scarcity and misuse are key issues in *Chinatown*, in *New York 2140*, we encounter an overabundance of this resource.

*New York 2140* contains eight parts, each consisting of various chapters narrated by individuals and groups of two characters. The novel has a multitude of characters, all of whom gather in and around Manhattan's MetLife Tower. Characters include programmers (Mutt and Jeff), an Inspector (Gen), a hedge fund manager (Franklin), some children (Stefan and Roberto), a video blogger (Amelia), a lawyer (Charlotte), the MetLife building superintendent (Vlade), and the sarcastic and mysterious "Citizen" or "City." When it comes to Franklin and the Citizen/City's chapters, the narrative is written in first person and reads like log entries. When it comes to Mutt and Jeff, the narrative is written in theatrical and dialogue-heavy ways, fitting the allusion to the American comic strip "Mutt and Jeff," created by Bud Fisher in 1907, which depicts two mismatched people and their adventures. The remaining characters (Gen, Vlade, Amelia, Charlotte, Stefan and Roberto) are narrated in third person. These characters and their distinct chapters form a collective detective-ship. Despite their being distinct, the different voices are woven together through mystery and environmental issues to form a unique and overarching eco-noir narrative about a deteriorating toxic natural environment.

While the characters, all of whom inhabit Manhattan's MetLife Tower, deal with a drastically changed reality, a mystery unfolds: programmers Mutt and Jeff are kidnapped after a computer bug they unleash threatens the financial markets. There are other sub-

plots, such as Franklin betting on a housing bubble, Stefan and Roberto looking for centuries-old sunken treasure in the Bronx, Amelia's video blog career (the blog is titled "Assisted Migration"), and Charlotte's rise to political power. The narrative is rhizomatic as each chapter has a different narrative voice that nevertheless fuses well with other chapters. There is no right narrator or character overpowering the process of communicating the story. In such a collective narration, we better grasp how the various characters and narrators exist in relationship with each other. As such, these characters form a collective detective-ship, and, in doing so, are rhizomatically mapping their deteriorating environment. In such a mode of mapping, readers acquire a multi-faceted sense of New York City as the New Venice.

### 3.5 The Collective PI and the Rhizomatic Map of New York City

A rhizomatic narrative approach is key to the way that Robinson's novel expands upon noir conventions to bring attention to issues pertaining to our environment. *New York 2140* adapts hardboiled and neo-noir texts' narrative structure, which focuses on capitalist exploitation and the lonely figure of the private eye who investigates crimes ultimately related to powerful patriarchs and capitalists. Robinson does not focus on oil executives or mine owners, but rather on the mundane financial offices, their CEOs, and employees. Robinson is not solely blaming financialization (the process in which financial structures in society gain greater influence over every facet of such a society) for ecological destruction as the narrative further indicates there is a hope that collaborative efforts can change the system, either legally or in more subversive ways. There is the potential, then, for an alternative sense of value. Furthermore, while hardboiled and neo-noir narratives feature a single investigator, *New York 2140* brings together the various characters into a

rhizomatic collective. The hardboiled character's individual status is often represented by the singular first-person narration. The hardboiled private eye is an isolated and alienated 'I.' For example, the Op and Marlowe live alone and operate a one-man independent business as investigators. There is also the sense that the reader is aligned with the private eyes as both are in the position of investigator. But Robinson has multiple investigators intertwined in various knowledge gathering and discovery efforts that map life in New York City.

It is possible to identify Inspector Gen as a contemporary female version of the hardboiled private investigator. The idea of a female private eye inheriting the masculine hardboiled world of a "private dick" is not new. Authors like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, and Laura Lippman wrote about female private eyes in response to the traditional role females played in the hardboiled era, especially as femme fatales.

According to Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones in *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-boiled Tradition*,

by 1990, the female 'tough gal' outgrowth of the male hard-boiled novel was making waves in the mainstream of American Popular Culture. The subgenre of the professional woman investigator had become well-established and was being publicly celebrated through unprecedented sales and economic rewards, as well as literary prestige and popular renown. (11-12)

Unlike the masculine private eyes of the preceding two chapters, the female hardboiled police investigator that emerged in the 1970s, and became prominent by 1990, "featured appearances in the police procedural genre, a version of the crime novel in which the mystery is unraveled by the police and in which much of the reader's pleasure is derived

from the novel's focus on police teamwork, techniques of investigation, and routines of crime solving" (Walton and Jones 13). Furthermore, the central female private investigator "is traditionally viewed as part of a collectivity" (Walton and Jones 13). Inspector Gen is directly approached by Charlotte to find Mutt and Jeff (as the client contacts the Op and Marlowe), which immediately separates Inspector Gen from her role within the cohort of the police. The inspector makes clear that she is a fourth-generation cop (Robinson 88). On the one hand, Inspector Gen is displaced from a collective of police investigators. On the other hand, even though she is like an "old school" private eye, she shows the reader how the individual and the collective can coexist in the role of a green investigator through the novel's narrative (Robinson 176).

The novel opens with Charlotte Armstrong, MetLife leader and city lawyer, approaching Gen about a case. When the reader is first introduced to Inspector Gen, she is "slumped in her chair" and Charlotte "looked as tired as Gen felt" (10). Inspector Gen being always tired, further highlights the intimate connection she has with her noir atmosphere. Much like the Op, Marlowe, and Gittes, Inspector Gen knows the "mean streets" (or waterways) of the urban metropolis. Inspector Gen even continues to walk around the partially submerged city roads, where transport is mainly by water taxis (or on foot via bridges). As she tells Charlotte, who is asking for directions, "you can take the [skybridge] from here to Bellevue, and then go downstairs and cross diagonally and then head west on the Twenty-third Skyline. It takes about thirty-four minutes. The vapo would take twenty if we got lucky, thirty if we didn't. So I walk it a lot. I can use the stretch, and it will give us a chance to talk" (10). Despite some similarities, Inspector Gen is not wholly like the

“old school” Op, Marlowe, and Gittes. An epigraph<sup>19</sup> on page 26 in the novel references an episode in Hammett’s biography, making clear the narrative’s awareness of the tradition of noir. Inspector Gen even acknowledges her persona at a party for political government officials, noting that at such social events “her coping method was basically to do film noir. Regard people tightly, keep a stone face” (267). But she is also an example of what it means to be a new type of investigator, a racialized woman investigator who functions as part of a collective.<sup>20</sup>

Vlade, the Ukrainian immigrant who is the superintendent of the MetLife Tower, describes Inspector Gen as a “tall black woman, as tall as he was, rather massive, with a sharp and reserved manner” (29). Vlade even likes to emulate Inspector Gen as he tends to think like her in his investigation of cracks in the building (93). Vlade is also important because he finds Mutt and Jeff for Charlotte and Inspector Gen (322). Just as Inspector Gen relies on Vlade to find the duo, she relies on others to reinforce a sense of collectivity in this detective-ship. For example, while Franklin, Charlotte, and Amelia are looking at the changes resulting from a hurricane that hit New York City, Inspector Gen is dealing with riots and how “violent person-on-person crime” and “drug overdoses” are followed by “food and sanitation” issues (509). The structure of having all the characters meet at the MetLife Tower, and the aid of Vlade in finding Mutt and Jeff, makes the way each character deals with the aftermath of the hurricane seem more interconnected

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<sup>19</sup> “While working as a detective in New York, Dashiell Hammett was once assigned to find a Ferris wheel that had been stolen the year before in Sacramento” (26).

<sup>20</sup> Inspector Gen’s last name, Octaviasdottir, could be seen as an allusion to American sci-fi (or Afrofuturist and cli-fi) writer Octavia Butler, but it is also indicative of the character’s Nordic, specifically Icelandic identity. In Iceland, surnames are typically patronymic, but Gen’s surname identifies her as her mother’s *dottir* rather than her father’s.



despite the physical distances between them. The urban crime and issues unfolding after a natural disaster demonstrates the relationship between human actions and the consequences of natural disasters. Inspector Gen helps readers navigate the urban criminality while other characters communicate the equally violent effects the hurricane had on the natural environment. In short, Inspector Gen shares similarities with “old school” private eyes, but she also changes the way one understands the traditional investigator to reinforce a collective green detective-ship.<sup>21</sup>

All the characters act in their own roles but also work together as collective investigators. In other words, the composite narrative voice can be perceived by readers as a collective voice. The investigation of the kidnapping of Mutt and Jeff, which is in retaliation to Jeff releasing a code into a computer system that revises existing financial laws, unites the other characters. As a result of Jeff’s action, Mutt and Jeff are kidnapped by members of a corporation who feel threatened by the release of this code. It is because of this kidnapping that the other characters unite: the other characters in the novel come together to try and unravel the mystery of who kidnapped Mutt and Jeff. This union results in a series of discoveries of corruption (such as how the individual who sabotaged the MetLife Tower did so to purchase it at a lower cost). The various threads of corruption linking political and financial powers address an underlying legal capitalist structure that inflicts harm on society and the natural environment. The composite form of *New York 2140*, as it contains different characters’ perspectives and voices that help to map the

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the collectivity of investigators also includes animals as Amelia attributes investigative qualities to “the bear, who was rising on her haunches with an investigative or at least troubled expression” (170). This idea will be expanded upon in my section on *Hummingbird Salamander*.

novel's natural and urban spaces, reintegrates the private investigator figure back into society and collectivity. No longer a solitary antihero, Inspector Gen works with others to solve the kidnapping and subsequent issues like the riots. Since a rhizome is a network of centerless relationships and is not concerned with linearity, beginnings, or endings, but always with rising from the middle, the rhizome works against the patterns set by earlier investigative hardboiled and neo-noir narratives. Inspector Gen relies on the multiplicity of networks that is the rhizome.

The street-smart language often associated with noir private eyes can be found in the language of the Citizen/City rather than in the Inspector herself. The Citizen/City is the voice of the city itself, which provides context and commentary on the narrative. The Citizen/City's language is akin to hardboiled tough talk, providing readers with straightforward facts and information that might be muddled in the characters' narrations. The Citizen/City relies on street-smart language when providing readers with historical context to better grasp New York's capitalist history and climatology. The Citizen/City uses phrases like "the crows just background tapestries for you to play your life against" and descriptions such as "White was shot dead by the jealous husband of a woman he was seeing, right in the Garden during a dinner show" (36, 78). The nameless Citizen/City's language, in reproducing the stylistic conventions typical of the hardboiled narrative voice, helps to cultivate noir's atmospheric disposition. In addition, we can consider the Citizen/City as the distinct narrative voice of the landscape. The unknown narrative voice lends the witty and sharp humour to Inspector Gen. Rather than attributing all the characteristics of a private investigator in the sub-genres of noir to one character, Robinson's novel places all the character's voices and actions in a collective

detective-ship. This dispersed network involving the environment, crime, and investigators, contributes to the eco-noir atmosphere. In short, in *New York 2140*, there is a community of people outside of Inspector Gen who work in a collective to navigate mysteries and environmental disasters. They begin with unravelling the mystery of the kidnapping, but soon begin to deal with issues of corporate greed and the biggest mystery of all: what they need to do to change the future for the better.

### 3.6 Regenerating Crime and Violence

In much the same way the eco-noir narrative re-imagines the private investigator's role, it also reconsiders how crime is defined considering environmental disasters. In an interview with Sally Adee in the popular science magazine *New Scientist*, answering the question "aren't we living in a dystopia now?", Robinson notes: "here's the dilemma. Capitalism is the system we have agreed to live by. Its rules, while being legal and not involving anyone being evil or cheating, are nevertheless destroying the world. So we need to change the rules" (44-45). Rather than focussing on individual thugs, identifiable crime syndicates, or even the illegal capitalist infrastructure, Robinson identifies capitalism more broadly as responsible for crimes that cause violence to the environment. In *New York 2140*, hedge fund manager Franklin sums up this point nicely when he distinguishes between financial crime as conventionally defined and acceptable financial practice: "spoofing? No. Ponzi scheme? Not at all! Just *finance*. Legal as hell" (Robinson 123). In an interview with *Scientific American*, Robinson remarks that "finance, globalization—this current moment of capitalism—has a stranglehold on the world by way of all our treaties and laws, but it adds up to a multigenerational Ponzi scheme, an agreement on the part of everybody to screw the future generations for the sake of present

profits” (Billings). While those who work in hedge funds and finance bubbles in the novel are not technically criminals, they are depicted as a new form of organized crime exploiting people and the natural environment and its resources for profit. There is also a sense that bankers and investors will make money if the planet does well or does poorly—in either case it will be monetized.

Noir posits an urban social environment where crime is endemic. During the Great Depression and interwar period, organized crime such as bootlegging, prostitution and gambling evolved and depended upon capitalist, political, and police corruption. Crime drives the narrative in noir, its sub-genres, and *New York 2140*. The form of crime in *New York 2140* is like the organized crime depicted in noir thrillers but with less focus on obvious forms of urban criminality. Consider, for example, Franklin’s descriptions of his job in finance which make him seem like a type of gangster. He describes his role in the workplace as “a professional gambler. Like one of those mythical characters in the fictional Old West Saloons,” associating himself with the outlaw characters typical of the Western genre (Robinson 415).<sup>22</sup> His pastimes include “cigars and whiskey and watching women in the river sunset” (21). “The city smartass,” or the Citizen/City, reinforces Franklin’s comparison of legal real estate speculation to illicit Ponzi schemes, tying both to the pervasive influence of capitalism: “the way [financial] bubbles work is structurally identical to Ponzi schemes...bubbles and Ponzi schemes and capitalism all have to keep growing or else they are in deep shit” (497).

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<sup>22</sup> In “The Hard-Boiled Detective Story: From the Open Range to the Mean Streets,” in *The Sleuth and the Scholar* edited by Barbara A. Rader and others, Richard Slotkin analyzes the historical affiliations between classic hardboiled detective narratives and the “populist style and ethic of the frontier out-law hero” at the heart of American cultural mythology (99).

Not only are investment/market-oriented individuals criminals, but so are Inspector Gen's political "acquaintances" such as Mayor Estaban. At an event held by the Mayor, Inspector Gen remarks that "she knew also that many of them were much bigger criminals than her submarine acquaintances," with "them" referring to the mayor and government employees (267). When threatened companies, such as the one Franklin works for, turn to crime as defined by the state. Pinkerton is behind the kidnapping of Mutt and Jeff, and it is described as an "international firm, based in Grand Cayman if anywhere" that "is unlocatable, both nowhere and everywhere. On the night Rosen and Muttchopf had disappeared, Sean said, there had been a strange event in the Chicago Mercantile Exchange" (175). The investigative activities of Mutt and Jeff place this company's ethics in question. When vulnerable, as Mutt and Jeff discover, Pinkerton turns to crime. Hammett, who is, as noted, mentioned in an early epigraph of the novel, began his career as an anti-labor Pinkerton operative. Hammett was sometimes hired to prevent and break strikes, a role that gave him experience in private investigation, but left him embittered with such activity, as *Red Harvest* amply shows. Both the fictional and real Pinkerton agencies are entities sanctioned by law to violently oppress those challenging the constraints of capitalism. Mutt and Jeff come to see "crimes of the ruling class" (189). The officials hired by institutions such as the mayor's office and Pinkerton are the only ones directly complicit in criminal activity.

Eventually Franklin redeems himself by joining forces with other characters and abandoning his finance job, and, on his way to doing so, he names the subject that is fighting back: "Mother Ocean...And it's turning out to be toughest to fight her in the intertidal...nothing can stand against [her waves]" (285). "Mother Ocean" is fighting

back in a way analogous to the way the water forms an insurgence against the capitalist exploitation of it as a resource in *Chinatown*. In Robinson's novel, Mother Ocean combats its exploitation through "pulses," a series of ecological events that raise sea levels over years, affecting coastlines everywhere. These pulses, involving the gradual yet shockingly substantial rise in sea levels over time, disrupt the lives of both the obvious perpetrators of our deteriorating environment such as corporations and politicians, and everyday citizens, who are implicated in their crimes. It is not only large-scale actions by corporations that produce harmful effects (such as industrial emissions) that contribute to rising sea levels, but also small responsive changes that result in catastrophic outcomes. All citizens are victims as collateral damage. "Mother Ocean's" reactions draw the reader's attention to the fact that separating the innocent from the guilty is neither accurate nor possible: guilt is dispersed, the environment becomes saturated in it, and the consequences of environmental harm affect everyone.

As Robinson's novel suggests, this form of violence can be reciprocal, perpetuated against the environment and returned in kind with damaging environmental change. Although briefly explored in relation to *Chinatown*, and when I discussed *Jordskott*, this extreme manifestation of violence transforms noir's passive atmospheric condition into one in which the natural environment has a sense of agency. The implication is that while certain actors should bear most of the responsibilities, it does not excuse the actions of others who perceive their role in perpetuating a toxic environment as minor. This idea, in turn, demonstrates the malleability of the characteristics of "violence" when urban crime is considered on a continuum with natural harm. The actors driving environmental issues are ubiquitous. To cite once again the statement by Hoefler, noir "is interested in crime

and violence as the manifestation of something sprawling” and “pervasive” (489-490). “Mother Ocean” does not distinguish between corporations and citizens acting outside of corporations. There is no distinction between corporate- and individual-driven violence against the natural environment. Thus, noir’s urban violence is not always an obvious and visible element when reimagined in eco-noir narratives.

Aside from the eco-catastrophes that happened prior to the narrative, readers witness a live environmental event: a hurricane. The most significant aspect of this hurricane is the aftermath. Rather than focussing on the dead bodies that are traditionally at the centre of noir narratives, the reader is presented with dead trees, specifically, “uprooted trees” that “looked like dead bodies on the land; floating trees looked like dead bodies in the water” (489). While human bodies under water tend to resurface (for example, after Stefan and Roberto submerge for treasure and after Amelia falls underwater while skating), the dead trees remain submerged. Charlotte’s meditation on the state of the trees integrates language that associates them with abject human bodies:

Giant root balls stood up from the edges of gaping holes in the ground, facing south together like sunflowers. Broken branches everywhere exposed the inner flesh of trees, blond and grainy, like limbs of different kind of flesh. Every once in a while she stopped and sat down on the ground, feeling melodramatic, like she was acting out an emotion in a theatre exercise, but she had to do it, her knees were buckling under her. (500)

This passage draws attention to the shared vulnerability of human and botanical anatomy, using a reference to damaged “flesh” and broken “limbs.” In fact, the broken tree limbs influence Charlotte’s own appendages when her legs begin to collapse under her. In

Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake* (1943), the missing victim is found submerged in a body of water. Leaning on the edge of the pier, Bill and Marlowe look "down into the water and something that looked like an arm waved out under the submerged flooring, the old boat landing. Bill dropped a heavy rock in and the body popped up" (55). Chandler suggests a continuity between the water and the body: they see not an arm, but something almost non-human, "the thing" that "looked like an arm", and "waved" in and out from under the planking. Bill's response, like Charlotte's, is visceral, reinforcing a continuity between the abjected corpse, the landscape, and his own body.

*New York 2140*, however, takes such associations to another level. Rather than reifying the human body, as Chandler does, Robinson creates a rhizomatic network and connects the natural and human environment. It is clearer about environmental violence too, making trees the victims of human crimes against nature. When Charlotte explains the holes in the ground from the uprooted trees and the broken branches that exposed the "flesh" of the trees, such descriptions instill in the mind of the reader a grotesque image of the trees as mutilated murdered beings. Charlotte makes a critical connection between the mutilated, drowned bodies of trees and the role of a cheater in big investment firm, demonstrating an intellectual and investigative mental capacity traditionally attributed to a private eye. As she tells her ex-husband Larry: "there's nothing there, all the way back up the line. And now it's a matter of letting the whole thing sink to the bottom of the canals. To the dark and backward abyss of time" (565). Like the collateral victims of the hurricane, the corporate criminals and government entities will soon drown in part because of their unwillingness to change their exploitative practices.



### 3.7 The Scene of the Seen Victim

I end my discussion of Robinson's novel by focusing further on how, through descriptions of landscape, *New York 2140* not only reimagines the victim in hardboiled and neo-noir narratives, but also envisions the potential for a fruitful near-reality. In the texts discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this project, the rotting environment is mapped in a fragmented scale, demonstrating the extent of pollution and contamination that "poison and corrupt," but these texts are, ultimately, unable to clearly connect human and environmental violences (Scaggs 70). As we have seen, Jameson focuses his study of Chandler on the way he painted American life as "fragmentary pictures of setting and place" (3). For example, in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Towne's *The Two Jakes*, there is an implicit connection between environmental pollution and the cultivated landscape of upper-class Californians and the water and oil production industries. In these examples, the landscape and environment reflect a troubled moral response to the extractive culture of America at the time. While the private eye is investigating a crime, the narrative subtly draws our attention to details of the largely unnoticed environment, landscape, and urban setting. In short, the mapping of their environment and natural landscape in the hardboiled and neo-noir examples is limited to their capacity to be utilized to understand human injustices and moral corruption. In *New York 2140*, the landscape is core to the novel's focus on the Ponzi schemes, investigations, and other narrative plots. The eco-noir atmosphere and landscape is embedded within the narratives as its own noir character. Its powerful sense of agency in the narrative allows us to see the potential of a decaying atmospheric disposition. The eco-noir representation of such a relationship highlights both the degree to which criminal acts make environmental issues worse and the strength of the ecological victim to regain its resiliency. At one point, Amelia asks if

anyone has noticed “how black the water is,” hinting at the literally “noir” cast, the toxicity and oiliness of the water (253, 96). In the examples below, there is not just bleakness in the descriptions of New York, highlighted by the darkness in the city’s water, but also a glimmer of hope as reflected in lighter colours.

Mutt and Jeff establish an eco-noir atmosphere in their green-dark descriptions of the landscape, which highlights both the environment’s decay and its ability to heal if given aid. Notice, for example, how the black water is described in Mutt and Jeff’s section in Whitmanesque terms as they take in the “whitmanwonder” of the city: “O Manhattan! Lights squiggle off the black water everywhere below them. Downtown a few lit skyscrapers illuminate darker towers, giving them a geological sheen. It’s weird, beautiful, spooky.” Later, Jeff describes the city’s “dark pools, the underwater economy and all. We could dive in and disappear” (7). These “dark pools” are significant because they highlight the relationship between literal and economic dark pools: the dark pool that is New York City is submerged due to the rise in seawater levels, and the dark and devastating capitalist infrastructure. These complex dark pools are those which not only characters can get lost in, but also those with which the environment is infused. They make up the *noir* of the eco-noir atmosphere. Near the end of the novel, Mutt and Jeff make clear that, in releasing the computer bug and disrupting financialization through this process, “we’re trying to light up the dark pools” (607). The Citizen/City reinforces the same idea that Mutt and Jeff introduce when they describe the drowned city, with its “prismatically oily waters sloshing poisonously back and forth”: the oily-looking water and sky are toxic thanks to human actions (33). The animals who have returned to this environment, “the fish, the fowl, the oysters” are also poisoned, deformed, and “fatal to

ingest.” In short, these descriptions reinforce the pervasive toxicity and poison of the noir setting.

The First Pulse occurred because “carbon dioxide in the atmosphere traps heat in the atmosphere by way of the well-understood greenhouse effect,” as the citizen explains in an extended description of their decaying environment. The atmospheric quality of eco-noir is thus literalized in the novel’s persistent concern with the consequences of the toxification of the Earth’s atmosphere. The noir atmosphere of the deteriorating environment is mapped through human senses. In *New York 2140*, Stefan and Roberto’s section describes “the familiar stink of anoxia”, or nitrogen buildup, which “filled the air, one of the smells of the city, here at its nastiest (305). Mutt and Jeff describe the “dark blue of the rivers turned black with silt or yellow with runoff, or prismatic with leaking gas and oil.” The atmosphere becomes tangible: “the humidity was so great that the air grew visible” (443). The renewal of the seasons becomes a kind parody of itself, when in Spring, “Every living thing budded and the turbid water smelled like shit, the intertidal oozing goo and reeking at low tide, its slimy mud stippled by oyster beds and old dock pilings” (443). Stefan and Roberto describe their setting in ways that are strikingly similar to the Op’s description of Poisonville and Marlowe’s depiction of Los Angeles: the city is dripping in toxic waste, which is a trace of past, present, and future capitalist exploitative actions.

Unlike the Op and Marlowe, Stefan and Robert attribute beauty and potential life to this landscape when they say that “the slack river” without the sun is “a dark handsome blue,” that the sky is “mother-of-pearl” and lastly when they describe how “late-spring days got longer and the rooftops burst all green” (193, 388). Vlade underlines the *eco*, or

green/blue, to the *noir* atmosphere when he talks about how “the river was dark even a foot deep, as usual in the drowned shallows of the boroughs” in which his headlamp illuminates “nothing but estuarine particulates of various kinds—seaweed, dirt, little creatures, detritus” (96, 199). Like Stefan and Roberto, Vlade refers to the sky in more positive terms, it has “a green infused with black” (457). A few pages later, he notes that “the day got very dark, the sky black, the air under it green” (460). Taking the elevator up to the cupola, he has a view of the city and the buildings that “poke above the general murk of the lower city.” He perceives the urban landscape through the lens of atmospheric water, the rain “falling so hard it covered the windows with a wavery sheet of water that sometimes allowed him to see the city fairly well.” Like the above characters, Franklin also attributes some sense of greenery or beauty to the decaying landscape, when he observes from his boat “the black water sheeting over a rising tide, a bar of sunlight mirrorflaking<sup>23</sup> across the middle of it right to me” (21). In short, these examples demonstrate that we can either succumb to the toxicity that halts growth and perpetuates destruction or try to see some beauty in it.

In conclusion, *New York 2140* adapts noir’s realism, to quote Robinson, “in a way the world needs” (45). The novel further regenerates how we think of crimes and victims. It invites readers to consider a collective network to navigate mysteries concerning capitalism and our deteriorating natural environment. In cultivating a collective detective-ship, and in rhizomatically mapping an eco-noir atmosphere, Robinson’s novel provides readers with a unique fusion of genres to make real a sense of our imminent

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<sup>23</sup> The process of a mirror deteriorating due to excess water seeping into the crevices of the mirror.

environmental destruction. VanderMeer's *Hummingbird Salamander*'s collective detective-ship is made *weirder*, further drawing on nonhuman entities to rhizomatically map a poisonous eco-noir atmosphere.

### 3.8 *Hummingbird Salamander*: The Rhizome and the “Weird”

Like Robinson, Jeff VanderMeer fuses conventions of noir with cli-fi elements in his 2021 novel *Hummingbird Salamander* to situate a seemingly distant and feared future in the near-reality. VanderMeer's collective eco-noir network in this novel is imbued with his and his co-author Anne VanderMeer's<sup>24</sup> idea of a *weird* eco-noir collective, pushing Morton's weird ecology further and introducing a new element to my eco-noir methodology. The structure of the narrative also introduces the potential for weirdness in eco-noir's atmospheric disposition.

VanderMeer's novel follows an unnamed female protagonist and security consultant, “Jane Smith,” a generic appellation that recalls Hammett's Continental Op, as she investigates mysteries surrounding a taxidermy specimen of an extinct hummingbird salamander that was mysteriously left for her in a locker by a deceased woman named Silvina. Throughout her investigation, the protagonist uses an alias and obscures the name of the city in which she resides. Nevertheless, she acknowledges her role as a detective, or “private eye” (92). This novel is set in the near-present day world. The main character, in investigating the taxidermy, follows eco-terrorists who have set up something unknown and vast in scale. When a message from a dead woman, Silvina, leads the protagonist to a storage locker, she finds the taxidermy specimen. As Timothy

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<sup>24</sup> Anne VanderMeer is the founder of Buzzcity Press, editor of weird fiction, and critic. She and Jeff VanderMeer are married.

Clark argues, “the very presence of an animal can show up the fragility of speciesism and the violence of the practices that sustain it” (187), and this is certainly the case in *Hummingbird Salamander*. As the narrator investigates, she is led down a rabbit hole of mysteries that leads to an awareness of connections between the human and the nonhuman across the past, present, and future. In her investigation, the readers get an education about the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants. As she picks up clues and investigates the mysteries, she does so through “conversing” with extinct animals and dead humans.

VanderMeer fuses a narrative about our environment with conventions of hardboiled and neo-noir texts to create what he calls, in an interview with Meg Gardiner, “a thriller-mystery set ten seconds into the future, or as traveling through our present into the near future” (Gardiner). This comment helps to reinforce my argument in this chapter that, in relying on the realism of noir, eco-noir texts persuade us to imagine environmental crises as issues we will face soon, as opposed to a distant future. In another interview, VanderMeer further explains how he “adopts the attitude and accoutrements of the hard-boiled detective novel, set in a very near future of climate collapse” (Berry). VanderMeer promises readers “a lot of the dark absurdity and environmental themes as well as the usual thing—that I tend to write ‘messy’ protagonists who don’t easily fit into the world around them” (Gardiner). Like Robinson, VanderMeer envisions the “very near future of climate collapse.” In this eco-noir narrative, the cli-fi, or speculative, elements of the narrative situate the text in an often far-future while the realism of noir situates the novel in a near-reality.

We can expand upon the idea of the eco-noir with the VanderMeers' theory of the "Weird." The "weird" is, as they explain in *The Weird*, a type of fiction that provides "dark recognition of the unknown and the visionary" (2). Furthermore, it is "as much a *sensation*" of terror and awe as a "mode" of writing fiction that draws the reader's attention to an uncertain reality" (2). In the concluding analysis focusing on *Hummingbird Salamander*, I propose that we can further consider the weird nature of eco-noir in the same light that Morton says green noir is weird. For the VanderMeers, weird fiction involves characters having a dialogue with their setting (2). In addition, the VanderMeers describe contemporary weird vernacular as that which "replaces the supernatural [and science fictional] while providing the same dark recognition of the unknown" (2). I further develop my concept of the eco-noir, and its atmospheric disposition, by including their idea of the weird to emphasize how eco-noir texts favour a stronger element of noir (or "dark recognition") in contrast to the fantastical to heighten the near-reality of our deteriorating environment. This additional element allows us to better perceive the intricacies of eco-noir's dark and toxic atmosphere, and to even *feel* it as a sensation. I support this claim through my close reading of the unnamed narrator in *Hummingbird Salamander* and her weird eco-investigative collective.

In the above interview with Gardiner, VanderMeer talks about the unnamed narrator of this novel's unique relationship with eco-related mysteries: "seeking an immediacy about climate issues and the puzzle of why a dead woman is communicating with Jane, along with the mysterious forces working against her." He remarks that "one thing...mystery does, depending on the subject, is turn information into plot—clues, vital intel on a character, and much more. So, the form allowed me to push further in some ways"

(Gardiner). *Hummingbird Salamander* demonstrates the ecological weirdness of the setting by playing with borders separating both the human and the nonhuman as well as the generic borders taken up in cli-fi and noir texts. VanderMeer comments on the process of writing his 2009 novel *Finch* and how he experimented with generic fluidity. As he tells Gardiner,

when I was writing *Finch*, a noir fantasy novel, I studied a lot of books on the craft and art of writing thrillers and of writing mysteries. I found the specific applications of craft to this art form fascinating and they wound up influencing *Annihilation* as well...by the time it came to write *Hummingbird Salamander*, I was doing so from this reservoir of past experience with these kinds of elements.

(Gardiner)

The addition of the weird element further highlights the role that the conventions of the hardboiled and neo-noir play in shaping conversations about our natural environment. *Hummingbird Salamander* combines the weird with the realism of noir to instill a sense of urgency regarding tackling our environmental crisis. The weird can be further understood through seeing the links connecting the natural environment, nonhumans, and humans, thus leading to a weird rhizomatic method of mapping the environment.

Jonathon Turnbull's essay on "Weird" opens with a discussion of how recent scientific discoveries have made "visible interconnections between humans and nonhumans across micro and macro scales," something that is often "accompanied by a simultaneous sense of estrangement and fascination" (275). Such discoveries instill in us such a feeling of weirdness and a clearer understanding of our rhizomatic relationship to the nonhuman. However, VanderMeer's eco-noir narrative not only reinforces this feeling of weirdness



and our relationship to the nonhuman, but it does so in a literary context through the conventions associated with noir. This fusion heightens and makes more visible the links connecting us to the nonhuman.

VanderMeer creates a green detective to solve various mysteries within a toxic landscape. In *Hummingbird Salamander*, there is a weird green detective collective insofar as the unnamed narrator works with ghosts, specifically Silvina who sent the amateur detective the taxidermy of the hummingbird; disembodied deceased entities and embodied lifeless corpses are both key to the narrative. While the collective detective-ship in Robinson's novel is represented largely in the form of a human collective, the collective detective-ship in VanderMeer's novel is indicated by a weird coexistence with a human and nonhuman who existed in the past. The narrator is dealing not only with ghosts from a past, but also with the effects of the actions of a society that emanate from such a past. The hummingbird is at once a clue, a victim, and a nonhuman entity that the unnamed green detective relies on as a co-investigator. In other words, while VanderMeer's narrator is primarily conducting the investigation, she is investigating in a weird manner insofar as her aides are nonhuman and spectral beings of the past. The narrator is working with that "which does not belong" (Turnbull 275). She is faced with a mystery that leads her into a series of adventures that instill terror and wonder in both her and the reader. The ghosts, Silvina (as manifested through clues left by deceased characters), and the taxidermy of the bird bring a sense of ecological weirdness in the narrator's dystopian world.

The weird, as it connects the familiar and unfamiliar in a novel about the deteriorating environment, functions similarly to a rhizome with multiple offshoots that connect

everything together. Jane draws on deceased partners who, although they are a thing of the past, leave clues for her. These partners of the past are warning beacons for the future. In my reading of *Hummingbird Salamander*, I examine how conventions of hardboiled and neo-noir are reimagined to formulate a collective green detective dedicated to solving a mystery concerning her environment. Furthermore, I analyze how conventions of sub-genres of noir are used to depict a dystopian landscape in a way comparable to *New York 2140*.

### 3.9 The Hardboiled and Weird Female Green PI

In *Hummingbird Salamander* we encounter an amateur hardboiled female green detective who investigates largely independent of any other investigative human/living body. But the investigator is in an important sense not “private” because of the ways she interacts with nonhuman entities. This narrator investigates eco-crimes and eco-issues spanning decades that are perpetuated by the government and elite families. The novel depicts both the present toxic environment and past governmental and other forces that perpetuate such poisonousness. One way the narrator maps her environment, and its embedded violence, is through her formation of a weird collective detective-ship with the bird taxidermy, a dead person, and the environment around her, all the while maintaining her hardboiled demeanour. The weird collective structure of the green detective provides the reader with an additional lens through which to perceive the interconnectedness of crime, violence, and environmental blight as well the impending detrimental reality of our own world. This additional lens is focused on Silvina’s ghost and the taxidermy of the bird, with the living existence of both being temporally and spatially outside of the narrator’s world.

The investigator notes that she is first drawn to “the frisson of mystery and intrigue,” stimulated by her research about the hummingbird throughout the investigation (35). Information she reads includes descriptions of how “hummingbirds are aesthetic and aerobic extremists” and how the hummingbirds’ natural habitat is infringed upon and changed by human settlement: “Hummers evolved high in the Andes Mountains with progressive colonization of lower altitudes and expanded latitudes” (35). Even when she decides to abandon her investigation early in the narrative, she notes how this mystery continues to call her: “[I] left the mystery alone, did not tug on the string of it. But, all the while, the string was tugging at me...But, deep down, I knew I was going to follow the thread. I just didn’t realize how far that would take me” (41, 44). The mystery and the investigator have a weirdly reciprocal relationship, represented in the thread that pulls (and implicitly unravels) in both directions. Indeed, the metaphor used here suggests that each is also a “clue” for the other, since historically, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a “clue” is a ball of yarn formed by a winding thread, “in many more or less figurative applications, a fact, circumstance, or principle which, being taken hold of and followed up, leads through a maze, perplexity, difficulty, intricate investigation, etc.” (“Clue”).

She continues to develop this idea of a thread that pulls her towards the completion of her investigation throughout the novel. This thread can be understood as a link which connects her with Silvina and the nonhuman as her investigative partners. In utilizing imagery pertaining to threads, and in attributing a physical feeling to the thread, this excerpt makes clear the narrator’s connection to her atmosphere: the weird, green, collective, detective-ship can connect us to our atmosphere through sensations. In the

following excerpt, the narrator describes an illness that overcomes her as she considers “how many dead things haunt us in our daily lives:” “*As purses, handbags, shoes—even as heads on walls. Or as roadkill...The mind renders them as setting. But now I saw them everywhere—an ongoing, everyday exhibit of dead animals and their parts*” (100). Not only is the dead body at the heart of the novel’s investigation the non-human, but the evidence of violence against the animal world in everyday life is pervasive. The narrator continues,

As my illness progressed, over time, I would see also the complexity of what we took for granted in our landscapes and hidden lines of connection would attach to me until moving through the world was like being wrapped in chains. But it was the links, the chains, that made you free. Once you saw it all, you could never go back. Everything was alive. Overwhelming. I was so overwhelmed eventually.

Overcome. (100-101)

She describes lines, links, and chains in conjunction with complexities, hidden threads, and the animation of the nonhuman that we often overlook, that are hidden until “you see it all.” When you see it, as the narrator has, you begin to see the collective structure of humans and the nonhuman and gain a language made up of sensations to better understand the complexities of the surrounding atmosphere; this is what it means to be a part of a green collective detective-ship.

The narrator begins like most investigators, with information, a dead body, and an instinct to “follow the clues”: “but all I *had* was information at first. And a dead bird’s body” (38, 35). Her investigation of the taxidermy leads her to discover information about Silvina’s family. The family is rich and influential, much like the wealthy criminal

families discussed in earlier chapters of this project (47). Silvina's father Matias Vilcapampa, initiated, according to Silvina's manifesto, the murder of an animal rights activist who fought against wildlife trafficking in Argentina (48). Matias is an example of why, as the narrator notes, "crime" specific to environmental harm "was meant to be invisible in our system" (50). Matias "gave to environmental organizations" while also being "a major exploiter, extractor, and polluter, with his own private army of bodyguards, and ruthless tactics from a corresponding army of lawyers" (66). As such, Silvina's father is much like the patriarchs of Donald Willsson from *Red Harvest*, General Sternwood from *The Big Sleep*, and Noah Cross from *Chinatown* and *The Two Jakes*.

Silvina's family, namely her father, to many, "were not bad people, not even close. Pillars of the community. They believed in the future" (68). However, their actions, which they describe as "contributing to the future," actually "took the future away" (68). This is much like the implication I drew regarding Noah Cross' desire to own the future and its manifestation in his incestuous relationship with his daughter: the rape of his daughter Evelyn, and the subsequent birth of her daughter/sister, are linked to his exploitation of the natural environment. It is an embodiment of how he is 'screwing over' future generations. Although the narrator's core investigation in VanderMeer's novel concerns only Silvina and her family, her case takes her beyond the immediate link connecting such characters to the taxidermy of the hummingbird. Through this investigation, the narrator can bring to light various connections that help to map the deteriorating environment and how acts of violence can negatively impact the nonhuman.

The narrator situates herself as an amateur yet driven investigative expert. She notes how her knack for questioning others' investigative techniques existed prior to the present case in the narrative. For example, she comments how she does not believe the verdict of drowning in her brother's death (52). As she sets in motion her role as an investigator early in the novel, she even comments that she

had a vague idea of joining the police force, maybe one day become a detective. I could snap any number of men over my knee. I might stand out, but I would also look like someone who shouldn't be messed with. Be one of the boys. Pretend, at least. But what you face doesn't always work like that. Whatever's indirect. The thing your strength might not match up against, any more than a boxer understands how to fight a wrestler. (51)

Thus far, she has established her ability to discern clues and apply her keen sense of observation in investigating a mystery. She also echoes the hardboiled qualities of the language: it is fragmentary, in the first-person, uses vernacular language, is often only single syllable words, and maintains an ironic distance from what goes on around her while establishing intimacy with the reader. In addition to her investigative and physical prowess, the narrator is apathetic insofar as she does what she needs to do to complete her investigation without any distractions: "I put on my stoic face. Made the approaches I needed to, spoke to the people I needed to" (76). This comment is much like Inspector Gen's comments in Robinson's novel, when she acts like she is in a film noir at the mayor's party. The juxtaposition of *Hummingbird Salamander's* narrator's hardboiled language and physical strength makes it clear that she is self-conscious about her relationship to a masculine tradition of noir investigators. Other allusions to the

traditional masculine investigator's role include when she notes that she cannot sleep, when she visits a dive bar, when she chases shadows, and when she exhibits her physical strength through various action scenes (186, 187, 204, 207). These instances are important because the narrator is aware of the masculine tradition that she is re-generating into a feminine, weird, collective detective-ship.

There are other examples throughout the novel that make clear the narrator's awareness of the tradition of the hardboiled private eye that she relies on in honing her role as a green investigator in a weird collective. For example, she mentions her grandfather, Shot, who "took his cues from an idea of nasty men, things he learned in the old noir magazines he'd once collected or bad shows on TV" (147). The quotation makes clear a distinction she discerns within such narratives: she is a private investigator while her grandfather is akin to a gangster. Her knowledge of this tradition is further exemplified when she finds a mystery novel and begins to reminisce about how she would "play detective in creeks and in rivers, look under rocks like back in the day" (149, 249-250). The latter example about her performance as a detective makes clear her understanding of the roles of detectives and investigators stemming back to her childhood. These early investigations involve an exploration of the natural world; the roles of detective and naturalist are aligned. She continues this performance of the role of an investigator in the present-day narrative when she notes that "I spent that day pretending to be a private eye" (250).

Her investigative techniques are like the ones we often find associated with characters like the Op, Marlowe, and Gittes. The following description is almost a pastiche of the fragmented, visually-cued, object-oriented descriptions deployed in hardboiled fiction.

She sees the natural world as a set of potential clues she must sort through to make meaningful:

A flattened patch of earth, the grass yellowing. Behind a large oak tree. Perfect vantage to surveil the house. A single cigarette butt. A beer bottle, Belgian import, that might not have been related. A couple shoe prints in soft dirt. Deep imprints. Someone was very large or had stood there a long time. A tree branch had been snapped off and shoved into the ground. Boredom? A message? (102-103)

This description is synecdochic—a synecdoche is a device that represents a whole through its parts—but it is initially impossible to relate these parts to a coherent meaning. This example of her investigative techniques includes a close observation of her surroundings, from the natural to the unnatural (from the colour of the grass to the type of beer bottle found on the ground). In this scene, the narrator is investigating her backyard, wondering who was there and for what purpose. Even when a clue or observation might not be related to the identity of the culprit, she points it out to the reader. For example, why is it important that the grass is yellowing? Rather than beginning with the shoe prints and noting the potential height and weight of the culprit, the narrator begins with a description of their natural context. While the kind of details and style of writing are akin to hardboiled language, the order of depicting the crime scene (or scene containing a mystery to be solved) differs from such texts. This is an example of a rhizomatic mapping of the environment, and it places the atmospheric quality of eco-noir at the forefront of the narrative. In other words, she “tried to *see* things from the point of view of a private eye,” but by placing depictions of her natural environment that are seemingly unrelated



details to the mystery at the centre of the investigation, she is making the link between the green PI and the natural environment (115). The narrator thus begins to consider the broader landscape as tied to the crime scene. By introducing the natural environment before key clues at the crime scene, she dismantles the idea of the natural environment as a backdrop to the crime scene.

### 3.10 The Eco-Crime Scene and Olfactory Sensations

In *New York 2140*, the investigation is more directly tied to government and legally sanctioned entities, while in *Hummingbird Salamander*, the figure at the forefront of the investigation is nonhuman. In other words, while both texts deal with investigating the criminals driving the environmental crisis, in VanderMeer's text, the narrator is largely investigating the nonhuman victims, the taxidermies and natural environment. Rather than investigating the criminals first, the narrator begins by investigating the taxidermy that Silvina left for her. The hummingbird had gone extinct because of poaching, habitat loss, and a changing natural environment: "the wildlife trafficking cartels manufactured need—they told those inclined to buy that this or that animal was good luck for the next hip thing for the rising newly rich. They pried open for coffers of countries that would look the other way. They dealt in volume, so the inconvenience of a shipment or two caught at a border meant little to them" (41). The protagonist lists multiple causes for the extinction of the hummingbird but focuses on the wildlife trafficking cartels' manufacturing of 'need' to create a business for themselves by selling hummingbirds for people desiring wealth or luck. Creature becomes commodity. There is a clear resonance here with the Maltese falcon at the centre of Hammett's 1930 hardboiled novel which seems to be precious but turns out to be a fake. The statue of the bird has, not inherent

value, but value according to the competing desires of characters greedy to possess it. Its worth emerges from the hypocrisy of a Holy War that was “largely a matter of loot,” becoming a mere object of exchange “passed from hand to hand by such means is clearly the property of whoever can get a hold of it” (128). The commentary on the hummingbird’s extinction requires that the reader consider what the value of a species is, and why it is important. The narrator mentions a chain of criminals from the cartels to the countries “that would look the other way” and those at borders who would not look away, potentially mistreating the birds as opposed to returning them to their natural habitat. Thus, the cartels are merely one link in a chain of culprits who aided in the extinction of the hummingbird. This is like the form of culpability depicted in *New York 2140* in which there is no clear single criminal entity.

The narrator’s fascination with the hummingbird continues to grow. She notes that the bird “went into a kind of suspended animation, or “microhibernation,” each night due to the high number of calories it needed: “torpor decreases their metabolism by 90%, their heart rate by 15 times, and their body temperature from over 100 degrees Fahrenheit to the ambient temperature” (45). She focuses on the uniqueness of the hummingbirds, specifically their “unique defensive toxin” which make them the goal of a capitalist “quest to harness their power without the toxicity” (345). In doing so, the narrator makes clear why this species was exploited. The heightened commodification of the hummingbird’s value resulted, ironically, in the elimination of the species.

The narrator delves deep into the victim’s characteristics and studies the hummingbird to the degree that she even dreams of it:

I kept having a dream. Every night. The hummingbird flew down like a tiny god, to the back deck of our house. Some fairyland version, glowing phosphorescent in a cascade of emerald, sapphire, and hot pink. As if revealing a true self as it descended steep from on high. Looking the whole time as if being moved seamlessly by an invisible hand from an invisible point in the sky to hovering position above me.

The hummingbird gave me what I can only describe as an imperious or even contemptuous look, hovering there weightless. It pierced me. Found me wanting. (58)

This dream highlights the impossibility of the hummingbird thriving again, appearing like a “fairy tale” hummingbird with “god”-like qualities. In other words, the hummingbird has forever transcended the material world. The contemptuous look the bird gives the narrator signals both a disdain for humans, but also a plea to help solve the mystery involving the taxidermy.

In her investigation, she begins to map the nonhuman as victims of human actions. This mapping is advanced by the various descriptions of the natural environment and its state of decay through her olfactory senses, which contribute to the noir as atmospheric conditions. The narrator relies on her sense of smell to provide the reader with a map of her dystopian reality and toxic atmosphere. The most common examples that include her use of her sense of smell are found in places, and in relation to things, that smell like tar and chemicals. Consider that when the “grass grew thick and tangled at the margins,” the narrator smells “tar and chemicals from no visible source” (335). Likewise, “the air often smelled electric, almost chemical, and maybe the green-gray would never go away,” an

impression which, like the smell of tar and chemicals, has no “visible source” (276). The invisibility associated with the smell of chemicals demonstrates the pervasiveness of the toxicity of her environment. In one example, when she is investigating a warehouse, she sees taxidermies and depicts the setting as if it were a crime scene: “dead bodies. Skins. The dead. Fur, feathers, scales. Dull glass eyes staring back at me. A confusion and chaos that made me take a step back, nauseated” (195). This morbid warehouse has a “chemical stench” which is described as “the underlying scent of the real,” a trace “of what they had been alive” (195). This chemical stench makes clear the poisonous conditions that probably resulted in the animals’ deaths. Thus, although this chemical smell is invisible, it is not only pervasive and real, highlighting the toxicity of the narrator’s natural environment, but it is an invisible trace (or link) that connects the narrator’s present to humans’ exploitative behaviour.

### 3.11 Conclusion

Cli-fi narratives such as *New York 2140* and *Hummingbird Salamander*, regenerate the conventions of noir and its realism to show readers what the world will soon look like if we do not address our environmental crisis. In doing so, these texts are no longer cli-fi, but rather eco-noir novels. They demonstrate a shift from the surface level allusion to investigator, violence, and crime conventions of noir to create the collective private investigators and to map human crimes and their consequences for the non-human world. Embedded in these eco-noir stories is an enhanced way of understanding the reality (rather than merely fictional or speculative possibility) of crimes against nature. Thus, this fusion of genres is a useful ecocritical tool that provides readers with a unique

method to tackle environmental concerns and provides us with a unique method to reassess our relationship with the nonhuman and our past, present and near-reality.

## Chapter 4: Afterword

### 4.1 Introduction: Eco-noir *Han*

In this concluding chapter, I argue that my dual concept of eco-noir as a subgenre and methodology can allow critics to follow cross-cultural and global trajectories.

Throughout this project, I have traced the history of the development of American eco-noir from American hardboiled and neo-noir fictions and have shown how these latter subgenres reflect back upon and illuminate the atmospheric quality of their original sources. Here I expand upon this analysis, arguing that for writers and filmmakers outside of the American cultural context, eco-noir has become a viable lens to represent and analyze global environmental catastrophes from their own geopolitical perspectives. In short, I am interested in the cross-cultural possibilities of expanding the scope of the eco-noir as a sub-genre and ecocritical methodology. In its ability to blend genres of detective fiction and climate fiction, eco-noir “atmosphere” appears to be a particularly useful and adaptable aesthetic. Like global environmental disasters, eco-noir can transcend geographical boundaries. The example I offer as a kind of test case in this conclusion considers the conventions of American eco-noir as they extend to a South Korean export: Netflix’s 2021 television series *The Silent Sea*. This series offers a paradigmatic example of how eco-noir can cross borders and adapt to non-Western cultural contexts. Not only does this series display elements of American eco-noir (moral ambiguity, systemic guilt and decay, and environmental degradation), it combines these elements with uniquely South Korean characteristics—particularly the affect of *Han*, which I will discuss further below.

Of course, eco-noir was never an exclusive American invention to begin with. In Chapter 3, I introduced the idea of eco-noir as the American offshoot of Nordic Noir, thus hinting at the idea that noir is not only malleable in its generic conventions, but also in its ability to form cross-cultural conversations. *The Silent Sea* is exemplary in its demonstration of how eco-noir works across genres in different cultural contexts. Like American noir, to quote Stephen Teo in “Darker Than Dark,” Korean noirs “have attained their deepest degree of blackness” with Korean artists treating noir as a “critical form” that transmits a “warning ‘about the disastrous social issue of a felt mutation in the structures of power’” (149-150). Often, as Teo relates, Korean noir focuses on the perpetuation of unequal power structures and their oppressive effects on ordinary people. An example of this can be found in Bong Joon-ho’s 2003 film *Memories of Murder*, which takes the “daily life in the late 1980s” as a core noir figure that highlights “the darkest years of Korea’s military dictatorship” (150). Teo links the sorrowful mood of Bong’s film to the affect of *Han*, suggesting the fit between this affect and the atmosphere of noir.

In his essay “Science Fiction and Postmemory Han in Contemporary Korean American Literature,” Seo-Young Chu explains how *Han* has “no equivalent in English” that references “a Korean form of grief”: “All Koreans feel it...[it] cannot be neatly analyzed” (97). *Han* can range from “bitter-sweet longing to despair that wracks your insides like fire” (97). Most interesting to Chu’s analysis is how *Han* is not just a form of individual anguish or despair but a collective one: “a compressed feeling of suffering caused by injustice,” often related to Korea’s military conquest and having to “shut up and listen to bigger countries” such as Japan (97). I extend this communal feeling of anguish to include not only a feeling of deep-seated sorrow over political and historical situations,

but also as a response to the unfolding and future environmental crisis depicted in cultural texts like *The Silent Sea*. While *Han* and American noir have distinct cultural origins, their convergence through the idea of affect provides a captivating lens for comprehending the potential for cross-cultural exchange in the eco-noir subgenre. Noir and *Han* can combine to accentuate the tones and melancholic settings, reflecting the emotional depth inherent in each concept. By incorporating the affect of *Han* into my understanding of a toxic eco-noir atmosphere, we can understand how both toxicity and negative emotions poison the individual and community in Korean noir and eco-noir: *Han* is a collective affect articulating a shared sense of decaying space that permeates the lived experiences of all Koreans.

Expanding the general concept of noir as atmospheric, developed in relation to American fiction, through the Korean concept as *Han* advances both the cross-cultural perspectives on noir and the already established scholarly discussions about its affective dimensions. For example, Breu and Hatmaker introduce their book of essays, *Noir Affect*, by stipulating that “an understanding of noir” is “characterized by negative affect,” such as anxiety (3). Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo put this sense of “floating anxiety”—neither strictly historical nor merely psychological or fatalistic—at the heart of their psychoanalytical study of noir, *Noir Anxiety*. Noir affect can thus be understood to “inflect (or infect) not only the characters and situations dramatized by the noir text, but also its formal dimensions and the cultural and critical discourses about noir” (3-4). While Breu and Hatmaker extend their idea of noir affect to “the different spaces of noir’s global florescence,” they do not address specifically the presence of *Han* in Korean noir. The atmospheric element, understood in conjunction with the affective concept of



*Han*, demonstrates how eco-noir texts, such as *The Silent Sea*, can present the impact of environmental blight beyond the visual, evoking a complex emotional experience consisting of feelings of grief and frustration. The brief analysis of *The Silent Sea* I offer here addresses the emotional charge attending the darkness of environmental blight that the series depicts. *The Silent Sea* not only represents the suspense, mystery, and darkness inherent in eco-noir, but also the somber emotions quintessential to *Han*. It shows one way in which the universality of environmental challenges can be filtered through a particular cultural context.

The transnational co-production of *The Silent Sea*, a “K-drama” produced by Netflix, not only showcases the adaptability and regeneration of the noir genre within the South Korean context, but also frames ecological issues as both cross-cultural and cosmic dilemmas, unfolding on, and beyond, Earth. By infusing a sense of *Han* into the narrative, *The Silent Sea* adds a layer of emotional depth to the exploration of the specific environmental crisis of drought. It offers viewers a unique expression of the increasingly widespread affective disorders related to global climate change, one that resonates with viewers outside of the Korean cultural context. The cross-cultural contamination embodied in *The Silent Sea*—in which the darkness of American noir becomes the darkness of *Han*—reflects both the universal impact of climate change *and* the particular ways in which it affects particular cultures.

#### 4.2 Introduction to *The Silent Sea* and Eco-Noir *Han*

*The Silent Sea* is directed by Korean director Choi Hang-yong, who also wrote and directed short film *The Sea of Tranquility* (2014), on which the 2021 series is based. The

series follows astrobiologist Doctor Song Ji-an, team leader Han Yoon-Jae, the head engineer Lieutenant Ryu Tae-Seok, Doctor Kim Sun, and Luna 073. Doctor Song Ji-an and the rest of the personnel are selected for a mission to the moon in which they must attend to an abandoned research facility, Balhae station. The team's sole mission is to retrieve a sample, the contents of which are classified. The team is thus completely "in the dark" about exactly what they are looking for and why. This collective lack of knowledge exacerbates the *Han* to which the team is subject. While at the station, Doctor Song takes on the role of a type of private investigator who insists that the officials commanding the mission have concealed information regarding their objective for the team. Doctor Song's string of investigations leads to others working with her to unravel the secrets of their mission. It is discovered that the sample they are after consists of a new element that mimics water, something referred to as "lunar water," that can potentially solve Korea's, if not the Earth's, water shortage crisis.

*The Silent Sea* exhibits several salient features that contribute to the exploration of environmental and noir themes discussed in my project. Namely, the series is a vivid dystopian imagining of a near-reality whereby water scarcity has become a global issue. It features elements of mystery and suspense, dark visuals and atmospheric lighting, and other stylistic choices that create both a foreboding noir mood and a toxic eco-noir atmosphere. Moreover, the series incorporates visual cues reminiscent of classic American noir aesthetics such as flashbacks, mysterious plotlines, and predominantly black-and-white scenes on the moon. However, in stark contrast to noir films, the black-and-white setting of the series is not simply as a result of using black and white film stock, or an effect added post-filming, but rather arise organically from the natural colors

of space, the moon, and the station: the palette of the mise-en-scene is often virtually monochromatic. Arguably, using conventions of noir to exemplify the extent to which environmental crises permeate our atmosphere helps to emphasize the complexities of collective suffering, grief, and sorrow. This approach not only pays homage to the classic genre but also underscores the series' commitment to portraying a genuine, albeit fictional, lunar environment through the lens of South Korean eco-noir. This fusion of visual, narrative, and affective elements reinforces Mcracken's idea of film noir, wherein the narrative and the prevailing mood are interconnected elements (170). The series couples American noir elements with the affect of *Han* to instill in viewers a heightened emotional state of awareness regarding the impending consequences of unchecked exploitation of the natural environment.

#### 4.3 Collective Detectiveships, Lunar Water, and Luna 073

When Earth runs out of water, the collective detectiveship is forced by its government to colonize the moon and harvest lunar water to sustain their capitalist greed and human survival. The collective detectiveship of *The Silent Sea* also serves to illuminate the shared deep-seated sorrow and grief of *Han* felt in response to the depletion, and exploitation, of natural resources. The series' collective detectiveship is akin to the rhizomatic collective investigative groups found in Robinson and VanderMeer's novels. There is no single private investigator in the series since all the team members work in a collective to unravel the mysteries of the sample. The rhizomatic collective extends into the narrative structure as there is no single beginning, middle/centre, or end to the plot lines. For example, there is no explanation of the cause of the drought or when the experiments were conducted on lunar water to test the viability of the new element, and

there is no clear ending or definitive conclusion to the future of the resources or the surviving members.

We can broaden our understanding of those who can experience the impact of *Han* to consider the *Han* of lunar water. This expansion facilitates a deeper recognition of the interconnectedness between human emotions and the collective sorrow and resentment of diverse ecosystems. By broadening the scope of *Han* to encompass the resentment and grief represented by the figure of lunar water, the series suggests that nature, too, can bear the weight of collective sorrow. Lunar water “fights back” against its exploitation by humans in much the same way water seems to retaliate in *Chinatown* and *New York 2140*. This is evidenced by lunar water’s ability to infinitely and rapidly multiply when in contact with human blood/living cells, eventually leading to the death of the host by drowning. Consider, for example, Soochan’s death in episode two. Soochan dies because of having come into direct physical contact with lunar water. He violently vomits water and eventually dies from drowning caused by an overproduction of lunar water in his body. The scene of his body spewing water is an uncanny scene of abjection – he seems to die, not of thirst, but of a superabundance of water in his system. The government’s need to exploit lunar water backfires as the substance seems to attack human beings by inducing a violent drowning. These scenes of violence make clear that lunar water is unassimilable, demonstrating that not everything in the natural world is exploitable. The spectacle of bloody violence and thrill found in early American noir is transformed in *The Silent Sea* into a weird one that includes the retaliatory potential of water. The watery atmosphere so typical of classic noir’s bleak rain and fog is here literally internalized within the human body, with deadly effects. In a sense, this is a complete reversal of the

“background” environmental desecration described in Chapter 1 – rather than existing in the shadows of the noir narrative, the environmental milieu here is represented in resurgence, in effect acting as both victim and murderer. These scenes of elemental violence indicate that lunar water represents the *Han* of nature. Human beings affect nature, but nature affects human beings. Thus, these scenes invite us to consider the *Han* of nature. In other words, it is as if lunar water is expressing nature’s sorrow. This expansion of *Han* challenges the anthropocentric perspective, acknowledging that nature and the nonhuman can experience a form of collective suffering that is akin to (if not fully manifest of) subjectivity. In a trope that might be described as a reverse pathetic fallacy, environmental *Han* prompts viewers to consider the emotional toll exacted on the environment by human actions, fostering a deeper connection between human emotions and ecological crises.

While lunar water is fighting back against the humans’ exploitation of it, a human/nonhuman hybrid, Luna 073, demonstrates an ambiguous answer to whether humans will leave the lunar water alone (thus rewarding its resilience) or continue to exploit it as an object. The series portrays Luna 073 as a victim of both human actions and broader societal negligence toward the environment. She suggests a continuity between human and nonhuman suffering. Luna 073 is a weird and uncanny nonhuman, as well as a victim of government, corporate, and everyday citizens’ greed. The infliction of scientific tests on Luna 073 creates a character who helps viewers reconsider what it means to commit acts of violence against natural environments. Luna 073 has biologically evolved with enhanced capabilities. Luna 073 is the only clone (out of 73) who has survived the experimentation process pertaining to the usability of lunar water

by humans. Luna 073 is immune to the effects of lunar water, and thus able to consume it without consequences.

Luna 073 is both a conventional subject (a human) and an object (in being exploited as a scientific experiment to ensure immunity to the deadly effects of lunar water). Unlike lunar water, Luna does not fight back, but is rather trying to survive on a station now occupied by the investigative team. When Doctor Song eventually initiates good relations with Luna 073, the remaining team members (Doctor Song and Doctor Hong Ga-Young), all of whom are female, escape the station, which is overflowing with lunar water, and take refuge on the surface of the moon. At the conclusion of the series, viewers are left with the image of Luna 073 staring at Earth. While lunar water is a victim that fights back, Luna 073 is a warning of future victims. The final scene highlights the ambiguous future in store for humanity if we continue to exploit the nonhuman to reproduce the exact or similar conditions that resulted in their current circumstances. Luna 073 is a young female, a beacon of hope for a future in which children can grow and flourish, but she is also a weird clone, a warning of imminent, and additional, environmental crises if humans continue their exploitative behaviour. This inconclusive ending resonates with the uncertain future that is in store for Katherine Mulwray/Kitty at the end of *The Two Jakes*, in which she carries forward the legacy of her politically, genetically, and criminally corrupted family. The uncertainty surrounding her future and the broader implications for humanity evoke a sense of shared anxiety and sorrow, aligning with the emotional terrain captured by the affect of *Han*.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This brief concluding analysis of *The Silent Sea* not only demonstrates the adaptability of eco-noir to different cultural contexts, but it also calls for further work in the Korean context specifically, given the rich tradition of Korean noir cinema (the filmographies of Bong Jo-Hoon and Park Chan-Wook would provide a wealth of material in this regard). Moreover, the depiction and expression of *Han* in *The Silent Sea*'s eco-noir offers a way to reconceptualize the scope and range of noir affect, especially in relation to the collective sense of increasing environmental blight. By employing eco-noir, the narrative of a work like *The Silent Sea* not only directs viewers' attention to the urgency of imminent environmental collapse but also encourages a re-evaluation of humanity's exploitative stance toward natural resources. In this project, I have attempted to provide scholars of noir with a new tool for (re)examining the genre as it has mapped fictional environments—the concept of the subgenre of eco-noir. This concept can provide noir scholars a new perspective on the developmental history of the genre, its forms, conventions, symbols, and affects. It can also provide ecocritical scholars new insight into the cultural, political, and affective dimensions of the human response to climate catastrophe.

I conclude *The Ecology of American Noir* by making clear that my outlined methodology and terminology in this project do not solely extend to South Korean filmmaking. The inclusion of *The Silent Sea* is not intended to establish a limiting boundary but rather to showcase the adaptability and versatility inherent in the conceptual framework presented in my project regarding noir and eco-noir. I hope that other critics may apply and adapt my work in any number of directions, and across artistic media and cultural contexts. In

other words, in using the foundation laid in this project, I invite critics to transcend disciplinary and cultural boundaries, as well as to reconsider the discourse surrounding noir and eco-noir and the ways in which they can enrich our understanding of themes in a global and interconnected context.



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**Publications:**

Forthcoming chapter in *The Crossroads of Crime Writing*, Anthem Press, (2024), edited by Meghan P. Nolan and Rebecca Martin: ““Dark Waters”: Eco-Noir in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*.”

Forthcoming chapter in *Outlander as Crime Fiction*, McFarland, (2024), edited by Erin E. MacDonald: “Epistemophilia and Landscapes: Claire Randall as a Metaphysical Sleuth in *Outlander*.”

Published article in *The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts* (IAFA), (2023), edited by Haerin Shin and Sang-Keun Yoo: “Eco-Noir in Netflix’s *The Silent Sea*,” <http://www.fantastic-arts.org/jfa/jfa-34-2-focused-issue-newtrospection/>

Published article in *Response Journal*, Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA), (November, 2021), "The Animistic and Uncanny Representation of Nature in *Jordskott*," <https://responsejournal.net/issue/article/animistic-and-uncanny-representation-nature-jordskott>

Published article in *Black Mask Magazine*, (April 2019), “The Evolution of the Femme Fatale in Raymond Chandler’s *The Little Sister*,” <https://blackmaskmagazine.com/product-tag/katrina-younes/>

Published article in the *Western Journal of Legal Studies*, (February 2018): “Prosecutor v Ongwen: Examining the Fate of Young Girls Abducted by the LRA,”

<https://www.wjlschambers.com/single-post/2018/02/26/Prosecutor-v-Ongwen-Examining-the-Fate-of-Young-Girls-Abducted-by-the-LRA>

Published article in Harvard Law School’s *The Case Studies Blog*, (January 2018):

“Somalia Simulation,” <https://blogs.harvard.edu/hlscasestudies/2018/01/19/discerning-the-interests-and-priorities-of-diverse-stakeholders/>

#### **Conferences and Guest Lectures:**

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Presenter at the American Studies Association (ASA), November 2023, Montreal Quebec, “Noiring Chinatown.”

Presenter at the Canadian Association of American Studies (CAAS), October 2022, virtual: “Eco-Noir in Netflix’s *The Silent Sea*.”

Presenter at The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA), October 2022, “The Intersection of Climate Fiction and American Noir in South Korean Pop Culture.”

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Two Guest Lectures for Western University’s Film Studies 2159B course, “Disney Dream Factory,” March 2019: I conducted a guest lecture on Wartime Disney shorts and features and a second guest lecture on the 1982 film *TRON* as a Disney production in the Bronze/Dark Era.

Two Guest Lectures for Western University’s English 2074F course, “Mystery and Detective Fiction,” October 2018: For my first lecture, I presented on writing and editing essays. For my second lecture, I presented on the representation of the femme fatale in Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Big Sleep* (1939).