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From Outcasts in the Streets to Movers on the Hill:
Narrating the Dark Side of Washington, D.C. in
D.C. Noir

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Abstract

This article examines the manner in which the recent collection *D.C. Noir* sets out to illuminate the dark urban corners of the so-called “Capital of the World.” I will look at how the neighborhood-based short stories in this collection reveal the urban underbelly of the American nation’s capital, its seedy underworld, the dark side of domestic life and murkiness of family ties, the racialized practices and institutionalized corruption plaguing the great American city. I argue that, through the collective voices of its residents, these stories offer precious insights into life as lived in the various corners of Washington, D.C., and bring to the fore a world populated not only by outcasts and the disenfranchised, but also by law enforcement officers, politicians, and high-profile representatives, similarly acting under the constraints of a dysfunctional city.

Keywords: noir, Washington, D.C., dark city, violent crime, political fiction, Capitol Hill

The founding fathers, whose infinite wisdom gave us a
Constitution and form of government well-nigh perfect,
located the seat of that government in a stinking,
steaming swamp. (Lait and Mortimer 6)

A city pivotal to American identity and life, Washington, D.C. was established by constitutional fiat at the end of the 18th century as an “anomaly, a curiosity of the Constitution” (Lewis 184) to serve as the nation’s capital. The city’s uniqueness in American culture is mainly

derived from the intermingling of Northern and Southern character – which, historically, had a great influence on its policies and attitudes towards the African-American population – and from its origins steeped in and shaped by political maneuvering and compromise. To these one can add its rather ambiguous status as a federal territory without representation or a local city whose residents have been forced into “a frustrating role as dependents or claimants rather than full citizens” (Asch and Musgrove 3) – and begin to grasp the underlying exceptionality of a city largely equated with the American nation itself. From its inception, Washington D.C. was regarded as “a place of dramatic contrasts – landed wealth and desperate poverty, civic liberty and racial oppression, genteel society and shocking squalor” (Dickey 18), a safe haven for those fleeing lives of slavery, but which at the same time presented itself as a city under siege from refugees (Acosta et al. 10), a “fiefdom ruled by national politicians” wherein citizens were essentially denied the right to vote for those politicians (Dickey x). Considered for a long period of time after its establishment no more than a “squalid little town that limped along through the early decades of American history,” with a landscape dominated by “bordellos and gambling halls,” it nevertheless transformed into “the urban showpiece, focus of national politics, and center of world power that Hamilton and his cohorts once imagined it could be” (Dickey 18).

However one chooses to approach the city, it has been argued that ever since the beginning, “Americans cast a wary eye on their capital,” whether for “its concentration of federal power, its suspicious cosmopolitanism, or its pretensions to glory” in a place inhabited by citizens stripped of their votes (Dickey 19). Rising from an “empire of mud” and turning “from a sparsely inhabited plantation society into a booming metropolis, from a center of the slave trade to the nation’s first black-majority city, from a self-governing town to a federal fiefdom and back again,” Washington, D.C. “has endured corrupt leadership and congressional meddling, weathered the Civil War and the crack epidemic, and survived urban renewal and multiple waves of gentrification” (Asch and Musgrove 3). Nevertheless, the people’s distrust in their national seat of government has been so pervasive along the ages that “[i]f we still

suspect our capital of dark designs, our fears are embedded in the city's DNA" (Dickey 19).

The present article sets out to examine the manner in which the short stories in the recent collective volume *D.C. Noir* (2006) portray these tensions at the heart of the so-called "Capital of the World," offering dark and gloomy glimpses into life as lived by Washingtonians in the streets, within the confines of their (mostly dysfunctional) homes or in the secretive corners on Capitol Hill, thus reaching beyond the scope of standard demographics and dry statistics. I argue that the collective voices of its fictional residents put forth a disorientating and morally ambivalent world populated by outcasts and the disenfranchised, by prostitutes and their pimps, by law enforcement officers and their confidential informants on the streets, by corrupt politicians and high-profile representatives, all similarly acting under the constraints of a claustrophobic and dysfunctional city. The authors of these narratives are themselves as diverse as the fictional voices they unleash: lifelong Washingtonians born and raised in D.C. or enthusiastic transplants coming from both sides of the racial and gender divide; writers by calling, but also actors by training, journalists and bloggers, a former CIA officer turned crime fiction author, a veteran police officer, and also a former Senate aide. What is more, the collection is curated by the "poet laureate of the D.C. crime world" (Wieland), novelist, screenwriter, and film producer George Pelecanos, whose life's work seems centered on the city and the people of Washington, D.C. It is this polyphony that adds substance and layers of meaning to the volume, I maintain, and creates a composite and elaborate image of the American capital as a dark city upon the Hill.

Urban fiction builds on subjective viewpoints of lived experience in the city at a particular point in time and regards the latter not as an "aggregation or accumulation ... in demographic, economic or planning terms" but rather "in terms of feeling and emotion." Consequently, "cities ... become more than their built environment, more than a set of class or economic relationships; they are ... an experience to be lived, suffered, undergone" (Preston and Simpson-Housley 1-2). At the same time, by "appropriating, juxtaposing and eventually reconciling distinct, often seemingly incongruous, tendencies and phenomena," cities spark

“conflicts, controversies and dissonances that find their outspoken vent in various literary renderings” (Cholupský and Grmelová 1-2).

The “political city,” even when not itself the main subject of fiction, has never been far beneath the surface of literary efforts, whether in the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity, in the utopias of the Renaissance and the early modern era, or in the novels that grew out of the fascination with the industrial-era metropolis. As “concentrators of diversity and proving grounds for rights and freedoms” (McNamara 2), cities always raised questions of citizenship and political participation, of social stratification and segregation within the constricted confines of a polity. After the Industrial Revolution in particular, when it became “a really distinctive order of settlement, implying a whole different way of life” (Williams 23), the city as a political space, often contrasted to the traditional order of the countryside, became an explicit theme in many modern-era novels, from Dickens to Dreiser to Dos Passos.

Nonetheless, the oft-touted “medieval maxim that the city air makes you free” has become outdated “in view of the visions of an approaching urban anarchy” (Prakash 1). From this point of view, perhaps nowhere has the political identity of the city been explored more directly than in the dystopian tradition that emerged in the nineteenth century, partly in response to the utopians’ shift of interest toward the urban metropolis, and partly as a reflection of the injustice and squalor prevalent in many of the actual cities of that time (Latham and Hicks 164). Far from fading away with the advent of the twentieth century, dystopian images have continued to occupy privileged positions in literary, cinematic, and sociological representations of the modern city (Prakash 1). Stirred up by the “terrors of the twentieth century” and feeding on a “hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life” (Moylan xi), dystopian narratives have tackled themes such as (state-sanctioned) surveillance and political control, social conformity, disenfranchisement and degradation, systemic corruption, endemic suspicion, and fear. Within these works, the city appears as

dark, insurgent (or forced into total obedience), dysfunctional (or forced into machine-like functioning), engulfed in ecological and social crises, seduced by capitalist consumption, paralyzed by crime, wars, class, gender, and racial conflicts, and subjected to excessive technological and technocratic control. (Prakash 1)

As a significant offshoot of the dystopian imagination, noir fiction constructs the city as a labyrinthine anti-utopia of alienation and anxiety, social inequality, and racial tension. In noir narratives, the setting is usually an alienating and claustrophobic urban space inhabited by “endangered, besieged city dwellers” who “live in isolation, unrest, and fear in a disrupted, disconnected urban labyrinth” and consequently “display the negative consequences that grow on this bed of specific urban characteristics” (Schupp 171). As a result, noir works are populated by deeply flawed and morally questionable individuals “whose greed, lust, jealousy, and alienation lead them into a downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry” and who appear “doomed to hopelessness” (Penzler x). However, it has been argued, it is not the individual who is the problem in noir, but the world where “[i]nstitutions are corrupt, public moralities hypocritical, the watchmen un-watched” so much so that “one person may pull a trigger, but that act is part of a sprawling web of mendacity and exploitation. No one gets away clean...” (Seeley). Such an approach speaks to noir fiction’s indebtedness to (literary) dystopia, whose “foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic,” since “no single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem, no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume” (Moylan xii).

Washington, D.C. makes no exception. A locus of both great political power and great inequality, once deemed the nation’s “murder capital,” the city has arguably been characterized by “the soundest security, the mightiest power, and the most superlative rates of crime, vice, and juvenile delinquency anywhere” (Lait and Mortimer 5). It harbors people living with “gunshots outside their doors,” in most cases prone to know either victim or shooter from their childhood, but, since “there is no vote to massage, politicians and presidents have historically

ignored the neediest people of this city, as there's little upside to reaching out" (Pelecanos, Introduction 10). Consequently, the American national seat of government is seemingly "a stark illustration of an absolute failure of governance" (Pelecanos, Introduction 11).

It is this image of Washington, D.C. that seems to persist in the short story collection under scrutiny here. In a neighborhood-by-neighborhood analysis, each piece in the volume seems to cast light on some of the city's bleakest aspects. One issue which is tackled recurrently in these noir stories is the problem of violent crime, mostly drug- and gang-related. In this respect, some areas are more prone than others to battle such adversities, depending on neighborhood and its demographics. For instance, the female narrator in "East of the Sun" has to learn quickly how to navigate the space surrounding her home on Potomac Avenue and avoid

mostly north and east, like the intersection of 17th and Independence, where the crackheads hung out, and the New Dragon, an all-night takeout joint over at 13th and C that sold liquor to go. You didn't want to mess with the kind of people who patronized that joint. They didn't go there for the food. The Dragon was where the local pusher known as the Wheelchair Bandit did business. (Howard 79)

However, as the narrative soon makes obvious, even when trying to keep away from trouble, danger sneaks up on you when and where least expected because the same narrator finds the body of a mentally impaired woman who had been acting as a drug mule in the alley behind their home:

I'd just pulled the can out from its spot next to the garage when I saw her. She lay face down in the little walkway that cut between the rental storage units across the alley. Someone had dragged her behind the chain-link fence to die. She had on that ratty parka, the green of it dark where it had absorbed some of the blood. I couldn't see where it all came from, just that there was a lot of it spread out around the body, dark and congealed into wrinkles like the skin on a cup of chocolate pudding. (Howard 87)

This dark net cast over her rather quiet family life determines the narrator to ponder on and decry the double standards in force within her neighborhood of Hill East and the stark contrast between the haves and

the have-nots of Washington, D.C. She observes that the city is “lousy with people who had too much money – the folks looking to buy up anything they could get their hands on – and even lousier with people who didn’t have enough to do anything at all. Not everybody could be a winner” (Howard 80). At the same time, despite its proximity to Capitol Hill, an American nucleus of power and authority, Hill East had historically been plagued by break-ins, drug trafficking, teenage delinquency and violent attacks. But when it comes to security and protection against crime, it is the higher-ups who benefit from it, as it was on

the lockdown zone around the Capitol and the Supreme Court where the Homeland Security folks concentrated their loving attention. For the most part they left Hill East alone. There was nobody fancy here to protect, no essential governmental personnel, unless you counted the famous residents of Congressional Cemetery two blocks over. (Howard 80-81)

Murder appears endemic and some narratives are not shy in providing gruesome details. In the felicitously titled “Cold as Ice,” for example, Rodney Grimes is the unintended eyewitness to a terrible double homicide in his quarter when grandmother and five-year-old granddaughter are gunned down on their front porch:

In but a few seconds, more than a half dozen hollow-point 9mm rounds ripped through each of them, their bodies performing the death dance that only the gunfire of automatic weapons can orchestrate, jerking to the staccato of the *rat-tat-tat-ta* of the machine gun, as though keeping time to the pulsating rhythm of a boogie rap tune. (Peterson 135)

As the scene “seemed to transpire in slow motion,” the reader is made to live it through Grimes’s eyes, whose colorful and vivid description appears intent on shocking the squeamish in the very opening lines:

Amid the crimson mist of their splattering blood, the bullets appeared to strike the frail old woman and the fragile little girl forever. The dreadful scene was punctuated, and made that much more grotesque, by Aaliyah’s head exploding, bursting like a ripe melon dropped from a high place. The pink halo of her vaporized brain was visible only for an instant, yet the obscene corona lingered around what little remained of the back of her neatly braided head; a ghastly image frozen in time ... emblazoned upon his troubled mind. (Peterson 135)

Living by his father's dictum that "evil flourish when good men do nothing," Grimes is poised to testify against the perpetrator, who unfortunately "had seen him ... and evidently knew who he was," which leads to a fateful encounter of the rather "outlandish odd couple, Rodney Grimes's clean-cut, black yuppie appearance in direct contrast to that of the killer, who looked like a hip-hop Rastafarian" (Peterson 136-137). The witness's dread reactivates a "sense of impending doom he had not felt in years," since he was a young boy and "beaten and robbed on a daily basis, by people like the killer, until he fought back one day and maced a thug in the face when he'd attempted to rob him" (Peterson 139-140). This recollection also speaks to the historically challenging pervasiveness of violence in the inner-city and to how it transfers from generation to generation like both a legacy of crime and an ABC of survival on the mean streets of Washington.

As the veteran detective John Mayfield observes in the narrative, good informants or eyewitnesses are more and more difficult to come by and part of the many "obstacles he now had to hurdle to bring the guilty to justice" (Peterson 141). A staple figure in noir fiction, this disaffected homicide detective "had seen better days, both careerwise and in his private life" (Peterson 140). Plagued by an increasingly failing health and mourning a wife who had died "by the hands of a lowlife during a street robbery gone bad" (Peterson 140), he laments the pressures put by a "law and order"-type of administration on the police, coupled with the community's reluctance to step up. As a result, any "thug strapped with a MAC-11 can open fire on a crowded street or sporting event or concert hall, and no one sees a thing. If the perpetrators fail to intimidate witnesses, then murder definitely does the trick" (Peterson 141). This rings so true to the narrator in yet another installment in the volume – "The Confidential Informant," whose activity as one proves ultimately fatal. After a labyrinthine midnight pursuit around the dark, convoluted streets of Park View, he finds himself entrapped by the criminal gang he was informing on, seemingly in order to make a few dollars and a perpetually disappointed father proud of him:

I turned my back on him. Pee ran hot down my thigh. My knees were trembling, but I made my legs move. The night flashed. I felt a sting, like a bee sting, high on my back. I stumbled but kept my feet. I looked down at my blood, dotted in the snow. I walked a couple of steps and closed my eyes. (Pelecamos, "The Confidential Informant" 35)

This arguably reads like a posthumous narration and, as illustrated by the story above, it is not uncommon for noir fiction to feature protagonists who narrate their stories from the other side. As poet and novelist Nicholas Christopher observes, "[d]ead men tell no tales, the saying goes – but not in ... noir, where the hero may narrate his own tale, fluently, from the grave" (9). This glitch in the chronology of events, which is surprisingly made apparent at the end of the story, makes the protagonist's belief that "Time will just fuck you up" (Pelecamos, "The Confidential Informant" 25) ring even truer.

As some stories in the collection show, the relationship between citizens and the law enforcement officers in charge of their protection has not always been without its tensions. For example, one of the stories hints at an infamous incident in 1991, when a black officer shot a Salvadoran immigrant and a curfew was instituted following three days of riots by the Hispanic community in Mount Pleasant. Situated in the North-Western part of the city, the neighborhood witnessed the settlement of immigrants from Latin America after the white flight of the 1960s. The narrative speculates that "[t]here's so much tension between the Latinos and the police" which "[has] been brewing for a while" that "[t]he shooting was like a flame to a tinderbox" (Casteneda 174). Far from an isolated case, the incident was part of a very troubled period in the history of Washington, D.C. These were the years of the crack cocaine epidemic and a homicide rate so high that the city was considered the nation's "murder capital" (Hermann). Overlapping with an unprecedented fiscal meltdown which aggravated local matters even more, the final decade of the 20th century witnessed a wave of violence that Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District's nonvoting representative in Congress since 1991, equated with a Civil War: "It's brother against brother. It's domestic war" (Lewis 427).

One of the most finely executed narratives in the volume, "Messenger of Soulsville", is built around a Malcolm X-like figure and

takes the reader on a spiritual trip through the Shaw / Cardozo neighborhood, itself a “place between places,” at the crossroads between downtown and uptown Washington, D.C., where “races and classes bumped and mingled as they got a foothold on the city” (Freundel Levey et. al). As a former officer in the US Marine Corps and war hero who had an affair with a white fellow officer’s wife, Dr. Minister Mallory Rex “had fallen within the white man’s military, but had risen and moved forward with a new mission after reading Dr. Isaiiah Afrika’s words in *Rise Ye Mighty Race: A Message to the New Blackman*” (Kelley 258). As a follower of Dr. Afrika’s new spirituality of Izlam (“based on a conflation of Yoruba and Islam”), Dr. Rex “captivated the faithful and put fear into the hearts of yacoubs, the nation of white devils” (Kelley 256) by adding “a kind of severe glamour and dash to the humorless black men in white robes who preached Izlam on the street corners of America’s urban bantustans while Uncle Tom ministers called for reconciliation and integration” (Kelley 258).

It is through his eyes that one can catch a glimpse of the neighborhood which harbors the famous U Street, a vibrant hub of black culture in Washington, D.C. during the first half of the twentieth century. Deemed the “Black Broadway,” supposedly by the legendary actress and singer Pearl Bailey, U Street was Harlem before Harlem (Haynesworth). In the narrative, this “heart of Soulsville” was “the center of ‘third places,’ the loci between work and home for the city’s colored population, the best place for the Temple of Ife to recruit the walking dead” (Kelley 256), the “sleeping blacks” not yet awakened to the teachings of the Messenger of Izlam. Largely disfigured in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, this part of Washington accommodated various forms of religious expression, mostly black churches but also those of white immigrants to the city. Strolling on the streets of Cardozo, Dr. Rex ponders on the changes in make-up and mood of a city dominated by a black population itself in a process of transition:

Earlier, a better tone of Negroes had resided here, but the influx of rough-and-tumble Southern blacks had changed the place and driven them away. It now had the odor of real people; it was a place of beauty parlors, fried hair, and big-hipped bouffant-do sisters. Men still wore hats but the new

looks, the “James Brown” process and the “Afro,” were making barbers anxious. There was a different mood in the air; the elders called it “funky” and the youths ran with it. (Kelley 259)

Within this “chocolate city,” where “over seventy percent of the population was colored, invisible to the master class that lived there and ignored by the indifferent tourists visiting the national edifices,” the Original Kingdom of Afrika was called on to help the family owning the Groove Records empire against the mob’s encroachment on their business and to mediate the safe return of their daughter kidnapped by the New Jersey mob to show that “niggers ain’t shit and had no protection” (Kelley 259). It is with the help of Dr. Rex – looking to ingratiate himself with the Messenger of Izlam – that members of the OKA, at the orders of their spiritual leader, kidnap in their turn the daughter of the Mafia boss as retaliation and to ensure a smooth exchange of “a life for a life.” An unfortunate turn of events, a killing based on racial considerations and an unforeseen betrayal – another prominent element in the noir paraphernalia – lead to the apparent disillusionment of protagonist Dr. Rex and to his “walk[ing] through the halls of the Temple of Ife No.1, taking in the admiring gazes of those he passed,” wondering “what the cost was to his soul, and how long would he keep it” (Kelley 267).

Disillusionment runs deep in the so-called “Capital of the World,” especially where hope used to flicker. In yet another noir installment, a Metro police officer, moonlighting as a bouncer in a club in order to make ends meet for the family, has an encounter he is doomed to remember. The narrative offers a glimpse into the underworld of human trafficking of Eastern-European girls and sets in contrast the latter’s covert plight with the big city lights on D.C.’s avenues. The Moldovan prostitute, whom the Metro cop tries to rescue, reveals a brutal life of “threats, beatings, torture,” a high rate of suicide among fellow women and inescapable, meaningless existences. This puts things into perspective for the officer – “*You thought growing up in the Barry Farms was tough?*” (Patton 52, original italics) – as he starts “sweating, hearing it” (Patton 53). For the capital city of the greatest democracy in the world to harbor such life stories seems unbelievable to the woman, whose hopes for freedom are shattered soon after arrival:

“I remember first night here,” she said. “Men take me in car and I see Washington Monument – something I see in book when I’m a girl. Now, I am here. Land of the free. I see people on street, I want to cry for help – Save me! This no happen in United States, in Washington, capital of the world! But I can no scream. No one hear me outside. Feel I’m under the water, you understand?” (Patton 56)

As a black man in America, the officer understands voicelessness all too well and reminisces “how he felt as a kid, the times he saw the nice part of D.C. Those people didn’t see a little black boy from Barry Farms, and if they did, they wouldn’t hear him – if he dared to speak. And he wouldn’t dare” (Patton 56). In pure noir fashion, the ending speaks not only about the inescapability of fate, but also about the empathy of the disenfranchised.

Women do not feature prominently in this noir collection but for one narrative penned by the *New York Times* best-selling author of crime fiction, Laura Lippman. “A.R.M.¹ and the Woman” breaks with other stories in the volume, as it is set in the rather affluent neighborhood of Chevy Chase, D.C., populated by single family houses with well-groomed front lawns and gardens and an area generally considered to be clean, quiet, remarkably safe, and “crawling with other families, au pairs, grandparents, preschools” (Abrams), nothing short of “a village unto itself” (Lippman 130). It is a part of Washington, D.C. which arguably proves that the “19th century developers who envisioned a green oasis lying not too far north of the central city clearly had insight, which has paid off for over 100 years,” as the Chevy Chase of present times is a “pleasant neighborhood where well-off (but not necessarily loaded) Washingtonians can find some peace and community while remaining in (relatively) close touch with the rest of the city to the south” (Abrams).

It is against this background that the stay-at-home, soccer-mom, eventual *femme-fatale* protagonist operates and exposes once more the economic imperative in noir fiction. Molly Haskell claims that while Italian and French versions of this vampish figure in noir “were allied with ‘the dark forces of nature’,” the version which gradually developed in the United States “was from the beginning allied with the ‘green forces of capitalism’” (qtd. in Boozer 20). Boozer further argues that in the

American tradition, “this figure largely abjures traditional romance and passive domesticity, choosing instead to apply her sexuality to homicidal plots in the service of greed” (Boozer 20). As the hopeless protagonist in Edgar G. Ulmer’s landmark film noir *Detour* (1945) observes, it is always for “the stuff you never have enough of. Little green things with George Washington’s picture that men slave for, commit crimes for, die for. It’s the stuff that has caused more trouble in the world than anything else we ever invented” (qtd. in Short 47).

The same fundamental insecurities and economic vulnerabilities which led to the postwar appearance of the *femme fatale* character in American noir fiction are at the center of Lippman’s narrative, whose protagonist’s economic status is challenged and whose lifestyle is threatened by a mid-life crisis divorce she failed to see coming. A charming middle-class dermatologist’s wife, Sally Holt

had consistently been one of the most sought-after for one simple fact: She was a wonderful listener. Whether it was her eight-year-old son or her eighty-year-old neighbor or some male in-between, Sally rested her chin in her palm and leaned forward, expression rapt, soft laugh at the ready. (Lippman 117)

As a stay-at-home mom – but “[t]o be a stay-at-home mother in Northwest D.C. was to be nothing less than a general, the Patton of the car pool, the Eisenhower of the HOV lane” (Lippman 118) –, Sally was very organized and

ruthlessly efficient with her time and motion, her radio always tuned to WTOP to catch the traffic on the eights, her brain filled with alternative routes and illegal shortcuts, her gaze at the ready to thaw the nastiest traffic cop. She could envision her section of the city in a three-dimensional grid in her head, her house on Morrison and the Dutton School off Nebraska the two fixed stars in her universe. (Lippman 118)

However, when her husband of seventeen years asked for divorce, the same universe shattered. And when she decided to keep the house, it meant that she had to buy her husband out of his share. But as she failed to understand the details of the mortgage plan, she finds herself three years later unable to afford paying for the house while preserving her

family's lifestyle. She is quick to identify the solution, though, upon realization that her estranged husband "carried enough life insurance to pay off the mortgage, with plenty left over for the children's education" (Lippman 124). The plan's execution, however, proves rather cumbersome: "Didn't anyone die anymore? Couldn't the killers and drug dealers who kept the rest of Washington in the upper tier of homicide rates come up to Northwest every now and then, take out a housewife or two? Why not?" (Lippman 124). That is, the execution was cumbersome until the charismatic protagonist finds the perfect victim to her seductive powers: a fellow stay-at-home mother of two, who

[i]n a school renowned for dowdy mothers . . . was one of the dowdiest, gone to seed in the way only a truly preppy woman can. She had leathery skin and a Prince Valiant haircut, which she sheared back from her face with a grosgrain ribbon headband. Her laugh was a loud, annoying bray and if someone failed to join in her merriment, she clapped the person on the back as if trying to dislodge a lump of food. (Lippman 124)

Riding the high wave of her unexpected love affair and manipulated into malfeasance by the scheming wife, the unsuspecting woman literally becomes the vehicle for Sally's dark endeavor as she drives Doctor Holt over with her car on her way back from the children's school:

The remorseful driver told the police that her children had been bickering in the backseat over what to watch on the DVD player and she had turned her head, just for a moment, to scold them. Still distracted by the children's fight when she turned around, she had seen Holt and tried to stop, but hit the accelerator instead. Then, as her children screamed for real, she had driven another 100 yards in panic and hysteria. If the dermatologist wasn't killed on impact, he was definitely dead when the SUV finally stopped. But the only substance in the driver's blood was caffeine, and while it was a tragic, regrettable accident, it was clearly an accident. (Lippman 129)

Ironically, the investigators appeared surprised by the low incidence of similar accidents, given "the congestion in D.C., the unwieldy SUVs, the mothers' frayed nerves, the nature of dusk with its tricky gray-green light" (Lippman 130). Once again, the noir heroine gains her financial independence as an outcome of a "murder-for-profit conspiracy with her lover" (Boozer 21).

Meanwhile, tensions are present not only in the mean streets or within broken family homes, but also on Capitol Hill. With its own “geography of mind, will, and luck,” the Hill is in itself a “gang turf carved by the blades of Congress” (Grady 212). Some narratives choose to focus on the machinations and the quid pro quos behind congressional decisions, acts of corruption and collusion, for which naïve and innocent men take the fall as “*Up here, the bottom line never changes*” (Grady 212, original italics) and Capitol Hill’s bottom line is “*It’s what you can get done*” (Grady 235-236, original italics). Yet another story deals with the so-called “Hill rats,” congressional aides who are most times arrogant young staffers, the “types who thought they owned the world just because they worked for self-serving blowhards who qualified as celebrities in D.C. (Slater 243). However, one of the bleakest narratives in the volume is constructed around the protagonist Jordan Port, a young and promising Republican darling, who finds himself shunned by influential people on the Hill because of his manuscript, *Betraying Ourselves*, which exposes the manner in which the Republican Party has betrayed Reagan’s conservative ideals:

The manuscript Port had written used Reagan’s words and ideals to challenge the direction the Right had taken since the opportunity of 9/11. Once [his editor] massaged the prose and smoothed out his newfound fanaticism, the book would be another Jordan Port bestseller. That could be deadly dangerous, a blueprint for a moderate coalition. (Fusilli 273)

Passionately believing that “Middle America is being compelled to act against its own interests ... tax relief, affordable health insurance, a promise fulfilled on Social Security” (Fusilli 273) by representatives who fail to put them first and hence, refusing to give up on release of this material, he is ultimately murdered at the orders of vengeful, venal politicians on the Hill, together with his female editor.

In his classic portrayal of metropolitan life, *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban praised the plasticity of cities and their infinite potential to be molded in our individual or collective images and, according to our intentions, claiming that the city we imagine, “the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city

one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture” (Raban 2).

Deemed by Charles Dickens a “city of magnificent intentions” and designed “on such a scale as to leave room for that aggrandizement and embellishment which the increase of the wealth of the nation will permit it to pursue at any period however remote . . .” (Krieger 191), the American capital was born out of the ambitious political project at the end of the 18th century as one of the nation’s great utopian quests, thus seemingly validating Anatole France’s famous quip that “it was Utopians who traced the lines of the first city” (qtd. in Upstone 85). Envisaged as a symbol for the young nation, itself the metaphorical City upon a Hill, and organized in its turn around the political core of Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C. shares in the country’s utopian project of a “holy experiment” in self-government and industry, to quote colonial founder William Penn (Williamson 53). In so doing, the capital city also mirrors this project’s “misguided idealism” and some of its dystopian features, such as “the extreme nationalism of such conceits as Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism; the political and corporate restraints placed on social and economic equality; and the despoiling of the environment in the name of progress” (Krieger xiii).

The volume under scrutiny cuts no corners in revealing the dark side of this capital city in what seems to be an open act of political protest and social activism on the part of authors engaged with the social world in which they are situated and which they write about. Taken together, the narratives in the *D.C. Noir* collection put forth a composite image of Washington, D.C. The atmosphere they create in their neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach is dark and heavy – too many drugs and weapons on the streets, too brutal gang wars, too many collateral victims, too deep the social divide. In line with noir fiction’s penchant for dysfunctional cities which seem to “intrinsically, inescapably, and almost naturally” lead to “an inclination to corruption, betrayal, and even the murder of other city dwellers” (Schupp 171), this capital appears plagued by violence which begets violence, by neglect, corruption, and sexualized greed, by mistrust and conflict, which affect both the people who fight crime and the people who commit it. In a world dominated by characters who would

“lie, steal, cheat, and even kill as they become more and more entangled in a web from which they cannot possibly extricate themselves” (Penzler x), “opportunity [is] fatality” (Ellroy xiii) and, consequently, most times human endeavors seem hopeless and the urban environment oppressive. It is a world where “[g]ood things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people (just like in real life!), which seems in line with noir’s cynicism and pessimism” (Conrad 2). Aided by the cynical tone of noir fiction, the stories in the Pelecanos-edited volume thus turn the tables on the exceptional nature of the city on the Hill. This act of reversal, evocative of so many others (e.g., the American Dream – American nightmare), speaks to a long-standing anti-utopian tradition in U.S. culture, whose passion for improvement is evenly matched by its zeal for (self-) denunciation.

Notes:

ⁱ The adjustable-rate mortgage is a type of mortgage which starts with a rather low interest rate for an initial period, but once this passes, the lender usually increases the interest rate for the loan. This type of mortgage falls under the oversight of the federal government.

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