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## *Lost in Cinematic Translation: The “Soft-Boiled” Housewife in *The Blank Wall* and American Gender Politics after WWII*

Since its publication in 1947, Elisabeth Sanxay Holding’s *The Blank Wall* has garnered a small but illustrious group of admirers, including figures of the caliber of Raymond Chandler and Alfred Hitchcock, whose names are synonymous with noir and suspense. In 1950, Chandler wrote a letter to his British publisher, Hamish Hamilton, recommending Sanxay Holding as “the top suspense writer of them all” (Gardiner and Walker 60) and singling out *The Blank Wall* as one of her best novels. Nine years later, as if heeding Chandler’s call, Hitchcock included *The Blank Wall* in his anthology *My Favourites in Suspense (Part Two)*, a remarkable choice considering that Sanxay Holding’s is the only novel in what is otherwise a collection of short stories. More recently, Sarah Waters has added her voice to the chorus of praise for this “terrific thriller” (online), which—having been out of print for decades—was given a new lease of literary life by the London-based independent publisher Persephone Books in 2003. Endorsements from prestigious quarters notwithstanding, Sanxay Holding is missing from scholarly accounts of early-twentieth-century-American crime writing. The same is true of other successful female practitioners of the genre of the same period, such as Vera Caspary and Dorothy B. Hughes, whose work tends to be remembered only as the source material for renowned film noirs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, what little academic interest Sanxay Holding has generated so far has been at one remove from her work, focusing on *The Reckless Moment*, the cinematic adaptation of *The Blank Wall*, directed by Max Ophüls in 1949.<sup>2</sup>

This essay also considers the novel alongside its early adaptation for the big screen, but it does so in order to redress the balance, drawing attention to the subversiveness of Sanxay Holding’s original take on the figure of the housewife and mother. My analysis will highlight subtle but significant differences in the novelistic and the cinematic portrayals of the female protagonist, as well as in their respective gender politics. Developed through her relationship with her children and—as has been noted before—with her domestic help, the characterization of the heroine in *The Blank Wall* is something of an anomaly in the hardboiled/noir canon.<sup>3</sup> Sanxay Holding’s creation is at odds both with traditional images of motherhood and with how the maternal role is typically reconfigured (as a tough, masculine act) by the conventions of early-twentieth-century crime narratives—on the rare occasions when mothers are allowed to feature prominently in thrillers, that is. As we will see, while the “hardboiled” female lead in *The Reckless Moment* usurps the patriarchal function and, in accordance with noir tropes, is punished for this transgression, the more nuanced protagonist of *The Blank Wall*—resourceful and vulnerable in equal measure, and constantly challenged by her offspring—displays at her core a strength of character that is tightly bound with her feminine qualities. In this and other ways, *The Blank Wall* sets up an opposition

between a pragmatic, feminine wisdom on the one hand, and a naive idealism, associated with youth and masculinity, on the other.

Sanxay Holding’s “soft-boiled” characterization of her heroine, and indeed of the male (anti-)hero, did not make it onto the big screen though; in the cinematic adaptation, the story-line is given the “noir treatment” and made to conform to a more customary representation of gender relations. The eccentricity of Sanxay Holding’s original narrative might explain its disappearance from the early twentieth-century hardboiled/thriller canon, which continues to be dominated by the likes of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, their “tough guys,” and their equally tough, highly sexualized “dames.” My reassessment of *The Blank Wall* shows a female writer challenging these noir stereotypes, stretching the conventions of the genre in order to cast light on the housewife’s predicament and the pitfalls of domesticity—a rather daring move in the context of the conservative climate of 1950s America.

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*The Blank Wall* tells the story of Lucia Holley, a housewife and mother left alone in charge of the family while her husband Tom is away, stationed “somewhere in the Pacific” (3) during WWII. Lucia’s war-time responsibilities pertain exclusively to the domestic realm: running the household at a time of (relative) austerity, supporting Tom with regular, upbeat letters with news from home, and keeping her teenage children and her elderly father safe and in good cheer. From the start, it is obvious that Lucia finds none of these tasks particularly congenial or rewarding, even if they are, presumably, a mere intensification of her pre-war duties. Unsurprisingly, the narrative is set in motion by a serious disruption to this humdrum, suburban routine when Lucia makes the short journey to New York City to confront the thirty-five-year-old, about-to-be-divorced Ted Darby and put an end to his burgeoning relationship with her seventeen-year-old daughter Bee. Later the same day, Bee arranges to meet the undeterred Darby in the boathouse adjacent to the family home, in what symbolically reiterates the incursion of moral seediness and chaos into the domestic environment. From here on, Lucia’s exposure to, and involvement in, criminal activities unfolds with the gradual inevitability that distinguishes the best noir tradition. The following day, Lucia discovers Darby’s body, pierced by an anchor, outside the boathouse and promptly decides to hide the corpse in order to protect her family from scandal. Already on the wrong side of the law because of her cover-up of this accident, Lucia then finds herself the target of a blackmailing plot. Even before Darby’s body is discovered by the police, she is approached by Martin Donnelly, who (with his partner-in-crime Nagle) is in possession of Bee’s compromising letters to her erstwhile suitor; Darby himself had handed over this correspondence as collateral for a loan. The development of the relationship between Donnelly, who gets increasingly reluctant to see the extortion through, and his victim, who feels ever more isolated and misunderstood by her family, becomes the narrative engine of the novel, and provides its final twist in the plot. In the end, Donnelly takes Lucia’s side against Nagle, to the point that he kills his criminal associate and

brings the woman’s ordeal to a close. Having handed back the letters and—for good measure—the jewels that Lucia had pawned in her desperate attempt to raise the blackmail money, Donnelly turns himself in for Nagle’s murder, and rather gallantly takes the blame for Darby’s manslaughter too, conveniently disappearing from Lucia’s life. This sketchy summary, however, does not do justice to the complexity of Sanxay Holding’s text; in particular, the ostensible neatness of the resolution belies the fact that this is not a story of redemption for the villain, tamed and turned into an exemplary, gentlemanly hero by the influence of the good woman/angel of the hearth—nor is it the tale of a woman’s temporary, necessary foray into a masculine world and of her subsequent, unproblematic return into the fold of domestic bliss.

The novel’s profound disillusionment with the condition of women, and with the values and gender roles extolled by American society in the 1940s and ’50s, is thrown into relief by a comparison with its 1949 cinematic adaptation, whose characterization of the two protagonists is much more clear-cut, in its debt to the aesthetics of film noir. Starring Joan Bennett as Lucia and James Mason as Donnelly, *The Reckless Moment* has been hailed as “one of the most radical critiques of the patriarchal family to be found in American cinema” (Lang 261), and an “original combination of ... the ‘lady in a jam’ type of thriller and the ‘mother coping in husband’s absence’ domestic drama which was common during World War II” (Barry Salt, qtd. in Lang 261). Set in the aftermath of the war, the film is given a suitably noirish West Coast location; the light, spacious, and “charming community of Balboa, about fifty miles from Los Angeles”—as it is introduced by a buoyant voiceover—provides a vivid contrast to the often dark, claustrophobic, business-like interiors of the nearby metropolis. Still, the post-war setting does not interfere with the basic premise of the story, with its focus on the besieged woman left alone in charge of the household. After an absence of three years, presumably on a military posting during the recent conflict, Tom is now frequently away on business.

Conversely, Lucia’s constant presence is taken for granted. The film loses no time in foregrounding Lucia’s accountability to her family for her every movement; as she drives off for her meeting with Darby, a curious David, her fifteen-year-old son, asks her where she is going, and later on, back from LA, she finds Bea (Bee) having a shower in her own en-suite, while David insists with his question, “How come you went to LA this morning and didn’t tell any of us?” The two children are thus introduced in the acts of keeping an eye on their mother and invading her personal space. This lack of privacy is also evident in Lucia’s



James Mason and Joan Bennett in *The Reckless Moment*

stunted interactions with Tom; when he phones home (to announce that he will be away until after Christmas!), Lucia must take the call in the presence of the entire family. Under such scrutiny, she feels unable to tell her husband how much she loves him, let alone to confide in him, and disclose her troubling encounter with Darby. In this way, the possibility of communicating with Tom by phone, which should render him more present and easily available, is actually deployed to emphasize the distance between the two spouses. Like the original novel, this early cinematic adaptation also makes a point of underscoring Lucia’s inability to raise any significant amount of money without her husband; the dispiriting visits to the bank, that insists on Tom’s signature on any paperwork, and a loan company are followed by a meagerly successful call on the pawn shop in both versions of the story. Even more explicit, the burden of domesticity on Lucia is underscored by *The Reckless Moment* in the course of a conversation where Donnelly remarks that “we are all involved with each other.” In order to exemplify his point, he then utters the extraordinary line, “You have your family. I have my Nagle.” This statement is meant to draw attention to the connections we all have in our lives and, in the context of the previous exchange, it alludes to the obligations and responsibilities that are part and parcel of these relationships. Yet with his nonchalant, matter-of-fact observation, Donnelly effectively compares Lucia’s nearest and dearest to a vicious, overbearing blackmailer. Earlier on in the same scene, he had spelled out unequivocally the oppressiveness of the domestic institution, with a rhetorical question to Lucia, “You’re quite a prisoner, aren’t you?” Needless to say, Lucia’s quick, affronted denial does nothing but confirm that this line of inquiry has indeed hit a sore spot, although it is interesting to notice that the refutation does occur.

In *The Blank Wall*, there are no such refutations on Lucia’s part; rather, the protagonist’s domestic imprisonment is given emphasis in various ways. For a start, the novel allows us to follow directly Lucia’s train of thoughts, and shows no hesitation in ascribing to its heroine the recognition that the roles of wife and mother make huge, and often unacceptable, demands on women. If the idea of wedded bliss is given short shrift with angry, blunt honesty in one of Lucia’s unspoken outbursts—“People are *idiots* to talk about getting married and being your own mistress, so much more free than women with jobs” (80)—the maternal myth gets punctured in a fraught exchange between Lucia and Bee who, like her brother, often adopts a chastising tone toward her (female) parent:

“Mother,” said Bee, “you’ve made things queer enough, as it is. When Lieutenant Levy asked me when you were coming home, I couldn’t tell him. *I didn’t know where you were!*”

“Well, why should you always know where I am?”

“*Mother!*”

That word was like a wave, like a tide beating against her. Mother! Where have you been? What were you doing? Open your door, when I knock. Answer, when

I ask. Be there, always, every moment, when I want you. It’s inhuman ... she thought. (187)



David checking on Lucia

Sanxay Holding’s characterization of the children as self-righteous, petulant young tyrants plays a major part in giving us the measure of the restrictions on Lucia’s independence. There are several moments in the narrative where we witness a jarring, and deliberately ironic, role reversal in the parental-filial relationship, such as, for example, when Lucia has to sneak out of the house in order to “play” (swim in the lake or use the motorboat by herself) without

incurring the censure of her son. Later on, Donnelly’s appearance on the scene provides the children with a further reason to reprimand their mother, remarking on her unbecoming association with this stranger in ever more patronizing and sanctimonious tones. Elsewhere, the constant surveillance to which Lucia is subjected by her children is associated to the world of law enforcement; Lucia becomes conscious of the similarity between Lieutenant Levy, the officer in charge of the investigation over Darby’s death, and her own son, “[Levy] talks like a grown-up David. Maybe David will be a lawyer. Or a policeman” (105).<sup>4</sup>

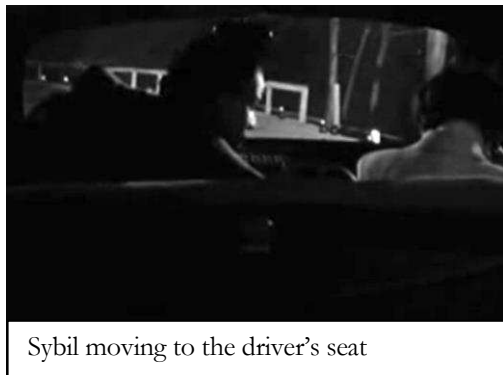
Lucia’s limited freedom of movement is dealt with differently on the screen than on the page; in *The Reckless Moment* the issue mostly comes up, matter-of-factly, in discussions with Donnelly about the logistics of their encounters, or Lucia’s access to money, but otherwise we are not privy to the strength of the emotions roused in the protagonist by her children’s constant surveillance and requests for attention (as we are in the novel<sup>5</sup>). The children’s condescending attitude and judgmental interferences are decidedly softened in *The Reckless Moment*, where David is characterized as an active, happy-go-lucky, and fundamentally immature child—content with messing about with engines, scampering around in a permanent state of partial undress (he is often seen with no shirt, no footwear, and sporting swimming trunks), inquisitive but not disrespectful, and never as earnest as his counterpart on the page. In fact, in places, he comes across as a figure of fun, providing much needed comic relief to the darkness of the main plot.<sup>6</sup> His disheveled attire and carefree demeanor also work as an interesting contrast to Lucia’s perfectly groomed appearance, the guardedness epitomized by her sunglasses,<sup>7</sup> and her



Lucia in sunglasses and Ted’s body

professional, no-nonsense attitude to parenting—the marks of a woman determined to retain control, and capable of doing so (see her peremptory injunctions for David to get dressed, and her firm handling of Bea, which is so different from the mother-daughter relationship of the original novel, as we will see later on). Beyond the allusions to incarceration and police surveillance, in both texts the most telling denunciation of the housewife’s thankless plight comes from Lucia’s close relationship with her African-American maid Sibyl (spelled Sybil in the credits of *The Reckless Moment*). A major character, especially in *The Blank Wall*, Sibyl/Sybil is described and/or shown to have Lucia’s unreserved trust and sincere respect.

In the novel, Lucia often compares herself unfavorably to her maid, whose many qualities—efficiency, poise, generosity of spirit, perceptiveness, prudence—she gratefully admires. On her part, Sibyl/Sybil is the only member of the household to have realized that Lucia finds herself in a terrible fix; this is particularly evident in *The Blank Wall*, where Sibyl also instinctively takes to Donnelly as if in prescient awareness of his fundamental good nature. (Sibyl pragmatically counsels Lucia to accept Donnelly’s gifts of choice cuts of meat from the black market and, another wartime luxury, the laundry services he can procure through one of his shady connections). In *The Reckless Moment*, there is much less scope to develop Sybil’s role, yet she features in a key scene toward the end of the film, when she accompanies Lucia in pursuit of Donnelly. Injured after



Sybil moving to the driver’s seat

his murderous confrontation with Nagle, Donnelly drives off to dispose of the body, but loses control of his car and is found by the two women in a fatal road accident.<sup>8</sup> This scene is so much more remarkable when we realize that it is used to let mistress and maid literally swap places; distraught by Donnelly’s death, Lucia is too shaken to drive and asks Sybil to go behind the wheel, in what—

according to Frances Williams (the actress who played Sybil)—was probably “the first time ... that an African American woman had driven a car in a Hollywood film” (Lutz Bacher, qtd. in Scruggs 23). The affinity and complicity between Lucia and Sibyl/Sybil convey a strong intimation that domesticity is a (mild) form of slavery. Indeed, in his analysis of *The Reckless Moment*, Charles Scruggs goes so far as to say that slavery itself is the real crime that haunts the narrative.<sup>9</sup> If, in the days of the Hays Code, “Ophüls had to tread gingerly over the film’s racial terrain” (Scruggs 23), in her novel Sanxay Holding can afford to flesh out Sibyl’s character, fill us in on her background (her husband is serving a long prison sentence for having hit a white man, in self-defense), and celebrate from the start her symbiotic relationship with Lucia, “They had been together, day in and day out, for eight years, in complete harmony” (21).<sup>10</sup> Sanxay Holding also makes an overt reference to slavery in one

of Lucia’s angry interior monologues, “I’m not a child, or an idiot. I’m not a slave, either. I can go to New York whenever I think best, and I don’t intend to be cross-examined by my own children” (110). Once again, alongside the image of bondage, Lucia draws attention to a generational role reversal, pointing out how her children infantilize, disempower, and control her. Bee and David have claimed for themselves a position of authority so strong that the family as an institution is reconfigured as a tyrannical prison state.

More importantly, the deep sympathy between Lucia and Sibyl becomes a catalyst for Sanxay Holding’s observations about the true meaning of courage. (This would make for a fascinating theme in a thriller movie and yet, tellingly, it gets completely lost in the novel’s adaptation for the big screen.) In the face of adversity, Lucia realizes that she shares a common language with Sibyl—a language representative of an attitude toward life completely alien to the men in her family:

“... Don’t fret, ma’am. Sometimes there’s good luck in this life. No harm to hope for it.” ...

That was language Lucia could understand. Her father and her husband never spoke like that. In the blackest days of the war, old Mr. Harper had never had the slightest doubt of England’s victory; he considered doubt to be a form of treason. And Tom, when he went away, had had the same resolute optimism. (43)

In contrast to the “resolute optimism” embraced by her father and her husband, Lucia displays a much more pragmatic, less idealistic outlook on things:

... She believed that a shell or a bullet could strike a brave and hopeful man as readily as a miserable one. She did not believe that the guilty were always punished; or the innocent always spared. She believed, like Sibyl, that life was incalculable, and that the only shield against injustice was courage. She had courage. (43)

Lucia’s, and Sibyl’s, courage arises from the quiet realization that life is imponderable and often unfair, that it does not unfold along predictable narrative lines—an observation that brings to mind a similar point made by Virginia Woolf in “Modern Fiction” (1921), and Woolf’s own ensuing call for “courage and sincerity” (106) on the part of the novelist intent on being true to life. Conversely, Mr. Harper and Tom subscribe to a more traditional (pre-modernist, one is tempted to say) set of beliefs, distinguished by confidence, lack of uncertainties, and faith in time-honored principles—traits that are all typically epitomized by an old-fashioned definition of soldierly masculinity, with its steady moral coordinates, cool decisiveness, and unshakable bravado.

In *The Blank Wall*, the radical, “feminine” skepticism embodied by Sibyl and Lucia is also ascribed to Donnelly; he too is fundamentally an outsider—at best an



interloper—into the world of Mr. Harper and Tom. There is something indistinct and unfathomable about Donnelly’s appearance:

He was a handsome man, or could be, or had been. But there was something curiously blurred about him, like a fine drawing partly erased. His strong-boned face looked tired. His dark blue eyes looked somehow dim. (37)

It seemed to Lucia then that this big, stalwart man, of unimaginable experiences, was a creature infinitely more sensitive and more fragile than herself. (112)

Donnelly’s difference from the men in Lucia’s family is also traceable in his attitude toward war, compared to Mr. Harper’s. “In France and Belgium, [Donnelly] had seen some of the English regiments whose names were glorious and almost sacred to the old man” (44), but Donnelly’s own views on war are devoid of this idealistic, uncomplicated pomposity:

“I wasn’t easy about it [killing people during the war]. I was *young* then, and when I’d see some of the Boches ... when I’d see them lying dead in a field or maybe a forest, I’d think, was it me did that? And now, when you see the young lads going off again ... You’d think the devil rules the world.” (132, my italics).

Donnelly’s dismayed awareness of the reality of warfare, especially when set against the narrator’s choice of words to describe Mr. Harper’s patriotic feelings, is reminiscent of Frederic Henry’s incisive critique of the rhetoric of warfare in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and his embarrassment at “the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice” (165).

Seemingly impervious to such disillusionment, Tom instead has been cut from an altogether different cloth than Donnelly’s; he is a brave military hero, with a frank, direct countenance: “[Lucia] imagined Tom standing on the deck of a ship that was rushing through water; she could see his blunt-featured face raised to a sky sparking with southern stars” (97). Tom’s “readability” is aptly reflected in his letters, “so definite about things, so uncomplicated” (72), purveyors of easy comfort to his self-doubting wife, whose own experience of the world is aligned with that of fellow characters marginalized by American society: the African-American maid and the Irish immigrant.<sup>11</sup> Like them, Lucia is expected to accept her lot, conform to social norms, and be as inconspicuous as possible; even her teenage son wants her “to be not only conventional, and beyond measure respectable, but practically invisible” (222). The conservativeness and intransigence of such a position are unsettling, especially when we consider that in the novel they are presented as attributes of youth, rather than of those more obvious representatives of the patriarchal *status quo*. In other words, in *The Blank Wall* the decisiveness and ease with the world that elude Lucia, Sibyl, and Donnelly are not only associated with a traditional definition of masculinity, but resurface in the characterization of Lucia’s adolescent offspring who, as already discussed, are their mother’s fiercest censors and the guardians of her morality—

paradoxically that very same bourgeois, patriarchal morality that Bee ostensibly rebels against in her liaison with Darby.

At the beginning of the novel, Bee looks to the unconventional, bohemian flavor of Darby’s social circles to provide an antidote to her own “miserably dull” (6) home life, and an opportunity for emancipation from what she sees as her mother’s “terribly old-fashioned” (6) values. This initial conflict between mother and daughter seems to reflect a real generational difference in female aspirations; while, by and large, “[w]omen educated in the 10s and early 20s believed that marriage and career were incompatible” (Michel 161), Bee voices a more modern frustration with such restrictive options. She is especially critical of the notion that mothers should devote themselves exclusively to their role as homemakers, and avows that marriage and children will not confine her to the domestic sphere “[b]ecause the sort of mother who simply stays at home and has no outside life can’t help being narrow-minded” (152). Thus, the generational conflict that opens the narrative is perceived by Bee as an act of resistance specifically aimed against her mother, whom she identifies as a terrible, uninspiring role model. Lucia’s allegedly sheltered existence is what Bee wants to break away from, as she explains with brutal frankness, “But I’m not going to have a life like yours. If you can call it a life. Getting married at eighteen, right from school. Never really seeing anything or doing anything. No adventure, no color. I suppose you like feeling safe. Well, I don’t want to be safe” (34).

Initially, ever conscious of her own limitations, Lucia is very impressed with Bee’s bravado: “She’s—tough, Lucia thought astonished. . . . that child who had lived all her life at home, protected and cherished, was talking now like a *tough girl in a movie*” (30, my italics). The reference to media representations of hardboiled poise—the desirable self-assurance popularized so brilliantly by film noir—reminds us of Lucia’s fascination with similar fictional role models, a susceptibility that coexists with the conviction that she cannot live up to their example.<sup>12</sup> Even the least attentive of readers, however, will have noticed that Lucia is downplaying (as she is wont to) her own toughness and ingenuity, traits that are deeply connected with her experience as a *femininely* strong and quick-witted—or, in a manner of speaking, “soft-boiled”—housewife. Take the instinctive decision to dispose of Darby’s corpse; while the cinematic adaptation reconfigures it as (one of) the “reckless moment(s)” of the title, Sanxay Holding presents it as an automatic, but not unthinking, reaction, whose necessity is fully understood and embraced by Lucia. She immediately recognizes how the crisis at hand calls upon the very qualities that she has had to develop in the fulfilment of her role as protector of the household: “She had the resourcefulness of the mother, the domestic woman, accustomed to emergencies. Again and again she had had to deal with accidents, sudden illnesses, breakdowns. For years she had been the person who was responsible in an emergency” (15). Following this line of reasoning, the disposal of Darby’s corpse becomes another domestic chore, albeit a particularly unpleasant one; dutifully, Lucia overcomes her instinctive repugnance by recalling the memory of when she had to put down a family pet, or

tend to her son David, unconscious and covered in blood, after a fall down the cellar stairs (16).

The fact that obstructing the course of justice is couched in terms of emergency “housework” makes an interesting contrast to what is probably the best-known thriller of the 1940s to focus on a single mother, James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* (1941). There, and in its attendant, eponymous 1945 film adaptation, the professionalization of domestic skills, when Mildred becomes the owner of a successful chain of restaurants, functions as the most visible marker of the woman’s transgression into a male sphere; as Pam Cook explains, “Mildred’s take-over of the place of the father has brought about the collapse of all social and moral order in her world” (75). *The Blank Wall*, instead, denies this causal relationship, insisting on Lucia’s distinctly feminine take on fulfilling her role as the protector of the household in lieu of her absent husband. The continuity between the domestic and the criminal, highlighted in the passage above, is later reinforced by references to the black market and to the (ironically named) “Regal Snowdrop” (68), the laundry service provided by a young man of not altogether spotless appearance and credentials. Moreover, Lucia’s shopping list, inadvertently left near Darby’s corpse, is the clue that leads Lieutenant Levy to make a connection between the housewife and the man’s mysterious demise. Sanxay Holding’s emphasis on the homemaker’s involvement in crime *in her function as homemaker* goes against the conventional dichotomy between *femmes fatales* and girls-next-door captured in classic film noirs such as *Out of the Past* (1947). By contrast, Sanxay-Holding’s Lucia inhabits a middle-ground; she is neither scheming like the dangerous “dolls and dames” of the noir world, nor passive and “house-trained” like their angelic counterparts.<sup>13</sup> Her actions are dictated by a resigned, feminine expediency, accompanying the understandable desire to protect her family; nevertheless, this protective attitude should not be mistaken for the uncritical, wholehearted embrace of the maternal and wifely ideal ascribed to Lucia by Bee, whose own feistiness and rebelliousness turn out to be only skin-deep.

As the narrative progresses, Lucia comes to realize that Bee’s bluster and worldliness are a by-product of her naivety and immaturity—the recklessness of youth, one might say. Such unthinking and unwavering subscription to a code of



Bee as the spirited rebel

plucky confidence is shared by all the members of Lucia’s family: Tom as the courageous soldier, Mr. Harper as a benign, parsimonious, stiff-upper-lipped older man, David as the patriarch-in-waiting and, of course, Bee as the spirited rebel. Ultimately, as they remain essentially undisturbed by the strange comings-and-goings of Darby, Nagle, and Donnelly, Lucia begins to see them in a different light—not so much brave, as naively incautious, “*They were too innocent*. They

seemed this morning like victims, pitifully unaware of what darkly menaced them” (77-78, my italics). Unlike the rest of the family, instead, Lucia must make a conscious effort to inhabit the role of competent, reliable housewife—see, for example, her determined attempts to dress up for, and act, the part<sup>14</sup>—and never stops questioning herself, and the rightfulness and wisdom of her decisions. Sanxay Holding’s take on the generational conflict, and her resolution of the confrontation between mother and daughter, thus provide a further, dark commentary on the gender politics of the time. They undercut any prospect that the aftermath of World War II might promote female emancipation, as it had happened instead in the follow-up to the Great War, most notably in the granting of women’s suffrage in countries like the United States in 1919 and Britain in 1918. Sanxay Holding’s intimations have proven to be perceptive, for the end of World War II was marked by an opposite trend toward the reinstatement of conservative gender roles in America. After the armistice, in a “dramatic reversal of the wartime influx of women into the labor force, millions of women decided against acquiring a higher education and pursuing a career and instead concentrated on rearing their children and keeping house” (Mintz and Kellogg 175). As cultural historians have been keen to remind us, this choice was not completely self-determined; women’s return to the domestic fold was presented as a duty by the post-war American political rhetoric, with its emphatic identification of the family as the lynchpin of democratic society.<sup>15</sup> The golden age of the nuclear family in the 1950s is presaged in *The Blank Wall* by Bee’s striking U-turn with regard to her vehement call for unconventionality—a change of direction anticipated by her decision to drop out of art school, abandoning her bohemian aspirations in order to enroll in a “two-year secretarial course” (151). In the end, Lucia’s daughter morphs from the wild child who does not want to be safe, and who claims that she will continue to work even after marriage and children, to the domesticated little woman who offers to “look after the housekeeping for a while” (229) so that her mother can recover from (what Bee thinks is) the folly of her relationship with Donnelly.

This final reconciliation between mother and daughter happens through an ironic exchange of their initial circumstances; the narrative had opened with Lucia’s determination to defend Bee from the threat of a real unsavory and manipulative character, but it closes with Bee consolidating her self-appointed role as custodian of her mother’s virtue on the basis of a completely wrong assumption. Bee misinterprets her mother’s relationship with Donnelly as the “pitiable, last fling of a middle-aged woman” (229), and thinks that sweeping it under the carpet—to use a housewifely metaphor—will restore the old domestic order. The illusoriness and artificiality of this order, however, remain clearly visible to Lucia and Sibyl, as intimated in the memorable conclusion of the novel, “Sibyl came in, with tea and cinnamon toast. The butter on the toast was margarine, colored yellow; the cinnamon was artificial. ... But nobody knows the difference, [Lucia] thought. Only Sibyl and me” (230-31). In the 1949 film, the demystification of the domestic idyll is still apparent, but it is articulated in a different, less nuanced manner. The recklessness of youth and of the

unproblematic idealism of the Harper family (as the Holleys are renamed in the film) become Lucia’s recklessness, as she tries—and for the most part succeeds—to behave in a decisive, manly fashion. As Robert Lang has perceptively observed, Lucia’s destruction of the letter about Darby to Tom, and Bea’s part in Darby’s accidental death—to which we may want to add Lucia’s efficient disposal of the body—“are reckless [gestures]. They are examples of impulsive behavior that *pretends* control over the situation but actually avoids confrontation of it. . . . Lucia decides to act in a way she obviously thinks men act—alone, and resolutely. She takes a *role* (the role of ‘the man of the house’), which turns out to be unwise” (263).<sup>16</sup> With this starker, more masculine characterization, it is no wonder that Lucia gets drawn into an extreme version of the original plot. The story culminates with a truly dramatic conclusion, made somewhat inevitable by the fact that the relationship with Donnelly has become suggestively intimate—and for this, Donnelly will pay with his life, rather than a mere prison sentence. Gone are the deferential distance and touching practicality of the food offerings and laundry services that Donnelly conjured up in *The Blank Wall*—gifts, always made *in absentia*, meant to alleviate the wartime domestic discomforts in the Holley household. These sensible attentions had marked Donnelly as a humble, *chaste* admirer, from a lower social class than Lucia, who is paid homage to in her role of homemaker.

The characterization of Donnelly in *The Reckless Moment* intimates a more confidential relationship, as witnessed by the amusingly domestic scene in the drugstore. Donnelly is cast as a substitute husband; as he attends to Lucia’s family shopping, much to the curiosity of the local grocer, he makes an impulsive buy and presents the chain-smoking Lucia with a cigarette-holder. There is an assumption of closeness, even a certain transgressive flirtatiousness, in this personal gift, thought of for Lucia as a modern, alluring, emancipated woman, who had better not smoke as much as she does (as Donnelly reproaches her at one point), but in the meantime may as well do so in style, and with minimum harm to her beauty and health.<sup>17</sup> The cinematic Lucia’s greater self-possession and determination also shine through in her diminished reliance on Sybil in matters of household management and private comfort; until the remarkable ending, when the two swap places in the car, Lucia interacts with Sybil as a fair, caring, efficient employer dealing with a devoted employee. Besides, in *The Reckless Moment* Lucia displays an assertive and confident parenting style. In particular, the conflict with Bea is much less pronounced, and is resolved almost instantly, since the girl turns to her mother for help and reassurance as soon as she realizes, to her great distress, what a squalid character Darby truly is. Finally, in the rapid conclusion following Nagle’s murder, the distance between Lucia’s bourgeois moral code and Donnelly’s underworld is



Donnelly shopping with Lucia



all but erased by the two characters’ willingness to make extreme sacrifices for each other’s sake. Lucia is unhesitating in her suggestion that she should go to the police and tell the whole truth, including an account of Darby’s accident; she is therefore prepared to risk her daughter’s reputation, and potentially make Bea vulnerable to the charge of manslaughter, so as to provide Donnelly with extenuating circumstances for Nagle’s murder. On his part, Donnelly will not hear of compromising the Harpers; he is determined to do the “decent thing” for once—something he had never even considered before his encounter with Lucia.

The sentimentality of these mutual declarations, soon to be followed by Lucia’s



Lucia’s close-up with Donnelly

tears, is an apt prelude to the film’s melodramatic ending, where the fatal car accident provides an opportunity to show the two protagonists’ faces in very close proximity—the dying Donnelly solicitously urging Lucia to go away and abandon him to the police, while Lucia herself is rendered speechless by grief. This last scene capturing Lucia and Donnelly together is much more passionate, in its brief and tragic intensity, than its counterpart in the

novel, where the woman’s grateful loyalty to her erstwhile blackmailer, and his renewed awareness that they belong to different worlds, replace any hint of real intimacy or sexual frisson. The very final shot in the film shows us Lucia back home, having to pull herself together to answer Tom’s phone call from Berlin. As Lucia assures her husband that everything is fine, the camera moves to frame her head behind the banister, the bars of her domestic prison. In this cinematic adaptation then, a much stronger and decisive Lucia—precisely by virtue of her blunter characterization—succumbs to the traditional order of patriarchy, whose power she had almost usurped with her tough parental act and subverted with her momentary defection away from the family, in aid of Donnelly. Unlike her novelistic equivalent, whose eyes have been opened to the oppressive deceit of domestic conventions, the cinematic Lucia has learned her lesson, is put back in her place and, most likely, “will not buck the patriarchal order again” (Lang 266). Sanxay Holding’s “soft-boiled” take on her complex protagonist—riddled with self-doubt, and yet paradoxically resilient, as well as ingenious and perceptive—presents a more successfully subversive heroine than the self-possessed, no-nonsense Lucia created—and ultimately doomed to failure—by the



Lucia behind domestic “bars”

more clear-cut characterization of film noir. Regrettably, well-rounded female protagonists are hard to come by in canonical American crime fiction of the first half of the last century. One suspects that a closer look at neglected women writers of the period might reveal other unconventional heroines alongside Sanxay Holding’s Lucia.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Caspary and Hughes are most famous for *Laura* (1943) and *In a Lonely Place* (1947), respectively. The former was made into a film in 1944; directed by Otto Preminger, it starred Gene Tierney as the title character and Dana Andrews as the hardboiled police detective. The latter was adapted for the screen (with quite significant changes) in 1950; directed by Nicholas Ray, it features Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame. Both novels are currently in print. *Laura* was reissued in 2006 for the series *Femmes Fatales: Women Write Pulp* by The Feminist Press (NYC), and is also available as a Vintage Classic (2012). Also reissued, in 2003, by The Feminist Press, *In a Lonely Place* has been subsequently republished as a Penguin Classic in 2010—this latter edition boasts a still from Ray’s film as its cover. Interestingly, James Naremore claims that, in the field of film studies, the “production of *Laura* is almost never viewed as an adaptation of Vera Casparay [*sic*] (even though the film’s main title reads “*Laura*, by Vera Casparay”)—probably because Casparay’s post-proletarian, proto-feminist thriller has long been out of print and has barely been read by English teachers” (2).

<sup>2</sup> *The Blank Wall* has also inspired a contemporary film version in Scott McGehee and David Siegel’s *The Deep End* (2001), starring Tilda Swinton and Goran Visnjic.

<sup>3</sup> The taxonomy of detective fiction is as fluid and as potentially problematic as the definition of film noir. Broadly speaking, writers like Sanxay Holding, Caspary, and Hughes belong to the American hardboiled tradition, as opposed to the so-called “Golden Age” or “classic” era of detective writing (the latter does number several, enormously popular, female practitioners, such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers). For the purposes of this essay I use the terms hardboiled fiction and (noir) thriller almost interchangeably, on the strength of their shared close affiliation with film noir.

<sup>4</sup> This is a telling development of an earlier image also connected with crime and punishment, whereby the house had been configured as a jail, with Lucia thinking of herself as both custodian and fellow-convict (32).

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, the following passages: “There was another silence, and she resented it. Other people go to New York, she thought, and nobody’s so amazed. I bet Mrs. Lloyd goes to New York whenever she feels like it” (108) and “Oh, let me alone! Lucia cried in her heart. Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies. . . . ‘I wish you wouldn’t keep on at me so!’ cried Lucia. ‘I have absolutely no freedom at all! I can’t do the simplest thing without all this nagging—’” (109).

<sup>6</sup> In *The Reckless Moment*, David shares a bedroom with his Grandpa, who complains that he smells like a garage, triggering the following exchange, “I take a shower every morning.” “Yes, but I have to sleep with you every night.” Later on, awakened by a commotion caused by Bea, David quips, “I’m a growing boy. I need my rest.” and shortly afterwards asks his mother for a slice of chocolate cake.

<sup>7</sup> Lang suggests that the sunglasses “lend [Lucia] a potentially sinister aspect. She is a well-dressed, trim, evidently respectable, bourgeois woman, but her sunglasses seem to be part of a disguise” (263). Jim Hillier observes that Lucia wears them when she “first crosses the bridge which physically as well as metaphorically links and separates Balboa and the city . . ., signalling entry into the *noir* world, and she wears them too when she finds and disposes of Darby’s body” (Hillier and Phillips 222).

<sup>8</sup> As Donnelly maintains in his final speech, this fatal accident will conveniently account for Nagle’s death too, in the eyes of the authorities. Lucia is thus off the hook because nobody knows of her connection with Darby.

<sup>9</sup> “By the film’s end, Ophüls portrays both mistress and maid as victims of a society that has plotted to reduce them to servitude. The intimacy established between them reveals a ‘crime’ embedded within America’s social history: slavery” (Scruggs 18). Paradoxically, however, as Scruggs reminds us, Frances Williams remains “uncredited” in this film.

<sup>10</sup> Sibyl’s loyalty to the Holleys is remarkable when we think that during the war, “[h]alf the housewives used to having domestic servants lost their help,” and that only about 42 percent of the upper-middle class had been hiring help before the conflict (Campbell 173). Those black people “who left domestic work for high-paying factory jobs observed that Lincoln freed the Negroes from cotton picking and ‘Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen’” (Campbell 174), although even in an industrial environment, black women would be employed to undertake janitorial—i.e. pseudo-domestic—functions (Rabinowitz 236). Paula Rabinowitz is right to note that, in *The Reckless Moment*, Lucia is seen to delegate all household duties, including child-care, to Sybil, which makes it possible for her to leave the home and deal with blackmailers and pawnbrokers. By contrast, in *The Blank Wall*, the relationship between the two women is more collaborative; in fact, often it is Sibyl who appears to be in charge of domestic plans.

<sup>11</sup> The novel intimates that Donnelly’s career as a petty criminal is in part motivated by his difficulties in finding a job in the hostile environment of the Depression. Lieutenant Levy’s stern peroration in defense of the law, and its universal accessibility, sets him apart from Sibyl, whose husband is a victim of racist double-standards endorsed by the American legal system at the time (Scruggs 22). Both Donnelly and Sibyl are thus presented in clear opposition to another representative of masculine order, who—as already discussed—is himself compared to David Holley, the family’s patriarch-in-waiting.



<sup>12</sup> See, from the second page of the novel, “If only I were one of those wise, humorous, tolerant mothers in plays and books. ... she didn’t even look like the wise, humorous, woman-of-the-world mother she so wished to be” (4).

<sup>13</sup> In Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944), asked whether he ever knew a woman who “wasn’t a doll or a dame,” the cynical police detective Mark McPherson replies, “Yes, one, but she kept walking me past furniture windows to look at the parlor suites.” The scene reprises a similar exchange in Caspary’s eponymous novel (31).

<sup>14</sup> Lucia performs her housewifeliness, especially in the public sphere: “She changed into a costume suitable for the village ... she stood patiently in line at counters, she engaged in conversation with other housewives, she was zealous with her ration stamps” (24). In a later passage, Lucia is shown to aim for a look that combines respectability and sophistication, with subtle martial qualities, “She was curiously undecided about what to wear for the brunch. It was a problem which, as a rule, concerned her very little, only now she felt sure of nothing. She did not even feel like Mrs. Holley. I want to look nice, she thought. But not too formal. And thinking about this, she was inspired to remember a picture in a magazine, and that was how she wished to look. She put on a black blouse with a high neckline and a white skirt; she looked in the mirror and was pleased with the debonair and somehow soldierly effect” (101).

<sup>15</sup> As many as 80 percent of working women would have wanted to retain their jobs after the end of the war (French xvii). However, the General Report adopted by the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy held in January 1940 had already intimated that the family could be “the threshold of democracy, ... a school for democratic life” (quoted in Michel 155). The primacy of one’s duty to the family was therefore impressed upon to all adults, regardless of their gender (although the message found particularly easy currency in publications and advertisements targeted at women): “‘Whether you are a man or a woman,’ as *The Woman’s Guide to Better Living* put it, ‘the family is the unit to which you most genuinely belong’” (Peter Biskind, qtd. in Leibman 180).

<sup>16</sup> In *The Reckless Moment*, the disposal of the body never gets tracked back to Lucia, nor does anybody find out about Bea’s connection with the man. In *The Blank Wall*, instead, the shopping list found under Darby’s corpse leads Lieutenant Levy to Lucia. The loss of the shopping list is mentioned in the film too, but nothing comes of it, as if to signal that, for the duration of her adventure, Lucia has left behind her traditional housewifely role.

<sup>17</sup> Janey Place sees the cigarette as a symbol of the film noir woman’s “unnatural’ phallic power” (54). While signaling her anxiety, Lucia’s chain-smoking in *The Reckless Moment* is also a mark of independence; she will not curb this habit, nor does she accept Donnelly’s cigarette holder. Interestingly, the novel’s opening page marks smoking as one of Lucia’s “small deceptions” (3)—a forbidden extravagant treat, to be indulged in secret.

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