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A Reckless Verisimilitude: The Archive in James Ellroy's Fiction

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The archive as both plot element and narrative presentation factors significantly into the work of James Ellroy's novels in the L.A. Quartet and USA Underworld Trilogy series. This article examines the important role of the archive as a source of information and evidence that Ellroy's characters utilize in their attempts at either maintaining or attacking the status quo. Through these novels, Ellroy conveys the potential power archives wield over the trajectory of history and our understanding of it by demonstrating how the historical record is often shaped in favor of the powerful. Yet even if the archive is a manifestation of the power narratives that dominate society in any given time, it also holds the potential to reveal truths that disrupt that power.

Introduction: Archives, Power, and Literature

In his 2009 work on archives and social justice, Rand Jimerson captured the dominant strand of modern archival scholarship and theory by describing the historical intersection of recorded information, political power, and social memory. According to Jimerson, documents and archives have been used repeatedly to consolidate the power and authority of the state and other powerful groups in society: "Thus, the emphasis of records as agents of truth needs to be examined within a political context. The power conferred by knowledge makes records creation and preservation a significant locus for political influence in society. Archives thus need to be evaluated as centers of power" (129). Much of this power derives from the inherent nature of archives, which are constructed using surrogates of memory (in place of actual memory) that interpret the past to reflect certain perspectives (Jimerson 2009). Long before historians, pundits, and artists had a chance to craft the initial drafts of history, the archival record was being shaped to fit a set of values deemed important by powerful individuals and institutions.

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The notion of power as it relates to memory, history, and the documentary record has been explored periodically in creative literary work, especially following the rise of large-scale totalitarianism in the twentieth century. European novelists like George Orwell and Milan Kundera blurred the lines between political reporting and fiction, using personal stories to demonstrate the conditions of a world in which power is gained or lost through control over written records and personal memory (Jimerson 2009). The ability of the state or other powerful interests to control the future is often predicated on its success at defining the past. Like most notable social commentators, Orwell and Kundera needed only to observe the world around them to see how the Nazi and Soviet regimes sought to align the historical record with their imperial missions. Similar critiques of American power have emerged in post-war American literature, particularly in genre fiction dealing with government conspiracies, military adventure, law and order procedurals, and political history. Many of these stories include the archive as a plot element and explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the importance of records and information as evidence and the ability of archives to illuminate hidden truths.¹

This article discusses the archive as represented in James Ellroy's most fully realized fictional worlds: the L.A. Quartet (*The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *White Jazz*) and the Underworld USA Trilogy (*American Tabloid*, *The Cold Six Thousand*, and *Blood's A Rover*). In this series of consecutive novels, the archive plays an important role as a source of information and evidence that characters utilize in their attempts at either maintaining or attacking the status quo. The archive contains the darkest of secrets and the most vindictive of plans; everybody has something to hide and everybody can be gotten to. Throughout the series, the archive most often emerges as a wedge used by characters to compromise others, serving as a constant reminder that the past is irrevocable. But perhaps more consequentially, and like Orwell and Kundera before him, Ellroy's writing conveys the potential power archives wield over the trajectory of history and our understanding of it by demonstrating how the relationship between records and memory shapes the public consensus on specific events in the past, often favoring the powerful. The archive is a manifestation of the power narratives that dominate society in any given time, but it also holds the potential to reveal truths that disrupt that power.

The Physical and Intellectual Archive: Plot and Narrative in the L.A. Quartet

The novels in the L.A. Quartet are works of historical fiction in the broad sense, but they incorporate elements of noir detective fiction, hard-boiled police procedurals, and pulpy sex-crime paperbacks. The densely layered story lines move from book to book, re-circulating the themes of official corruption, terrible family secrets, racial and class strife, and characters operating in a world of moral ambiguity. The main protagonists are invariably cops, lawyers, or private investigators interacting with heavy-handed departmental brass, ruthless attorneys, ambitious politicians, psychotic gangsters, career criminals, entertainment industry bottom feeders, and all other types who inhabit the unclear boundary between good and evil in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles.² The bookends in the Quartet, *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz*, are written in the first-person voice, while the remaining works (and those in the Underworld USA Trilogy) are written in third-person omniscient, each installment typically following three main protagonists whose paths interweave.³

Beginning with the L.A. Quartet, the archive or many archives are notable primarily as collections of records and documents with an identifiable provenance and location. Most often these are police file cabinets, evidence rooms, bank vault “dirt” stashes, and other ostensibly secure repositories. The records are utilized by the characters as an integral part of the action and storyline, and they exist in a way that is simultaneously graphical and intellectual. Documents are integrated into the narrative on the page as discrete records and records series, helping to expedite the plot by providing a textual account of actions, motivations, and facts in a particular format or genre such as news copy, memoranda, letters, recordings, transcripts, and journal entries.

These archives serve practical and personal ends for the characters. In *The Black Dahlia*, a fictionalized account of the infamous and unsolved 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short, Detective Dwight Bleichert encounters a sort of archival shrine that his partner has constructed to the victim in an obsessive search for justice:

I checked out room 204 at the El Nido Hotel, hoping for some kind of a message, some kind of a clue... The room was a typical Hollywood bachelor flop: Murphy bed, sink, tiny closet. But the walls were adorned with Betty Short portrait pictures, newspaper and magazine photos, horror glossies from 39th & Norton, dozens of them enlarged to magnify every gruesome detail. The bed was covered with cardboard boxes – an entire detective’s case file, with carbons of miscellaneous memos, tip lists, evidence indexes, field interrogation and questioning reports all cross-filed alphabetically... The bulk of the information was staggering, the manpower behind it more staggering, the fact that it was all over one silly girl the most staggering of all (Ellroy 1987, 180).

In the follow-up novel, *The Big Nowhere*, one of the main protagonists, LA County Sherriff’s Department Deputy Danny Upshaw, becomes obsessed with solving a brutal sex crime that eventually links him into a wider criminal conspiracy involving corrupt cops, gangster-run unions, and an anti-Communist crusade within the Hollywood studio system. Upshaw’s case is ultimately made by connecting the paper trail, but this comes with great difficulty:

There were six cabinets full of them: musty folders stuffed with occurrence reports, mugshots clipped to the first inner page. The filing was not alphabetical, and there was no logic to the penal code placements – homosexual occurrences were lumped with straight exhibitionism and child molestation; misdemeanants and felons brushed against each other. Danny scanned the first two files in the top cabinet and snapped why the system was so sloppy: the men on this squad wanted this wretched data out of sight and out of mind (Ellroy 1987, 183-184).

Sifting through vast amounts of records and information is one of the primary obstacles that Ellroy’s protagonists encounter. This is further complicated by the nature of records creation and recordkeeping, which are subject to the disparate prejudices, competencies, and motivations of many individuals and institutions. The following section from *The Big*

Nowhere illustrates this point:

Danny bolted out of his cubicle and back to the records alcove adjoining the squadroom. One battered cabinet held the division's Vice and sex offender files – West Hollywood crime reports, complaint reports, arrest reports and trouble call sheets dating back to the station's opening in 1937. Some of the folders were filed alphabetically under 'Arrestee'; some under 'Complainant'; some numerically by 'Address of Occurrence.' Some held mugshots, some didn't; gaps in the 'Arrestee' folders indicated that the arrested parties had bribed deputies into stealing reports that might prove embarrassing to them – and West Hollywood was only a small fraction of County territory. Danny spent an hour scanning 'Arrestee' reports... knowing it was a long shot to keep him busy... The slipshod paperwork – rife with misspellings, smudged carbons, and near illiterate recounting of sex crimes – had him to the point of screaming at LASD incompetence (Ellroy 1987, 75-76).

Records and archives also fulfill a voyeuristic aspect of investigative work and intelligence gathering, something that is revisited throughout the Quartet and the Trilogy. In *The Big Nowhere*, Lieutenant Mal Considine culls through backlogs of federal House Un-American Activities Committee files for information that he intends to use to pressure witnesses into testifying against fellow-traveler subversives: "The dirt in the files had him riled up like back in the Administrative Vice days, when he put surveillance on the girls before they took down a whorehouse – the more you knew about who they were the better chance you had to get them... after forty-eight hours of paper prowling, he felt like he had a pulse..." (Ellroy 1987, 84).

Characters and storylines originating in *The Black Dahlia* and *The Big Nowhere* continue through *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz* with various archives and stores of documents playing an integral role in breaking cases, understanding the motives behind heinous crimes, and settling personal vendettas between departmental rivals. In *L.A. Confidential*, Sergeant Edmund Exley prepares for his promotion to the Detectives Bureau using the evidence scrapbook from his celebrated father's glory case—a grisly series of child murders from twenty years earlier that works its way back into a current investigation:

Ed drove to his apartment, read, remembered. The scrapbook held clippings arranged in chronological order; what the newspapers didn't tell him he'd burned into his memory ... [Exley's father] keeps copies of the death photos; he shows them to his policemen sons – so that they will know the brutality of crimes that require absolute justice (Ellroy 1990, 47-48).

The notion of archives as a wedge against enemies turns up repeatedly throughout Ellroy's novels. In *L.A. Confidential*, Exley's chief departmental nemesis, Officer Bud White, maintains a file on a series of prostitute homicides that he intends to solve to ease his own conscience and as a balance against Exley's growing prestige. In another instance, Sergeant Jack Vincennes hoards photographic evidence from a pornography investigation that

connects to wider criminal conspiracies. Vincennes later becomes the victim of an extortion plot by a journalist with a stash of documentary evidence detailing the truth surrounding an “accidental” homicide from Vincennes’ past. At the book’s climax, Exley risks life and limb to uncover a cache of files that nullifies an opponent in the District Attorney’s office and eventually clears the way for his promotion to LAPD’s Chief of Detectives: “Ed laid a folder on his desk. ‘Sid Hudgens had a file on you. Contribution shakedowns, felony indictments you dismissed for money. He’s got the McPherson tank job documented, and Pierce Patchett had a photograph of you sucking a male prostitute’s dick. Resign from office or it all goes public’” (Ellroy 1990, 478).

The destruction and rebuilding of the archive is a recurring theme in Ellroy’s novels. This is first introduced in *The Big Nowhere*, when Sergeant Buzz Meeks undertakes a personal kamikaze mission to irrevocably alter the historical record:

A flick of the overhead light: the living room jarring white – walls, tables, cartons, shelves, and odd mounds of paper ... a once in a lifetime shot at the political moon. Graphs and charts and thousands of pages of coerced testimony. Boxes of photographs with linked faces to prove treason. A big fuckload of lies glued together to prove a single theory that was easy to believe because believing was easier than wading through the glut of horseshit to say, “Wrong.” Buzz doused the walls and shelves and tables and stacks of paper with gasoline. He soaked the... photos. He ripped down graphs, emptied the cans on the floor and made a gas trail out to the porch. He lit a match, dropped it and watched the white whoosh into red and explode (Ellroy 1988, 405-406).

In *White Jazz*, Lieutenant Dave Klein is an irredeemably corrupt cop who must manipulate the documentary record to placate his criminal and police overlords, and to keep from being implicated in a federal probe into organized crime in South Los Angeles. Klein is assigned to investigate a burglary in return for his superior officer (Exley) destroying a coroner’s file with evidence tagging Klein for murder. He decides to find a fall-guy for the burglary and pores over his options of frameable candidates from the Administrative Vice department’s “pervert file.” Klein later sets fire to a cache of files in a bank-deposit box to destroy homicide evidence against his love interest and to curry favor with certain members of the LAPD brass whom the files also implicate in widespread criminal malfeasance. Just as the noose is tightening around Klein’s neck, he escapes to Mexico but only after chronicling the extent of his crimes and various sins of the LAPD, then forwarding this evidence to the press. However, the information is quashed by forces within the Los Angeles political power structure and the book’s epilogue details how the central players in the web of criminal conspiracies in the Quartet managed to avoid justice and flourish in spite of their misdeeds.

L.A. Confidential and *White Jazz* convolute and eventually resolve the overarching plotlines from the previous novels, but they also represent a stylistic evolution. *L.A. Confidential* finds Ellroy utilizing larger sections of the text to tell the story through non-protagonist perspectives, mostly through the presentation of official police reports and news copy. These sections give the reader multiple viewpoints and conflicting accounts on events as time passes. They also break up the narrative to offer an official or public version that the characters more fully explain or contradict when the narrative resumes. The use of archives

and records as plot and narrative is common to other popular genres, especially police procedurals and other variations of the mystery story. The use of archives and records as part of the textual presentation also has many literary precedents, particularly in the tradition of polylogic epistolary novels. However, Ellroy's use of this type of narrative more resembles the work of John Dos Passos in the U.S.A. Trilogy (*The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money*), a similar multi-volume work of historical fiction communicated in part through multiple documentary formats. But where Dos Passos used records and documents to give the narrative a more official feel and place it within historical context, Ellroy's intent seems quite different. According to Jonathan Walker (2002), "The result of placing Ellroy's novels next to 'official' documentation is a screech of feedback. He works in the spaces between the facts to undermine, contradict, deface, and rewrite the official version. His model for historical truth is not the academic essay but the scandal-sheet magazines that figure prominently in all his novels" (183).

Indeed, Ellroy's fascination with the Hollywood gossip and scandal magazines of 1940s and 1950s, and the kind of scurrilous "dirt" these scandal magazines accumulated, inspires his use of document inserts and record aggregations. In a 2009 interview, Ellroy told *The Paris Review*: "I loved *Confidential*. Along with the Lutheran Church it's probably the biggest cultural influence of my life. Who's a homo? Who's a nympho? Who's got a big one? Who's got a small one? Who fucks people of color? Who's getting head at the Griffith Park john? That shit was important to me then, and it's important to me now" (Rich 2009, 67). However, Ellroy's interests are not entirely prurient: "Sometimes I need to get outside of the perspectives of the characters in order to convey information that they don't know, and offer occasional editorial comments and historical facts in a compressed, direct way. That's where the document inserts come in. It's also a great excuse for me to write copy for Hollywood gossip rags" (Rich 2009, 66-67).

It is during *L.A. Confidential* that *Hush-Hush* magazine, a fictionalized rival of *Confidential* magazine, becomes a prominent part of the narrative and sets the stage for more extensive use of document inserts. Stylistically this is important because the interspersed records offer such a sharp formal contrast to the often telegraphic and tersely-worded text. In a way, the documents are simultaneously augmenting and competing with the rest of the narrative; this becomes more graphically apparent in *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz*. As the *L.A. Quartet* concludes, the archive takes on another dimension: it shifts from being primarily a plot element (something the characters encounter and utilize) to a more significant part of the text and narrative that is constructed by the characters and interacted with by the reader. As the *Underworld USA Trilogy* begins, the records and documents that show up are no longer compiled by an unknown omniscient entity that is not a part of the story. At this point they become extensions of the protagonists' and supporting characters' deliberate actions to gather and manipulate information.

Truth, Memory, and the Documentary Record in the Underworld USA Trilogy

At the outset of the Trilogy, Ellroy moves beyond conventional literary genres and is writing something closer to fictionalized social history. The books' subject matter expands geographically and topically, moving beyond the confines of Los Angeles' criminal underworld to various locations controlled by the Chicago-based Outfit—a nationwide organized crime syndicate with key members in New Orleans, Tampa, Miami, Dallas, Los

Angeles, and Las Vegas, and growing business interests in the Caribbean. It also expands beyond the purview of local law enforcement concerns to various players in national defense, domestic and foreign intelligence, and the political networks that determine public policy through covert actions. If the L.A. Quartet amounts to a series of crime stories depicting the raw moments of a socially repressive time and place, the Trilogy takes this to the macro level, framing personal stories of corruption and redemption within the big explosive events between the years 1959 and 1972.⁴

With *American Tabloid*, Ellroy keeps the three-protagonist formula and re-circulates the themes of personal secrets, official corruption, and political malfeasance, but on a much grander scale that sets the tone for the remainder of the Trilogy. *American Tabloid* offers an account of the John F. Kennedy assassination from the perspective of the men carrying out the scut work on behalf of powerful criminal and political forces. Though he keeps many elements of the police procedural, Ellroy is no longer solely dealing with the base motivations of cops and criminals or questions of personal morality in pursuit of justice and order. Rather he attempts to address the larger historical forces that have shaped the modern American character. Consider this excerpt from the prologue:

Mass market nostalgia gets you hopped up for a past that never existed. Hagiography sanctifies shuck-and-jive politicians and reinvents their expedient gestures as moments of great moral weight. Our continuing narrative line is blurred past truth and hindsight. Only a reckless verisimilitude can set that line straight... It's time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars. It's time to embrace bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time. Here's to them (Ellroy 1995, prologue).

In a 1997 interview, Ellroy summarized his ideal protagonists: "What interests me are the toadies of the system" (Duncan 1997, 246). In the Underworld USA Trilogy, powerful elites drive history forward from behind the scenes, working through a network of goons, hatchet-men, cutouts, fixers, and other street-level surrogates. Ellroy demonstrates that sustaining this elite sphere often means simply maintaining the social and political status quo, so as not to upset the compartmentalized existence between regular citizens and those in "The Life." According to Tim Ryan, in Ellroy's books, "it is civilization as we know it that is rendered marginal and insignificant ... Ellroy's underworld is an elite sphere to which one must gain access... To be part of the criminal and political underworld is to be part of the only civilization that matters" (Ryan 2004, 277). Being in "The Life," particularly as a toady, involves many unsavory tactics including shakedowns, beatings, bribes, intimidation, and murder, but it also requires a willingness to influence history in more subtle ways. Controlling history means controlling and manipulating the documentary record, not only as an *ad hoc* necessity of business, but also to maintain those separate and secure compartments over time.

For instance, in *American Tabloid*, reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes purchases *Hush-Hush* magazine to disseminate propaganda reflective of his ultra-conservative political views and obsession with celebrity gossip. He sends his pet goon, Pete Bondurant, to fire the editor and obtain his information files, which leads to a severe beating for the editor and the discovery of secret documentation that proves illegal financial collusion between Hughes

and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon—just as the 1960 presidential race is getting into full swing. As in previous instances, the information and evidence found in this archive serves as an effective wedge for Bondurant to assert his usefulness to those who outrank him in “The Life.” But it also provides a distinct thrill for Bondurant, who quickly recognizes the larger implications of his find:

The files were Sol’s revenge against HUAC. It was some kind of fucked-up penance: Sol wrote right-wing-slanted smears and stashed this shit for payback. File #3 packed more photos: of canceled checks, deposit slips, and a bank note. Pete shoved his food aside—*this* was smear bait supreme... Pete rechecked the evidence pix. The verification was solid—straight down the line. His food was cold. He’d sweated his shirt starched to wilted. Insider knowledge was a big fucking blast (Ellroy 1995, 43).

The Cold Six Thousand begins in the immediate aftermath of the JFK assassination with mob lawyer and agent provocateur, Ward Littell, on the scene at the Dallas Police Department to make sure that the frenzied response to the shooting results in a slipshod investigation. Littell’s position in “The Life” puts him at the nexus of all parties complicit in the assassination, but eventually his attempt to control the fallout and balance his increasingly complex entanglements leads to a complete turnaround in his motivations. Littell’s conversion is accompanied by constant efforts to buttress his lies and actions with documentary sabotage, forgery, and obfuscation. This intensive approach to documentation is typical of Ellroy’s protagonists. The paper trails that they follow to solve crimes and get an upper hand on opponents is mostly made up of the everyday byproducts of human activity, or at least they begin that way. These evidentiary aggregations accurately reflect the nature of archives and how they function in the real world, with all of the attendant characteristics and problems like overwhelming bulk, deterioration, poor organization, and incompleteness. But also in real life, archives and records are constructed by humans and thus only bound by the moral and legal constraints that society and those with custody place upon themselves at any given time. In recent decades, archival disciplinary thought has largely rejected the notion that records are inherently neutral and inert, that custodianship is passive. The archive portrayed in Ellroy’s novels supports the idea that records creation and accumulation is the result of deliberate efforts to influence policy, history, and memory, though in much more nefarious ways than people typically encounter in real life.

Just like his characters, Ellroy is purposeful in using archives to help develop new myths and create a “reckless verisimilitude”—the characters to get away with often unspeakable crimes and Ellroy to better understand the era he writes about in the Trilogy. Ellroy deliberately distorts the past in pursuit of a higher but repressed truth that exposes certain events and people for what they really are (Walker 2002). In the case of the Trilogy, he seeks to expose the less virtuous motivations of the powerful, which, though exaggerated in his fiction, are undeniably part of this country’s history. Walker (2002) contends that Ellroy also wants to demonstrate, “that history is fundamentally contingent: simultaneously conditioned by the actions of individuals and outside of their control” (184). The growing prevalence of the archive in the Trilogy serves to elevate these claims of a manufactured and often hidden truth. The archive that develops becomes an essential expository channel

with the document inserts throughout the series accounting for 15-20% of the total textual presentation in each of the entries.⁵ The records speak for themselves and their creators, while remaining a significant part of the plot—something to which the characters are inextricably tied. As Walker asserts, “Ellroy sees reality as composed of texts as well as people and events: advertising signs, newspaper headlines, television screens, police radio signals, bebop jazz rhythms... Ellroy sees the distinction between text and context as a false one” (Walker 2002, 188-9).

Ellroy’s juxtaposition of various kinds of media invests the archive’s content with a tremendous amount of authenticity and makes his version of “history” more plausible. Walker notes that in Ellroy’s books, “The story of the crime and the story of the investigation are connected. You only reach the truth through the distortions of memory and lies. There is no objective truth that does not include subjective distortion and vice versa” (191). The characters assume that the documents and records amount to irrefutable evidence of bad behavior or actions (often of deviant sexuality, criminality, or political malfeasance) and that these are confirmed simply by the existence of those materials. After all, why would anyone bother to record and keep this information if it were not true or at least believable? But just like the plot-related archives, the records in the textual presentation do not always tell the whole story and often only hint at the workings of the characters at a particular point in the story. In all instances, the truth value of the records as information and evidence is never really under question. Even though the document inserts and the archives the characters encounter are a result of human artifice, this does not necessarily make them subjective entities. Walker argues that, “Within the world of the novels, there is always a definite (and obsessively-detailed) truth... Ultimately, even though the historical record is what misleads you in reality, within the novel the possibility of truth is still associated with documentary proof” (184).

In fiction and in real life, the truth value of the archive rests in the eye of the beholder. In Ellroy’s books, the plot-based archives and document inserts exist equally for the protagonists and the reader, helping to reveal inner motivations and external developments at appropriate times throughout the story. What makes Ellroy’s use of the archive most effective to the reader is that he does not ascribe full meaning to the documents and archives within the context of the story. In many instances, the archival material brings up as many questions as it answers and requires further confirmation or interpretation by the characters. This narrative collaboration allows an exploration of the relationship between memory and truth, as well as that between fiction and history. According to Walker, in Ellroy’s books memory is often compared to “a tape, photograph, or film and subjective reveries are intercut with records that are messed-up, incomplete, deliberately mutilated, or encoded, requiring the reader to reconcile their own recollections and understanding of the historical events he depicts” (190). Ellroy’s novels remind us that sometimes “tidied up narratives have the sanitized gloss of the newspaper puff pieces that he juxtaposes with the real ‘secret shit.’ Underneath the surface of our narratives, suppressed possibilities seethe. Ellroy attempts to liberate them through invention” (190-191). Ellroy’s approach to history disavows facts that are unknowable and memories that are unreliable in favor of a good story that is plausible on a metaphysical and mythical level.

Archives, Power, and the Changing Metanarrative in *Blood's A Rover*

American Tabloid introduces two major aggregations of records and information that become essential to the Trilogy: the Teamster's Central States Pension Fund Books and the extensive surveillance file of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, both of which are secret and only really accessible to those of a certain rank within "The Life." However, these aggregations function very differently in the series. The reader does not encounter the content of the Fund Books on the page as discrete records, but the Books—and what they represent to the characters—drive the plot forward by providing the key to the various criminal and political conspiracies unfolding in the series. More than a MacGuffin, the Fund Books are consequential because they prove fatal to the characters who attempt to control them—not because of the information the Books contain, but because of the raised stakes in the "The Life" that access to the Books confers. Hoover's file, by contrast, is presented on the page as assorted documents spread throughout the narrative prose, which amounts to an excerpted paper trail drawn from a larger archival corpus ostensibly in Hoover's possession. As in the *Quartet*, the information contained within these and other archival aggregations is used to manipulate, coerce, and threaten to achieve specific ends. However, the scale reached in the Trilogy goes well beyond personal or professional vendettas and illuminates the role of information and documentation in helping to facilitate a sea change in American society.

The events covered in the Trilogy represent the "last grasp of pre-public accountability in America where the anti-Communist agenda... justified everything" (Woods 2009, 60). This includes the copious gathering of records and intelligence by the government and other powerful entities on American political subversives and other real or perceived enemies of the status quo, a historical reality that becomes the driving force behind the archive in the Trilogy. In *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* the cumulative textual archive, composed of multi-format document inserts, suggests that a powerful outside party is authoring events to some degree. The archive that builds shows how Ellroy's characters are culpable in maintaining this elite sphere through both their reactionary, self-serving behavior and a genuine belief in what they and their masters considered to be the natural order of things. These characters operate in the shadowy back channels of public policy via the institutions established to maintain that power, and Hoover proves to be the primary personage behind it all. The archive that Hoover maintains represents the documentary record of the predominant metanarratives driving society during this turbulent era, namely white male supremacy and Cold War political orthodoxy.⁶ These dual metanarratives are embodied in the official nature of the documentation. Though the methods and activities documented are clandestine, the labeling and implicit statutory endorsement demonstrates the functioning of a bureaucratic structure that seeks to sustain itself and maintain order at any cost. That these documents are evidence of malfeasance seems to be of little concern, which is often the hallmark of repressive governments that consider themselves infallible. History has shown that managing repression requires the pen and the typewriter as much as the sword and the gun.

The final installation of the Trilogy, *Blood's A Rover*, signals the breaking down of these metanarratives, reflected in the social upheaval that helped erode the consensus on white male supremacy and American political and military hegemony—in addition to other changes prompted or solidified by opposition to the Vietnam War. This breaking apart is also reflected in the document-based archive presented on the page, which shifts from reflecting

the products of a repressive surveillance state to one that exposes the private misdeeds behind the crumbling public facade of a corrupt, powerful elite. Human intention and artifice continues to be the main determining factor in the historical record, but in *Blood's A Rover*, the document-based narrative grows more expansive and inclusive of other contributors who operate in opposition to the prevailing power narratives. According to Ellroy:

I wanted to dramatize the seismic shifts that took place during the sixties and seventies. I wanted to show the effects of ideological transformation... This novel displays my greatest diversity of characterization. Karen Sifakis is a mother and a revolutionary. Marshall Bowen is a homosexual black man who goes undercover for the FBI. These characters think about their actions and what they mean. They're not afraid to write down their thoughts. There are a lot of diary entries and correspondence that give us different perspectives on American history between 1968 and 1972. It's all about conveying the complex ideological nature of the era (Rich 2009, 66).

It is clear from the outset of *Blood's A Rover* that Ellroy intends to deliver on this revolutionary arc and he does so by introducing the story with this bit of metafiction:

I followed people. I bugged and tapped and caught big events in ellipses. I remained unknown. My surveillance links the Then to the Now in a never-before-revealed manner. I was there. My reportage is buttressed by credible hearsay and insider tattle. Massive paper trails provide verification. This book derives from stolen public files and usurped private journals. It is the sum of personal adventure and forty years of scholarship. I am a literary executor and an agent provocateur. I did what I did and saw what I saw and learned my way through to the rest of the story. Scripture-pure veracity and scandal-rag content. That conjunction gives it its sizzle. You carry the seed of belief within you already. You recall the time this narrative captures and sense conspiracy. I am here to tell you that it is all true and not at all what you think (Ellroy 2009, 9).

Where the preface of *American Tabloid* finds Ellroy setting up the series and discussing his own motivation for telling the stories of bad men who secretly defined their time, this represents a direct challenge to the audience from a fictional character. He is daring us not to believe it, but tacitly admits it might be unbelievable. *White Jazz* has a somewhat similar preface, but it reads like the first-person recollections of the protagonist, which aligns with the format of the story. It is difficult to guess why Ellroy chose to make this intertextual reference for *Blood's A Rover*, but the message itself seems to place a very high value on historical documentation and the emphasis on archives and records never abates throughout the story.

The character providing the introduction is Don Crutchfield, an unlikely hero and ideal Ellroy protagonist: a toady of the lowest level who gets in way over his head but survives through a mix of luck and brutal determination. In many ways Crutchfield is the consummate

Ellroy character and seems the closest to a thinly-veiled version of Ellroy himself. In his memoir and other biographical pieces, Ellroy has laboriously detailed his own misadventures with petty crime, substance abuse, and general lowlife behavior in the decades after his mother's murder, before he became a successful writer. Crutchfield shares many of these qualities, including an ongoing mother fixation and voyeuristic pursuits that are legally questionable. However, these have also seasoned Crutchfield to be a prolific documentarian, which proves fortuitous when his career as a law enforcement hanger-on brings him into contact with the world-changing clandestine plots and conspiracies of the previous books in the Trilogy. Crutchfield shifts between observer, participant, and recorder of history as it unfolds, and his ability to stay just below the radar of the most powerful players is the main reason he lives to tell the story.

Crutchfield also embodies the ideological shift that Ellroy sought to portray, going from a low-level stooge with authoritarian sympathies to full-on revolutionary. It is fitting that Crutchfield's political conversion comes full circle with an act of archival destruction while encountering the primary embodiment of power in the Trilogy, longtime FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his massive surveillance file:

It was his file space and Wayne's file space and Reggie's lab gone mammoth. The basement ran the length and breadth of the house. The ceiling was raised for more paper. The shelves topped Mount Matterhorn and almost scraped clouds... He had forty-four paper bombs, mesh-netted and screw-topped. He uncinched the duffel bag and placed them shelf by shelf... He put on his gas mask. He ran through the basement. He popped all forty-four screw tops. The fumes went up. Colored clouds rose. The walls contained them. Paper singed, curdled, crackled and charred. Little explosions went off. The file shelves rattled. Paint peeled off the walls. The fumes turned re-colored: dark/light, dark/light. Paper flecks vaporized in thin air... Mr. Hoover weaved and drooled. Mr. Hoover clutched his chest and staggered upstairs (Ellroy 2009, 633-634).

Though already old and infirm by the time of Crutchfield's intrusion, this final act of sabotage shows just how tightly bound Hoover's power was to his ability to control others through information and documentation. It is as if his life force drains as his archive disintegrates. In the final passage Crutchfield makes a claim to the archive, to the historical narrative that he helped write, and to truth that remains forever fixed in the jumble of memory and evidence of the initiated, but elusive to everyone else. It serves as a self-referential bookend to the introduction and as a coda to the stylistic and creative lineage began several books earlier:

The photograph has been preserved. History stopped at that moment thirty-seven years ago. History reconvened with the first batch of paper. Documents have arrived at irregular intervals. They are always anonymously sent. I have compiled diary excerpts, oral-history transcripts and police-file overflow. Elderly leftists and black militants have told me their stories and provided verification. Freedom of

Information Act subpoenas have served me well... I found the journals of Marshall Bowen and Reginald Hazzard. I found Scotty Bennett's notebooks. The Richard M. Nixon Library provided perfunctory support. The J. Edgar Hoover library was resistant. Hoover spokesmen have consistently denied the charred files in his basement and refuse to link the event to Hoover's death... My own memory rages in sync with everything I have described. I have not forgotten a moment of it. Forty thousand new file pages buttress my recall. I burned all of my original paper. I built paper all over again, so that I might tell you this story (Ellroy 2009, 639).

Conclusion: A Reckless Verisimilitude of Our Choosing

On October 26, 2017, the United States federal government was set to release all previously undisclosed documents relating to the Kennedy assassination. In many ways, it seemed to present a moment of apotheosis for a country that has grown exponentially conspiracy-minded in the decades since—a reckoning of the historical record with a unique strain of American paranoia. Would this evidence that was kept hidden for so long finally reveal the truth about what happened? What web of conspirators might be exposed for this crime? Would this lead to any justice for those responsible, however delayed? That there was a conspiracy of some kind behind the assassination is an opinion shared by a majority of contemporary Americans, regardless of political background, which demonstrates just how amenable we are to the kinds of mythologizing Ellroy and others turn into popular art (Swift 2013). After all, the records are being released as a result of legislation passed in the wake of Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*, which itself is based on one of the more outlandish conspiracy theories of the assassination. It seems disconcertingly fitting that the final authorization for the release of the documents rests with a conspiracy-theory-loving former “reality” television star, a man who routinely approaches established facts—about himself, about this country—with selective incredulity.⁷

America's current post-truth era, with its alternative facts, fake news, and information bubbles, is perhaps the most analogous embodiment of the reckless verisimilitude that Ellroy offers in his fiction. Truth is less about the evidence you bring to bear than the feeling of righteousness you get from whatever truth you have chosen. An endless news cycle and pervasive access to media delivery systems help ensure that almost anyone can have a voice and find a sympathetic audience for their version of the truth, all the better if it contradicts the truths proffered by nebulous establishment elites. In this environment ironies abound: we are a nation increasingly mistrustful of institutions that we believe are guilty of infringing on our rights as private citizens, yet we often have no problem sharing our most personal details with complete strangers across globalized communication networks. Driven by the demand for extreme transparency, information and documentation are available on all manner of topics at an unprecedented level, yet evidence that contradicts or disproves our own confirmation biases is expressly avoided and becomes part of the conspiracy against our inviolable beliefs. Unlike Ellroy's goal of uncovering truths about power through the distortion of memory and the strategic deployment of documentation, we increasingly embrace only those “truths” that are unfalsifiable or that we are unwilling to subject to logical scrutiny.

Much has been written about post-consensus America and how the democratization of ideas and information can serve as a bulwark against any one set of values or beliefs becoming dominant and oppressive towards others. It is hard to believe that anyone would want to go back to the binary certitude of the Cold War era, but in lieu of a more ordered system we are forced to deal with the resulting chaos and point-scoring that ensues. It is difficult to say what the current state of incredulous relativism means for historical documentation and how we understand our history moving forward: why bother to adopt or uphold rigorous standards of archival custodianship, access, and preservation if the information and evidence these collections provide is meaningless to those most in need of convincing? If objectivity is constantly edged out by tribal self-righteousness, what good are the lessons that history holds? Since most of us likely will never have the surety of fictional insiders like Don Crutchfield, or similar opportunities to repeatedly fix the historical record, it is up the custodians of those records to help ensure that, even if everything is subject to reflexive skepticism, the archive remains the best resource we have in figuring out what is true and what is not.

Historical fiction like James Ellroy's offers a way forward to a greater understanding of truth and power—not in the suspension of disbelief to further blur the line between real and imaginary, but in fiction's ability to tell a compelling story. In the last year or so the biggest and most consequential stories to American power and the quality of our citizenship have been archives and records stories—Russian interference in the 2016 election, the DNC email hacks, the Paradise Papers, and countless other revelations that hold direct implications for leadership, public policy, and popular opinion. Clearly, archives and records have a story to tell through what they reveal at face value, but also through their inevitable interpretation by pundits, politicians, artists, and others seeking to insert their version of events into the conversation. In this context, archivists, curators, historians, and other custodians of the historical record have no need to try to make archives sexy or insist they be something they are not: the drama is inherent, the struggle over what might eventually become the historical consensus is palpable, and the relationship of archives and records to power grows immutable as time progresses.⁸

Endnotes

- 1 Jimerson specifically mentions a book by Martha Cooley (*The Archivist: A Novel*) but many other examples exist from novelists writing for both popular and literary audiences (A. S. Byatt, Stephen King, Alice Walker, C. D. Payne, to name a few).
- 2 For a more extensive look at Ellroy's work (particularly his pre-Quartet and Trilogy novels) see Peter Wolfe's *Like Hot Knives to the Brain: James Ellroy's Search for Himself* (2006).
- 3 Ellroy's third person omniscient novels (excluding *The Black Dahlia* and *White Jazz*) roughly follow an A-B-C format with three protagonists that have become archetypes in Ellroy's fiction (The Player, The Heavy, and The Underdog). Each chapter centers on one protagonist, followed by the next, followed by the last. This sequence repeats throughout the books with some deviation when a particular protagonist is removed from the story (usually because they were killed), which results in an A-B or B-C format. The narrative in *Blood's A Rover* is notable in that two of the protagonists perish before the story concludes and their perspectives are replaced by two other characters who previously had supporting roles.
- 4 Namely the Castro revolution in Cuba, the election and assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Civil Rights Movement and counter-movement, the Red Scare and the Vietnam War, the race riots and rise of Black militancy, the rise and fall of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the FBI's ongoing counterintelligence programs against political subversives.
- 5 In an admittedly unscientific assessment, I looked at the number of pages devoted to the archive (mostly extra-narrative document inserts) in each entry from the Underworld U.S.A. Trilogy. The percentages (archive text pages divided by total text pages) for each book worked out thusly: *American Tabloid* 15%, *The Cold Six Thousand* 20%, and *Blood's A Rover* 18%. Again, very unscientific, but even a rudimentary analysis of the text shows that records and documents have an important place in this series of novels.
- 6 Metanarrative definitions: Metanarrative or grand narrative or master narrative is a term developed by Jean-François Lyotard to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values (*New World Dictionary*); Any narrative which is concerned with the idea of storytelling, *spec.* one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself and to its own artifice. Also: a piece of narrative, esp. a classic text or other archetypal story, which provides a schematic world view upon which an individual's experiences and perceptions may be ordered (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*).
- 7 In a development seemingly tailor-made for the conspiracy theory set, the October 2017 release excluded some of the more sensitive documents and the disposition of their release will not be known until Spring of 2018 at the earliest.
- 8 Andersen's recent book helped form the basis for some of the ideas in the conclusion of this article and is an excellent resource for understanding a uniquely American strain of skepticism toward facts and evidence.

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