

## PUBLIC BODIES,

PRIVATE I / EYES,  
and "US"

## IDENTITIES

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*I pulled away from the open door and pulled it open and went back through the hall into the living room. A face in the mirror looked at me. A strained, leering face. I turned away from it quickly (...)*

Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*, 1039

*Passing the open door of the wash cabinet I saw a stiff excited face in the glass. (Idem, 1127)*

*Then I carried my glass out to the kitchen and filled it with ice water and stood at the sink sipping it and looking at my face in the mirror. (Idem, 1177)*

### Public Bodies

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Consider the famous first paragraph of *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars. (Chandler, 1995: 589)

Of course, the description Philip Marlowe, Chandler's protagonist, here offers of himself is ironic. At the same time, in its specificity of detail, it neatly obeys the convention of detective fiction that calls for precise descriptions of places, things and people. Such detail and precision are not only completely in line with the professional habits of the detective, they also add to the air of realism this kind of fiction aims at. Yet, a harder look at this same paragraph reveals Marlowe's precision here to be deceptive. Indeed, whereas he is very forward in accurately, comprehensively yet economically enlightening us as to the clothes he is wearing, he is much less so when it comes to his physical characteristics. We merely hear

that he is "neat, clean, shaved and sober". Yes, but what kind of face and body does this neatness, cleanness, shaved-ness and soberness cover? In fact, this remains somewhat of a mystery throughout *The Big Sleep* and indeed all the further Chandler novels that have Marlowe for their hero.

What little we learn about Marlowe's physique comes to us through the mouth of other characters, and even then remains peculiarly vague. Right after Marlowe has introduced himself to us in *The Big Sleep*, for instance, he is met by what will turn out to be one of the daughters of the millionaire he is coming to see. Her opening remark to Marlowe is: "Tall, aren't you?". A little further on she adds, "handsome too ... and I bet you know it" (*Idem*, 590). Marlowe's answer consists of a grunt. In other words, he refuses to either confirm or disconfirm the girl's observation. *Farewell my Lovely*, the novel that follows upon *The Big Sleep* has no reference whatsoever to Marlowe's physical characteristics. In the third Marlowe novel, *The High Window*, the scene we just met with in *The Big Sleep* is repeated. Marlowe goes to interview a woman and finds her in a tête-à-tête not with her husband but with a boyfriend. It is clear that she does not appreciate the interruption. She runs her eyes over Marlowe, and then says to her boyfriend: "Big, isn't he? Too much for you to handle, I guess" (*Idem*, 1018). Later on, when Marlowe makes a verbal play for her, intimating that she might be more forthcoming with the information he is looking for were she to have a tête-à-tête with him instead, her reaction shows that she is clearly attracted to him.

Marlowe's decided reticence about his own physique, and as the Marlowe novels are all first-person narratives thereby also that of Chandler, is remarkable for three reasons. First of all, *The Big Sleep* is the first novel of a series featuring this same character as hero. Customarily, such first novels firmly establish the series protagonist by elaborate physical and character descriptions. Later novels in the series then briefly reiterate these same characteristics as help to the new as well as the recurring reader.

For the latter, these synoptic passages ensure the continuity of the character and of the series. For the former, they provide information necessary to situate the protagonist. In more contemporary series, as of the 1970s or so, a personal past is often also provided for the protagonist. In earlier series, this is very rare. To be given as little information as Chandler gives us about Marlowe, however, is rare too. To a certain extent, we might claim that there was no need for Chandler to detail this character in *The Big Sleep* as this novel incorporates material from his stories "Killer in the Rain" and "The Curtain" that earlier had already appeared in pulp magazines. The same would then hold for two other Marlowe novels, *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Lady in the Lake*, that likewise incorporate such material. Still, Chandler could hardly have expected his readers to have readily remembered these stories. Indeed, chances were that they had never read them at all – something Chandler himself rather may have counted on when incorporating already published material in these novels. In any case, none of the novels explicitly harks back to any details as to the physical appearance of the protagonists of these stories. >>

Moreover, if we look at the pulp stories that Chandler did not "cannibalise" (his own words) for the sake of any of his novels, we find that those that are closest in tone to the Marlowe novels, and that moreover, like these novels, feature a first-person narrator, are also very slow to come forward with physical details on their protagonists. This is the case with the two stories featuring private eye John Dalmás, "Red Wind" and "Trouble is My Business", but even more so with "Finger Man" and "Goldfish". In the first of these stories the hero remains nameless. In the second story, though, the hero refers back to the first story as an earlier adventure of his. He then also gives us his name: Carmady. Carmady has an office much like Marlowe's, and lives in the same sort of residential hotel as Marlowe. More importantly, "Finger Man" and "Goldfish" connect with *The Big Sleep* through the figure of Bernie Ohls, a



D. A. investigator who plays a role in the Marlowe novel as well as in the Carmady stories. The only thing we learn about Carmady's physique is that he is "five-eleven and a half" and weighs "one-ninety-five" (*Idem*, 361).

In the other pulp-stories of Chandler's, written in the third person, we learn considerably more about the protagonists. For instance, Mallory, the hero of the very first story Chandler ever wrote, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot", makes his entry as follows in the opening paragraph of the story:

The man in the powder-blue suit – which wasn't powder-blue under the lights of the Club Bolivar – was tall, with wide-set grey eyes, a thin nose, a jaw of stone. He had a rather sensitive mouth. His hair was crisp and black, ever so faintly touched with gray, as by an almost diffident hand. His clothes fitted him as though they had a soul of their own, not just a doubtful past. His name happened to be Mallory. (*Idem*, 5)

Mallory obviously is a fore-runner of Marlowe, witness the powder-blue suit, which with Chandler always is the hallmark of the good guy. But about Marlowe we are never told the kind of details we here so freely are regaled with concerning Mallory. In fact, by the time Chandler gets to *The Big Sleep*, and Marlowe becomes his leading man and the spokesman of Chandler's own vision on life and the world, all the outside trimmings have been filed carefully away. Marlowe is the perfect blank – solely focused through other characters' eyes as far as his physical appearance is concerned, and even then only in a very general way, to impress us that he is tall, looks strong, and is attractive in women's eyes. Yet this character, so utterly "in-distinctive", in the sense of "in-descript", became the hero of a series that established Chandler as an American "classic". Why this was so, I will come back to in a little while.

Now, I want to turn to the second reason why the scarcity of detail as to Marlowe's physical appearance is remarkable. In the Marlowe novels, all characters except Marlowe himself are

meticulously, even if often caustically, described. Have a look, for example, through Marlowe's eyes and in Marlowe's words, at the millionaire's daughter we met earlier:

She was twenty or so, small and delicately put together, but she looked durable. She wore pale blue slacks and they looked well on her. She walked as if she were floating. Her hair was a fine tawny wave cut much shorter than the current fashion of pageboy tresses curled in at the bottom. Her eyes were slate-gray, and had almost no expression when they looked at me. She come over near me, and smiled with her mouth and she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin too taut lips. Her face lacked color and didn't look too healthy. (*Idem*, 590)

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We find that the physical details Chandler, and Marlowe as Chandler's mouthpiece, here pays attention to are largely identical to those also noted with regard to Mallory, Chandler's very first pulp story private eye: clothes, size, eyes, hair, mouth. In addition, there are references to the character's way of walking and her skin color. These latter points are not unimportant, as it is these that Chandler often uses to stereotype the characters Marlowe meets with: for women they give us a clue as to their sexual attractiveness, for men they signal racial affiliation. Here, for instance, we have the boyfriend of the lady Marlowe goes to see in *The High Window*:

Tall, dark, with a clear olive skin, brilliant black eyes, gleaming white teeth. A narrow black mustache. Side-burns too long, much too long. White shirt with embroidered initials on the pocket, white slacks, white shoes. A wrist watch that curved halfway around a lean dark wrist, held on by a gold chain. A yellow scarf around a bronzed slender neck. (*Idem*, 1016)

This is obviously a latin lover, if not a plain gigolo – and equally obviously Marlowe disapproves of him, and of his sort. Or take the description of Elisha Morningstar, the numismatist

Marlowe visits in the same novel. It almost seems something straight out of a book of Jewish caricatures:

In the swivel chair at the desk sat an elderly party in a dark gray suit with high lapels and too many buttons down the front. He had some stringy white hair that grew long enough to tickle his ears. A pale gray bald patch loomed high up in the middle of it, like a rock above timberline. Fuzz grew out of his ears, far enough to catch a moth.

He had sharp black eyes with a pair of pouches under each eye, brownish purple in color and traced with a network of wrinkles and veins. His cheeks were shiny and his short sharp nose looked as if it had hung over a lot of quick ones in its time. A Hoover collar which no decent laundry would have allowed on the premises nudged his Adam's apple and a black string tie poked a small hard knot out at the bottom of the collar, like a mouse getting ready to come out of a mousehole. (*Idem*, 1029)

For some final examples of racial stereotyping I turn to Chandler's stories. In "Finger Man" a night-club owner is introduced as follows:

A door opened in the panelling, beyond the table nearest me. A very slight, very pale man came into the room. He had straight, lusterless black hair, a high bony forehead, flat, impenetrable eyes. He had a thin mustache that was trimmed in two sharp lines almost at right angles to each other. They came down below the corners of his mouth a full inch. The effect was Oriental. His skin had a thick, glistening pallor.  
(...)

He had a queer expression for an instant. Then he turned and slid away with a little sway of the shoulders. He pout his feet down flat and turned them out a good deal as he walked. His walk, like his face, was a little negroid. (*Idem*, 103)

And in "Pick-Up on Noon Street" the very first paragraph reads:

The man and the girl walked slowly, close together, past a dim stencil sign that said: Surprise Hotel. The man wore a purple

suit, a Panama hat over his shiny, slicked-down hair. He walked splay-footed, soundlessly. (*Idem*, 285)

It is not just Marlowe's racial "Others", though, that are detailed in the way I have just illustrated. The same thing is the case with his racial peers. The butler that shows Marlowe in at the Sternwood place in *The Big Sleep* is

A tall, thin, silver man, sixty or close to it or a little past it. He had blue eyes as remote as eyes could be. His skin was smooth and bright and he moved like a man with very sound muscles. (*Idem*, 591)

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And when in *The High Window* Marlowe takes a good look at a "blond man in a brown suit, dark glasses" and "a cocoa straw hat with a brown and yellow band" who has been tailing him, he finds that

At close quarters his face seemed young and pink and plump and the blond beard on his chin was very carelessly shaved. Behind the dark glasses his eyelashes flicked up and down rapidly. A hand on his knee tightened and pulled the cloth into wrinkles. There was a wart on his cheek just below the right eyelid. (*Idem*, 1024)

The question then is: why did Chandler in the Marlowe novels – the series that "made" him – opt for the form, first-person narration, that allowed for a minimal physical specification of his hero, and even then systematically withhold all such information? And why did such a hero become a popular success at the time of writing, and subsequently a classic in the genre? The answer, I think, is that Marlowe is an unspoken distillation of everything that makes Chandler's pulp story third-person private eyes or equivalents attractive to the main target audience of the 30s through the 60s: white middle-class America, or that portion of the American population that considers itself as such,



which is to say the mass of regularly employed, or aspiring to be, and self-employed. It is these people that were worst hit by the Great Depression, and that looked for reassurance and self-confirmation in the popular culture of the time, and hence also in detective or private eye fiction. It is precisely the "blankness" of Marlowe that allows him to become a role-model for this audience. His physical features need not be detailed: by default they mark him as the normative ideal of Depression through Eisenhower America's social silent majority. The rest are deviations that threaten this America: the Latino's and the Filipino's olive skin, the Jew's nose, the Negro's splay-foot, but also the rich man's belly, the punk's pockmarked face and unshaven chin, and so on.

Chandler's Marlowe, then, becomes the perfect incarnation of "us/ US" versus the rest, both below, gangsters that are often also "Others", and above, often "Others" too. As such, Marlowe's body becomes a "public body" in the sense that it can be substituted in the imagination of Chandler's contemporary reader for the latter's own ideal image of himself: the ordinary decent American, squeezed by the punks and heels, the gangsters and mobsters on the one hand, and by the idle rich on the other, as well as by "Others" in general, and often in combination. The difference is that Marlowe, smart and able private eye that he is, is in a position to *do* something about it all, whereas "we" are not. As such, also, he is that "dark knight" from the opening pages of *The Big Sleep* we all dream of being, but know we will never be. In very different incarnations, and offering sometimes almost diametrically opposed remedies, the formula Chandler invented would be continued down to the present by Ross Macdonald in his Lew Archer series, Mickey Spillane in his Mike Hammer novels, Robert B. Parker in the Spenser novels, and Lawrence Sanders in his Matt Scudder series. Especially with the later novels of the latter two authors, however, one sees not so much Chandler's "us/ US" affirming itself as detailing its falling apart.



## Private I/Eyes

In a move and a history now familiar to all of us students of American literature, from the 1980s on the consensus about a supposedly homogenous US-identity is replaced by what we have come to know as multiculturalism. Needless to say, private eye fiction has followed the general pattern, and many of the authors and works I mentioned in my opening paragraph belong with what we could call minority or ethnic private eye fiction. Perhaps equally needless to say, these developments have also had consequences for the way the protagonists of these novels are described physically. >>

Let us begin illustrating this by way of *The Monkey's Raincoat* (1987) of Robert Crais. This novel, the first in a very successful series starring Los Angeles private eye Elvis Cole, keeps up a running dialogue with the work of Chandler – at moments even quoting the master – and with the generic tradition of the hard-boiled detective novel the latter did so much to (co-)establish. Predictably, one way this shows is in the physical descriptions of the protagonist. There is a clear echo, for instance, of the self-description of Carmady in "Goldfish" I quoted earlier, in Cole listing himself as being "five feet eleven and one-half inches tall" and weighing "one hundred seventy-six pounds" (Crais, 1987: 2). Crais obviously ironizes Chandler though when he has Cole introduce himself on the first page of the novel, and in a scene where he has some clients drop in on him, as follows:

Janet Simon looked like a dancer who'd spent a lot of time at it. Lean and strong. Good bones. She wore tight beige cotton pants and a loose cotton shirt striped with shades of blue and pink and red. No panty line. I hoped she didn't think I was déclassé in my white Levi's and Hawaiian shirt. Maybe the shoulder holster made up for it. (*Idem*, 1)

Another author to play around with the Chandler conventions regarding the physical detailing of the private eye is Janet Evanovich. Her heroine, Stephanie Plum – not really a regular private eye but a bounty hunter – gives us this first glimpse of herself as seen by another character in the first novel of the series, *One for the Money* (1994):

Gruber's eyes were locked halfway down my chest. I'm a 36B. Respectable but far from overwhelming on my 5'7" frame. I was wearing black spandex shorts and an oversized hockey jersey. Not what you would call a seductive outfit, but Lenny was ogling anyway. (Evanovich, 1995: 7)

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In *Four to Score* (1998), better to ensnare a skip, Stephanie does not strap on a gun, but tarts herself up as follows: "I was dressed in four-inch FMPs (short for "Fuck-me-pumps", because when you walked around in them you looked like Whorehouse Wonder Bitch) (...) I shimmied into a low-cut black knit dress that was bought with the intent of losing five pounds, gunked up my eyes with a lot of black mascara and beefed up my cleavage by stuffing Nerf balls into my bra" (Evanovich, 1999: 40).

Despite Stephanie's deprecatory evaluation of her own physical attractiveness, in fact, the rest of *One for the Money*, and the subsequent novels in the series, confirm that Stephanie is a very attractive woman indeed, or so most men seem to think. This makes her perhaps in one sense the female equivalent to Chandler's Marlowe, but it obviously does not make her very apt as an enforcer of the law. In fact, Joe Morelli, a police detective and Stephanie's long time on-again off-again lover, in the second novel in the series, *Two for the Dough* (1996), bluntly calls her "the worst bounty hunter in the history of the world" (Evanovich, 1996: 301). Still, Stephanie usually gets the job done, if often with a little help from friends. So does Crais's Cole, in a more orthodox way. What is clear, though, is that in their respective protagonists and their physical appearance

both Crais and Evanovich are humorously, but at bottom no less seriously, chronicling the demise of an unspoken consensus as to what constitutes "the" "us/US"-identity – in fact, they are gently ridiculing the very idea of such a consensus as embodied in an ideally, because normatively, shaped and dressed white male private detective.

The same critique of any such normative ideal comes through even stronger, of course, in ethnic detective fiction. It takes a different form, though, than it does with Crais and Evanovich. In fact, it takes the form of that kind of double consciousness W. E. B. Dubois spoke about when analyzing how black folks felt, at least in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, when it came to their own being, also physically. They looked at themselves as though through the eyes of white people, uncomfortably aware of their difference from what was considered normative – the normativeness precisely of Chandler's Marlowe. It is this awareness too that shows in the protagonist of Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), an African American called "Easy" Rawlins, when a man walks into the Los Angeles bar he is having a drink in:

I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948.

I had spent five years with white men, and women, from Africa to Italy, through Paris, and into the Fatherland itself. I ate with them and slept with them, and I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just as afraid to die as I was. (Mosley, 1999: 9)



Though Rawlins is quick to neutralize his own fear by reminding himself that all men are equal when it comes to certain things, it is clear that his initial gut reaction points otherwise. In fact, throughout *Devil in a Blue Dress* and the rest of the Rawlins series, the protagonist is about as reticent about his own physique and appearance in general as Marlowe is. Unlike with Marlowe, though, this does not make Mosley's hero into the incarnation of the unspoken normative ideal of a homogenous "US"-identity. It only serves to emphasize the difference there is between the "us" Rawlins represents and the putative "US" that white society stands for – in other words, it illustrates the refraction of any "us/US"-identity into many smaller "us-es" that all are "theys" to one another. If anything, later books in the Rawlins series grow increasingly militant as to the antagonism between black and other, particularly white, American identities.

The awareness of difference, however, is strong not just with African Americans in their line of descent from W. E. B. Dubois. It also comes through strongly in other detectives, often in mirror scenes in which the protagonists describe themselves, and particularly the way they differ from the putative normative "neutral" ideal. As such, they are compelled to turn a "private eye" upon their "private selves". In the various mirror scenes that dot the Marlowe novels, Marlowe invariably disappoints our hopes that finally we have him describe himself: he always draws a blank. How different is the situation of Henry Rios, the hero of a series by Michael Nava. Rios's double sense of estrangement comes out in *The Burning Plain* (1997) when he looks in the mirror and sees

a tall, thin man in khakis and a denim shirt and prematurely – well, at forty-five perhaps not so prematurely – white hair. Dark-skinned, the face unmistakably *mestizo* and clearly middle-aged. What did Richie say? After thirty-five gay men aged in dog years. (Nava, 1999: 52)

The play with generic conventions enters again with Dale Furutani's *Death in Little Tokyo* (1996), the first of the Ken Tanaka mysteries:

I looked at myself in the large mirror I had propped up against the wall and decided I still cut a pretty dashing figure. I figured I looked like a worthy recipient of the Silver dagger trophy for unraveling the L. A. Mystery Club's phony murder.

I was dressed in a tan trench coat and a gray hat. The props helped to compensate for my small frame and delicate features ... two curses for someone who secretly aspired to be a 1930s hard-boiled detective. Of course, my being a Japanese-American from Hawaii is also an impediment to this aspiration. The only Asian detectives I remember from old movies were Werner Olan doing his Charlie Chan bit or Peter Lorre doing an incredibly campy Mister Moto. At least Charlie Chan was from Honolulu, although nobody I've ever met from Hawaii actually looked and talked like Werner Olan did.

My face is round with a slightly squared jaw. My eyes are more deeply set than the Asian stereotype, but many Asians, particularly in Japan or Southeast Asia, have deep set eyes. I have the epicanthic fold that characterizes Asians everywhere, and of course my eye color is deep brown and I have black hair. (Furutani, 1996: 7-8)

Obviously, Tanaka, and Furutani through him, is conducting an elaborate discussion with the tradition of the private eye in fiction as well as the movies. Everything he sums up leads him to stress that he is different from the generic norm. Ironically, this is true even with regard to the portrayal of the most famous of movie Asian private eyes, Charlie Chan. The point is that Tanaka is a true Asian, whereas Chan-as-played-by-Olan was not. Neither, of course, was the creator of the Charlie Chan fiction series, Earl Derr Biggers. Eventually, Tanaka will turn into a real private eye himself, against the odds he himself has just listed. He always remains sharply, and in fact, like Rawlins in the eponymous series, increasingly so, aware of his different identity, as expressed most graphically in his different physique.

Finally, let's move on to Sujata Massey's Rei Shimura series. This series displays an interesting new development, in that it has an American from ethnic origins return to the land of her forefathers — actually, her father — to there do some (amateur) sleuthing. In the novel initiating the series, *The Salaryman's Wife* (1997), we first meet Rei on a Japanese train:

It was dark outside, turning the train's door glass into a mirror. I saw myself as I always appear: small, Japanese-American, and with the kind of cropped haircut that's perfect in San Francisco but a little too boyish for Japanese taste. (Massey, 1997: 2)

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The difference here is not with the putative homogeneity of the American ideal, but with the Japanese norm. Through her physique, or her self-description of it, Rei expresses not an unease with her specific slice of multicultural America, but rather with the thrust for uniformity of Japanese identity. What makes this novel, and the entire Rei Shimura series, particularly interesting is that it is written by an English-born young woman of mixed Indian-German descent, educated on the East Coast of the United States, and for a while resident in Japan. Unlike Mosley, Nava, or Furutani, then, Massey does not seem to be using the genre of the private eye, nor the "bodily" conventions of that genre, to express a particular ethnic grudge vis-à-vis any overarching "US"-identity that is experienced as oppressive. Rather, she seems to be using the genre and its conventions to celebrate the freedom in variety of multicultural America.

### "US" Identities

American private eye fiction holds up a mirror for its primary public in which to recognize itself. In most of the novels I have here briefly considered, this effect is even underscored via mise en abyme mirror scenes. In this respect Marlowe's silence as to how he sees himself in the mirror scenes in *The High*



*Window* goes to support what is also suggested by the overall vagueness as to his physical appearance throughout the Marlowe novels: he is the greatest common denominator for 30s to 60s "us/US". Still, the strain, the leer, and the stiff excitement that linger on Marlowe's face in the first and second epigraphs to this essay, and the self-interrogation that speaks from the third epigraph, undercut the self-evident "Mister America" confidence and mastery he otherwise exudes. Marlowe's "private eye" questions his "public body", and concomitantly the sense of identity the latter both reflects and underpins. The more recent ethnic detectives on the contrary seek affirmation in their mirror image, constituting their private bodies as representative of both difference from the all-American norm and solidarity with a specific form of hyphenated, but certainly not lesser, "us-American" identity. <<

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