

Race, Crime, and Motherhood in George Pelecanos's *Soul Circus*

George Pelecanos has written some of contemporary fiction's most relentlessly masculine narratives. In one neo-*noir* crime novel after another, he stages conflicts between detectives in muscle cars and heavily armed inner-city felons.¹ *Soul Circus* (2003) is in some ways standard-issue Pelecanos—a turbulent, cinematic tale about the drug trade in Washington, D.C.² In his representations of black women and their sons, however, Pelecanos emphasizes an aspect of urban culture he has never examined so closely in the past. The interplay of family and crime in African-American communities can be risky territory for a white male novelist to explore, but Pelecanos consistently depicts black single mothers in convincing, perceptive ways. More specifically, he calls attention to a problem that is seldom addressed in contemporary political and journalistic discourse: the drug trade endangers virtually everyone in America's inner cities, not only the young men whose outlaw narratives have dominated so many news reports, hip-hop CDs, and crime films. Most of the male characters in *Soul Circus* are exposed to drug-related mayhem, to be sure, but the novel's most compelling episodes highlight the victimization of women and children.

I

Soul Circus is the third novel in Pelecanos's series focusing on two former District of Columbia police officers: Derek Strange, a black man in

his fifties who owns a private investigation firm, and Terry Quinn, a white man in his early thirties.³ In *Right as Rain* (2001), Strange is hired by Leona Wilson, the mother of a black policeman killed by Quinn in a highly publicized incident. Officer Chris Wilson, dressed in plain clothes, arrested a white man on a street near Capitol Hill. Quinn and his partner Eugene Franklin saw Wilson holding a gun on the suspect, whom he had wrestled to the ground. Unaware that Wilson was a policeman, Quinn ordered him to drop his weapon. Wilson shouted his name and badge number and raised his gun so it pointed at Quinn, swept past him, and then pointed toward Franklin. Feeling certain that Wilson was going to shoot Franklin, Quinn fired and killed Wilson. A civilian review board exonerated Quinn, but he resigned from the force, unable to reconcile his passion for his job with the bitter fact that he had killed a fellow officer. Strange's investigation turns up a wealth of information the review board failed to uncover. On the night of the shooting, Wilson was searching for his sister Sondra, a drug addict. The man Wilson arrested was Sondra Wilson's former boyfriend, a drug peddler who regularly supplied her with heroin. Eugene Franklin orchestrated the events leading to the shooting because Wilson knew he was a "sold-out cop" accepting payoffs from a drug dealer. Strange removes the cloud over Wilson's reputation, returns Sondra Wilson to her mother, and develops a complicated relationship with Quinn. He believes Quinn would not have fired had he seen a white plainclothes officer holding a gun on a black suspect, yet he feels so drawn to the troubled younger man that he offers Quinn a job in his investigation firm. In *Hell to Pay* (2002), Strange and Quinn suffer a devastating emotional blow when Joe Wilder, a nine-year-old on the youth league football team they coach, is killed by stray bullets in a drug-related ambush.⁴ After Strange begins to investigate the shooting, he is contacted by Granville Oliver, a gang leader who reveals that he was Joe Wilder's father.⁵ Meanwhile, Quinn launches his career as a private investigator by throwing himself, with characteristic intensity and bravado, into the dangerous business of seizing teenage prostitutes and returning them to their families. This work leads directly to Quinn's murder at the close of *Soul Circus*, leaving Strange to mourn the victim of another fatal shooting.

Strange concentrates on two cases in *Soul Circus*. First, he gathers evidence for the defense team representing Granville Oliver, who has

been indicted for murder and is expected to receive the death penalty if convicted. (The narrator observes that the prosecution was “seeking death for Oliver under the [federal] RICO act, despite the fact that the District’s residents had overwhelmingly rejected the death penalty in a local referendum. . . . The last execution in D.C. had been carried out in 1957” [10]). Like a street-corner Foucauldian scholar, Oliver argues that the government wants to use his execution to coerce and control other dispossessed black people in the city: “They want to erase me, Strange. Make it so I don’t exist no more. . . . They want to strap me to that table in Indiana and give me that needle and show people, that’s what happens when you don’t stay down . . .” (7). Second, with Quinn’s assistance, Strange searches for Olivia Elliot, the missing girlfriend of Mario Durham, a would-be drug dealer who lives with his mother Arnice. The two investigators agree that Durham’s account of the young woman’s disappearance is probably misleading, but Strange accepts the case, reasoning that he could not stay in business if he refused to work for untrustworthy clients. The outcomes of both cases are disastrous. Durham murders Olivia Elliot less than a day after Strange and Quinn find her. And shortly before Oliver is convicted and sentenced to death, Devra Stokes—a defense witness mentored by Strange—and her four-year-old son are abducted by a gangster who wants to prevent Stokes from testifying at Oliver’s trial.

By foregrounding the aspirations of three single mothers, *Soul Circus* suggests that few residents of inner-city Washington can avoid the violence and corruption generated by the drug trade. Olivia Elliot’s story dramatizes, among other things, the plight of children whose parents sell drugs. Early in the novel, the narrator explains that Elliot ended her relationship with Mario Durham by stealing a pound of marijuana he had obtained from his half brother Dewayne, the leader of a gang known as the 600 Crew, and hiding in a small apartment with her ten-year-old son Mark:

She hadn’t intended to take it straight off, not exactly, but it came to her, big surprise, when she was high up on it one night, not long after Mario had brought the pound over to her apartment. She had been way up and got to thinking, Why do I need Mario to make some money off this? . . . She’d sold off half of the chronic in one-hundred-dollar bags, just to friends and to people she’d met in the apart-

ments around hers and to people they knew. And now she was flush. (94, 95)

For Elliot, then, the temptation to become a drug peddler is so seductive that she deliberately creates circumstances in which a gang leader and an enraged former boyfriend might search for her in the apartment she shares with her child. Disregarding the perils created by her scheme, Elliot assures herself that she is an exemplary parent: “It touched her, the way Mark was always trying to please her and protect her. The flip side of that was, the only thing she worried about in her life was Mark. She did love her boy and she wanted him safe” (95).

Not long after Durham gets a revolver from Ulysses Foreman, a former police officer who makes his living by selling and renting legally purchased guns to criminals, Strange and Quinn discover Elliot’s new address. (Quinn is tormented later in the novel by the fact that he obtained the apartment number from Mark Elliot by telling him that his mother had won a prize in a raffle.) When Durham approaches Elliot’s home, she is simultaneously watching television, listening to the radio, smoking a joint, and savoring her audacity as a thief. In one of the novel’s most puzzling moments, Durham initially seems more concerned about the safety of Elliot’s son than she does:

“Where your son at?” He moved toward her and she held her place. She was up against the arm of the couch.

“He’s stayin’ with my brother for a couple of days.”

“It’s good he’s not here. ’Cause you and me need to have a very serious conversation.”

“Ain’t no big drama to it, Mario.” (113)

As the conversation unfolds, Elliot mistakenly assumes that Durham’s anger is harmless and that she can brush it aside by attributing her actions to her sense of maternal duty: “[Mark’s] funny about having men around our house, and you got to understand, I put my son above everything else” (114). Later that evening, Durham kills Elliot and leaves her corpse in a wooded area.⁶

In light of *Soul Circus*’s insistent emphasis on the ways in which inner-city crime threatens children, it seems almost inevitable when Elliot’s body is found by a boy who is terrified by his discovery: “The thing that made him run was her face: the bottom part of her jaw was set off from the

top part, and her lips were drawn back over her teeth so it looked like she had died trying to smile” (186-87).

Throughout this section of *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos underscores the “collateral damage” produced by the drug trade. Though her name resembles Granville Oliver’s, Olivia Elliot is not, as she puts it, “a drug dealer for real” (94). She is simply a young woman whose observation of dealers has convinced her that she can perform the role of a criminal and secure a small share of the city’s underground economy. The audience can readily understand her desire to escape from poverty temporarily through crime, but her recklessness poses a number of unsettling questions. How many inner-city parents risk death or prison for a few hundred dollars in drug profits? How many children become orphans after one of their parents becomes involved with “the life”? Far too many, the novel suggests—nearly everything the audience learns about Olivia Elliot’s habits, attitudes, and relationships implies that stories like hers are not uncommon in inner-city Washington.

Arnice Durham, the mother of Mario and Dewayne, is the second woman in *Soul Circus* who attempts to strike it rich through the drug trade. Like Nancy Botwin, the marijuana-dealing suburban mother in the Showtime series *Weeds*, Durham wants to remain a respectable parent while basking in crime-fueled affluence. Unlike Botwin, however, she evidently considers these aims easy to reconcile.⁷ She knows Dewayne is a dealer, yet looks the other way when he and his “troops” count cash and package drugs on her dining room table. A career in organized crime would not have been Durham’s first choice for her son, but in light of his underprivileged childhood she believes he is entitled to “make his way” by any means necessary:

Arnice Durham never questioned her son about his business, and she didn’t question her own involvement in it . . . Wasn’t any opportunity where Dewayne had come up, and the people in those schools where he went had barely taught him how to read. He was out here now, making his way the best he could, and he was doing fine. . . . She did worry about Dewayne’s safety, though, and she prayed for him . . . She prayed for her first son, Mario, too, but for different reasons. The Lord would watch over both of her

sons, because at bottom they were good. This was something she believed deep in her heart. Sometimes, also, she said prayers of thanks for the life Dewayne had given her. She knew she was blessed. (135)

Reviewers have occasionally accused Pelecanos of sermonizing about criminal justice, public education, and other socio-economic issues,⁸ but this passage conveys the fears and resentments of a woman from the inner city in a few understated sentences. Imagine a mother who feels “blessed” because one of her sons is “doing fine” in the drug trade. Parents in Washington’s affluent suburbs would be horrified to learn that their sons were selling drugs in the city’s most violent neighborhoods. When Arnice Durham reflects on Dewayne’s success, by contrast, she seems to feel something akin to the satisfaction suburban parents feel when their children enroll in medical school.⁹

Dewayne’s decision to step into the periphery of the drug trade initially appears to answer her prayers. Dewayne buys her a townhouse in a middle-class neighborhood,¹⁰ and, like the dealer in Tupac Shakur’s “Dear Mama” (1995), showers his mother with gifts. The young man in “Dear Mama” insists that his ability to support his mother financially justifies his criminality: “I ain’t guilty, ’cause even though I sell rocks / It feels good puttin’ money in your mailbox / I love payin’ rent when the rent’s due / Hope ya got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.” In a passage that appears to be an allusion to Shakur’s anthem, Dewayne smiles when he notices that his mother is wearing a necklace that spells her name “in diamonds, all of the letters hanging on a platinum chain” (135). Having become accustomed to a variety of expensive comforts, Durham shows no inclination to give them up: “[S]he had been poor and looked ghetto most of her life, but that changed when Dewayne started earning the money that he had been bringing in the past two years or so. With Dewayne’s cash she bought furniture for her new house, and clothes and jewelry, and she made two trips a week to the hair salon and had her nails done while she was there” (134).

Had Pelecanos wanted to denounce irresponsible parents in *Soul Circus*, Arnice Durham would have provided an ideal target. Like Olivia Elliot, Durham welcomes drug money, and all of the perils that come with it, into her home: “She knew to let [Dewayne’s] troops in whenever they came by

... And she knew not to talk to the police about anything, anytime” (135). But unlike Elliot she is in her late forties—indisputably old enough to know better. Nonetheless, Pelecanos’s portrayal of Durham is generally quite empathetic. In spite of her dubious code of ethics, Durham is a devoted parent who has maintained strong ties to her adult sons. That is a notable achievement in the world Pelecanos reveals to his audience. In this regard, Durham has a great deal in common with Heylia James, the black single mother in *Weeds*.¹¹ James, unlike Durham, is directly involved in the drug trade, but both women appear to believe that in spite of the danger it produces, drug money is the best available means of supporting their families and giving their children a sense of purpose. Most of the criminals in Pelecanos’s novels—black, white, and Latino alike—appear to have no “family” other than their accomplices. Dewayne Durham stands apart from most of Pelecanos’s outlaws in that he adores his mother and does not care who knows it. He drives her to church every Sunday. He does all he can to protect his half brother because “he had promised his mother he’d look after Mario, and there wasn’t anything [he] wouldn’t do for his moms” (53). And when Ulysses Foreman mentions Durham while notifying Dewayne that he has rented a weapon to Mario—“Didn’t want to worry you or y’all’s moms. But I just thought it might be better if you knew” (70)—Dewayne seems to appreciate the gun dealer’s recognition that his mother is his first priority.

Pelecanos also appeals to his audience’s sympathy by highlighting Durham’s poverty-stricken past. Before she began to profit from Dewayne’s drug transactions, she lived in the slums of Southeast Washington for more than forty years. The fathers of her sons, moreover, have long been absent. Mario was an infant when his father was murdered. Dewayne’s father, a convict serving a lengthy prison sentence, never knew his son at all. Even more importantly, by the end of the novel Durham and her sons pay a horrific price for their failure to resist the allure of the drug trade. Dewayne, indicted for racketeering, seems certain to repeat his father’s plunge into long-term incarceration. And Mario, reenacting *his* father’s demise, is killed by a cocaine user he cheated in a drug deal. The narrator is silent about Arnice Durham’s future, but it seems likely that she will return to Southeast, with little more than her diamond necklace to distract her from years of grief and remorse.

Devra Stokes, a single mother who works in a hair and nail salon, tries to turn away from Washington's criminal underworld and raise her son on a working-class income. As a teenager, Stokes dated Phillip Wood, a lieutenant in Granville Oliver's gang, but in several conversations with Derek Strange she insists that she has changed: "I don't want to get back into all that. I moved away from it . . . That life is behind me, forever and for real. I got no reason to go back there. . . . I'm ashamed for what I did when I was younger. Who I hung with, too. But that will never be me again" (76, 171, 261). Stokes's actions, however, are frequently at odds with her assertions that she has "moved away" from crime. Her employer is a drug dealer who uses the salon to generate income he can report on tax returns. She admits that she once accepted a cash payment in exchange for withdrawing a domestic violence complaint against Phillip Wood. She lives in an extremely dangerous neighborhood (twenty-five percent of the murders committed in Washington each year occur near Anacostia's historic downtown, the area Pelecanos chose to be the site of Stokes's apartment) and stays there even though her roommate's "inconsiderate, no-account" boyfriend drinks and smokes marijuana in the apartment "at all hours" (170). These problematic decisions notwithstanding, Pelecanos suggests that Stokes does not deserve the audience's censure. First of all, poorly educated single mothers cannot expect to find a wealth of attractive employment and housing opportunities. In addition, as Strange quickly perceives, most of Stokes's missteps can be attributed to her youth:

"What time you get off today?"

"About five, unless my clients run over."

"Your little boy likes ice cream, right?"

"He likes it."

"How about I see you around five? We'll find him some, and we'll talk."

Devra's eyes caught light and her mouth turned up at the sides. She was downright pretty when she smiled. "I like ice cream, too."

Course you do, thought Strange. You're not much more than a kid yourself. (27)

To shield her son Juwan from threats arising from her past, Stokes never lets him out of her sight—at work, at home, and during her meetings

with Strange: “A little boy, no older than four, sat at the foot of the [salon] chair, playing with action figures . . . Devra Stokes’s little boy was holding on to her pants leg as she gathered up her things. . . . Devra got up from her chair and Juwan stood up with her. . . . Quinn and Strange watched her walk down a hall, Juwan holding her shirttail tight” (26, 46, 181, 328). In spite of Stokes’s vigilance, however, she and Juwan are abducted and separated by a gang leader named Horace McKinley. (McKinley, an ally of Phillip Wood, is determined to prevent Stokes from providing testimony that might help Granville Oliver at Wood’s expense.) Stokes is rescued by Strange and her son is released by a member of McKinley’s gang who refuses to victimize children, but *Pelecanos* makes it clear that without a great deal of luck Stokes’s links to drug dealers, like those of Olivia Elliot and Arnice Durham, could have given rise to bloodshed and unbearable loss.

Devra Stokes’s story is, in some ways, the most alarming depiction of motherhood in *Soul Circus*. It suggests that there is something irreversible about decisions to become connected to organized crime. Stokes attempts to distance herself from “the life,” but until she receives Strange’s protection—and the unexpected mercy of a gangster—the distance she craves seems out of reach. McKinley’s brutality is the main source of her troubles, but she also helps to create the hazards that surround her. Unprepared to break all of her ties to the gangsters she “hung with” in her teens, Stokes often places herself, and her child, on the boundary between the criminal and the “legitimate.” Her rescue, moreover, merely preserves an undesirable status quo. After she endures the abductions and testifies at Oliver’s trial, Stokes continues to face all of the problems that confront single mothers in the inner city. Strange offers to help her find a new apartment, but he worries that “Juwan’s future, like the futures of many of the children . . . born into these circumstances, did not look promising” (75).

In addition to his detailed portraits of Olivia Elliot, Arnice Durham, and Devra Stokes, *Pelecanos* laces *Soul Circus* with dozens of ephemeral references to motherhood. When Mario Durham knocks on her door, Elliot recalls some advice she received from her mother: “[S]he put the tip of her finger in her mouth while she let it all bounce around in her mind. Her mother had told her to take her finger [out of] her mouth all the time when she was a kid . . . [but] the habit had never left her” (112). Oliver’s defense attorneys inform the jury that he was taught early in his childhood to inject

his mother with cocaine. Jerome Long and Allante Jones, two of the apprentice dealers in Dewayne Durham's gang, are also troubled by memories of their mothers' drug- and crime-related misadventures: "With one mother on a slow junk-ride down and another in and out of jail, they had been raised by Long's grandmother until she could no longer handle them" (49). Mike Montgomery, the gang enforcer who releases Juwan Stokes, turns against Horace McKinley when McKinley's misogyny calls to mind the domestic violence Montgomery witnessed as a child: "Gettin' violent on women didn't sit well with him; he'd seen a whole lot of men—if you could call them men—beat on his mother . . . when he was a kid. One of them finally beat his mother half to death" (164). Janine Strange, the mother of an eighteen-year-old son named Lionel, patiently coaches her husband when he stumbles as an inexperienced stepfather. After Strange tells Lionel that neglecting to change the oil in his car is like "gettin' on with a woman without giving her a kiss" (104), for example, his wife lets him know that she did not care for the analogy:

"That was pretty smooth tonight," said Janine. "Comparing women to cars."

"Yeah, I know. But you got to remember, though, I came to this game late. You had sixteen years of practice with that boy before I even came through the door."

"You're doing fine." (106)

Pelecanos even pauses to give his audience glimpses of several mothers his principal characters have never met. A cashier embraces her son after four men are killed in a gunfight in front of a Korean-owned grocery store. In a courthouse, Strange sees "a mother . . . raising her voice to her sloppily dressed, slouching son . . . [and then] heard a clap as she slap-boxed his ear" (139). The detective gives a "polite but direct" (377) reprimand to a mother who leaves her seven-year-old son alone on a street corner while she buys groceries after dark. And in one of the few soothing moments Strange experiences in *Soul Circus* he hears a mother speak about her son on the radio:

He turned the radio on and moved the dial to PGC. The Super Funk Regulator was on the air, talking to a woman who had called in from her car.

"Where you at right now?" asked the DJ.

"I'm on Benning Road, headed home from work."

“Who you goin’ to see?”

“My son Darius,” said the woman . . . “He’s ten years old.”

“You have a good one,” said the DJ. “Thanks for rollin’ with a brother.”

“Thanks for lettin’ a sister roll.”

Strange smiled. He did love D.C. (84)

II

The representations of motherhood in *Soul Circus* are by no means unprecedented in American crime narratives. Mothers play vital roles in *The Public Enemy* (1931), *White Heat* (1949), and other gangster films starring James Cagney. In Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990), Tommy DeVito stabs a man with a carving knife borrowed from his mother’s kitchen. The first two seasons of *The Sopranos* (1999-2000), moreover, highlight numerous domestic conflicts stirred up by Livia Soprano. During a session with his analyst Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony Soprano claims that his mother’s belligerence gradually “wore down” his father, a violent, experienced gangster:

Melfi: Let’s stay on [the subject of] your mother.

Soprano: Now that my father’s dead, he’s a saint. When he was alive— nothin’. And my dad was tough. He ran his own crew. A guy like that—and my mother wore him down . . .

Melfi: Quite a formidable maternal presence. (Pilot)

Mothers have also figured prominently in popular music outlaw anthems as dissimilar in era, genre, and mood as Shakur’s “Dear Mama” and Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” (1968). As Armond White observes, the lyrics of “Mama Tried” suggest that “Dear Mama,” one of the first hip-hop records to focus on a criminal’s relationship with his mother, was not as innovative as some critics have asserted:

“Dear Mama” . . . displays the heart and sensitivity behind a music mostly known for insolence. . . . But Tupac’s celebration and testimony are not specific to the affection Black children feel for their mothers, nor are they an un-

usual expression of bad-boy remorse. Merle Haggard got there first . . . Both Tupac and Haggard show what it's like for a rebel to feel humbled. Their abashment contradicts the hell-raiser image of both country and hip-hop music. (117-18)

Some mothers in American crime narratives function as channels through which the audience receives information about the criminal's childhood and family background. The first season of *The Sopranos*, for instance, emphasizes the ways in which Livia Soprano's destructive behavior has engendered her son's criminal career: "The judicious use of flashbacks provides . . . a sense of Tony's childhood traumas at the hands of Livia. In one vivid scene she threatens to gouge his eyes out with a fork when Tony begs her to buy him an electric organ. . . . Livia is the evil *magna mater* who makes Tony's criminal behavior understandable. . . . We are amazed that [he] turned out as well as he did considering that he started life with Livia" (Gabbard 101, 106).¹² Other representations of motherhood in crime narratives reveal that the criminal has become violent in spite of the support of an affectionate parent. As James Niebaur points out, the audience infers from the scenes in *The Public Enemy* which feature Tom Powers's doting mother that Powers has spent most of his life "enveloped by family and friends who love him" (44). Robert Sklar argues convincingly that Powers's mother does not simply view him as a beloved child; he remains her "baby" all of his life:

Tom Powers . . . is his mother's perpetual baby—and his babyhood is linked to the violence that helps him rise to gangster power. . . . Lying in his hospital bed [after he is wounded in a shootout], weak and bandaged, he whispers to his mother, "You must like [my brother] better than me." She exclaims, "No, no Tom! You're my baby!" The gruesome final image of the dead Tom, left at his mother's doorstep, has often been described as a corpse trussed like a mummy; but in fact he is swaddled in a blanket like an infant in a nightmare fulfillment of his dependence. (32-33)

Gangsters' mothers have also been used to call attention to the poignant, ordinary traits of vicious characters who might otherwise seem utterly disconnected from common experience. In *White Heat*, Cody Jarrett

sits on his mother's lap and says, "Always thinkin' about your Cody, aren't you, Ma?," as he recovers from a painful headache. (As James Maxfield observes, this scene "demonstrates that there are times when Cody does not have iron control over events around him, but instead is subject to forces which overwhelm him and reduce him to childish vulnerability. . . . His grateful remark to [his mother] . . . reveals the degree of his dependency on her" [72].)

Pelecanos accomplishes all of these narrow objectives in *Soul Circus*. His portrayal of Arnice Durham, for example, emphasizes that Dewayne, like thousands of other young people in the District, was poorly educated in the city's public schools and turned toward the drug trade because of the dearth of "legitimate" opportunities in the neighborhood in which he was raised. Dewayne can be ruthless with his adversaries, but in his mother's home his demeanor is gentle and courteous. Early in the novel, Dewayne seems indistinguishable from the other gangsters in Pelecanos's Washington, but it becomes increasingly difficult to view him as a representative drug dealer when the audience learns that he commands his "troops" while wearing clothes his mother has washed and pressed and comforts her with boxes of chocolate truffles when she worries about her children's safety. Pelecanos strays from the traditions of his genre, however, by scattering *dozens* of references to motherhood throughout *Soul Circus*. This unusual step raises a number of questions. Why, given its preoccupation with parents and children, does *Soul Circus* have so little to say about fathers?¹³ Why does the novel allude to relationships between mothers and daughters so infrequently? Why are so many of the mothers in the novel from the inner city? Why does Pelecanos mention several mothers who are strangers to his characters? To answer these questions, it is necessary to recognize that *Soul Circus*'s messages about family and crime are broader and more political than those ordinarily conveyed in crime narratives.¹⁴ More specifically, the novel's portrayals of motherhood underscore the ways in which the drug trade endangers women and children. The list of young men who suffer drug-related misfortunes in the novel (Granville Oliver, Dewayne and Mario Durham, Allante Jones, Jerome Long, and others) is extensive, but so is the list of women and children (Olivia Elliot, Mark Elliot, Arnice Durham, Devra Stokes, Juwan Stokes, and others) whose safety is threatened by their proximity to "the life." Pelecanos emphasizes, in other

words, that his gangsters are not isolated figures; they have mothers, girlfriends, siblings, and in some cases children, and their crimes frequently expose those “civilians” to danger.

This issue is rarely mentioned in political and journalistic discussions of the drug trade. Most commentaries about the so-called war on drugs suggest that “the life” is populated almost exclusively by dangerous (and endangered) young males. Laura Bush, for instance, recently concluded a speaking tour in which she reframed Nancy Reagan’s “Say No To Drugs” campaign by urging young men to “say no” to crime: “Mrs. Bush, who will take her crusade all over the country over the next few months and plans a summit in [the fall of 2005], wants a ‘national focus’ on what we can do for boys. . . . ‘We want all young people to grow up to lead successful lives in our country,’ she said in Baltimore. ‘And we want to show young men, particularly, an ideal of manhood that respects life and rejects violence’” (Rauber 1). On the other side of the political landscape, the former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis has argued that U.S. sentencing laws systematically target “lost young men” in inner-city neighborhoods:

[T]he effort to stop drug use by harsher and harsher penalties has had devastating side effects. It has made importation and distribution of the forbidden products immensely profitable. That in turn has lured large numbers of young men . . . into the trade. . . . One third of this country’s black men between 20 and 29 are now in prison or under supervision of the criminal justice system, most of them for drug crimes. (A29)

When drug dealers speak publicly about their enterprises, they also tend to characterize the drug trade as a snare for underprivileged young men. In 2004, for example, Tommy Edelin, the leader of a gang known as the 1-5 Mob, spent three hours during his sentencing hearing “lecturing” a district court in Washington about, among other things, the counterproductive results engendered by contemporary law enforcement policies: “Wearing an orange-and-white striped jail jumpsuit and wire-rim glasses, Edelin maintained that he was innocent of the government’s claims that he orchestrated killings to further his drug business . . . then warned that many other young men growing up rudderless and hopeless in neglected pockets of Washington were following his path into crime” (Leonnig B04).

These commentators' shared assumption that the drug trade has a destructive effect on young men is surely not incorrect, but it has some disturbing implications. If, in this time of political "polarization," everyone from the spouse of a conservative president to a prominent liberal columnist to a real-life Granville Oliver assumes that the principal victims of "the life" are armed and dangerous young male felons, it seems unlikely that many Americans will protest against things as they are. Virtually everyone will agree that men like Tommy Edelin deserve to suffer as a consequence of the violence and corruption they have produced. As Strange reflects during a conversation with Oliver, the damage inflicted by drug dealers is all but unforgivable: "You left out the part about all the young black men you killed or had killed, thought Strange. And the part about you poisoning your own community with drugs, and ruining the lives of all the young people you recruited and the lives of their families" (7).

In *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos moves beyond conventional opinion about inner-city crime by suggesting that the drug trade is not only an arena in which violent young males prey on each other—it is much *worse* than that. The crimes committed in the novel are not confined to dark alleys in deserted sections of Washington; to the contrary, they often take place in apartment buildings, townhouses, small businesses, and other sites occupied by women and children. By the end of the novel, the audience senses that nearly every family in inner-city Washington is threatened by the drug trade. Some women, like the three mothers discussed in the first part of this essay, sell drugs themselves, maintain close relationships (and/or collaborate) with dealers, or find it difficult to break their connections to "the life." Others, like Tosha Smith, the guardian of one of the boys on the football team coached by Strange and Quinn, become addicts. Even Janine Strange, the most prosperous African-American woman in the novel, is not immune from drug-related hazards. A house owned by the Stranges is ransacked by criminals who want to disrupt Derek Strange's inquiry relating to Phillip Wood, and the detective exposes himself and his family to danger late in the novel by wounding Horace McKinley. Thus, *Soul Circus* offers an eloquent reply to conservatives who argue that residents of American inner cities can avoid the perils of the drug trade simply by holding them at arm's length. One could plausibly apply that reasoning to Olivia Elliot and Arnice Durham, who deliberately chase after drug money, but several other traumatized

women and children in *Soul Circus* do nothing to associate themselves with Washington's underground economy. Mark Elliot does not have the option of "saying no" to his mother's murder. Devra Stokes is threatened, sexually harassed, abducted, and briefly separated from her child even though she has tried to keep away from "the life." Her son Juwan is, of course, in no position to resist when McKinley has him kidnapped. The Korean-American mother and son terrified by gang-related gunfire provide another haunting illustration of the drug trade's capacity to threaten innocent women and children: "Inside the market, a woman named Sung locked the front door, extinguished the lights, and sat down on the floor with her little boy. His name was Tommy. She held him tightly and told him not to cry" (208).

This embrace, as much as any moment in Pelecanos's fiction, highlights the ways in which he has departed from the traditions of American crime fiction. In Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), the narrator asserts that "[m]ost serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring" (7). Nearly every page of *Soul Circus* casts doubt on this dismissive assessment. The novel's intricate plot, modern-day *noir* atmosphere, and explosions of violence attest to Pelecanos's mastery of "the hard-boiled," but they also challenge the notion that "serious matters" are beyond the reach of writers preoccupied with masculinity, violence, urban corruption, and so forth. *Soul Circus*'s representations of race, crime, and motherhood are so complex and subtly modulated, in fact, that it is hard to imagine where else readers can find comparably illuminating discourse about current conditions in American inner cities. Corporate-controlled media? Politicians in Washington? Not likely.¹⁵ Many writers of "literary" fiction could presumably keep pace with Pelecanos in terms of vibrant storytelling and incisive social commentary, but to do so they might have to revive the mode of urban realism associated with forebears such as Zola and Dreiser. In the meantime, George Pelecanos, a writer whose work has been overlooked by critics in the academy,¹⁶ will remain an indispensable source of dispatches on family and crime in the inner city.

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Notes

¹Pelecanos does not attempt to explain away the sexist attitudes that often accompany his detectives' hyper-masculine preoccupations. As Woody Haut points out, even Nick Stefanos, the first-person narrator of Pelecanos's most directly autobiographical novels, is not above viewing women in callous, exploitative ways: "[W]hen it comes to women, Stefanos's attitude is sometimes suspect. He demonstrates this in [*Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* (1995)], not so much in meaningless sexual encounters as in the way he splits up with his girlfriend. Because he does not want to stop drinking, nor stop her from drinking, he decides to dump Lyla, but he does this only after speaking with her father. . . . [Lyla] has little to say in the matter" (118).

²A number of reviewers have stressed that Pelecanos's plots unfold in neighborhoods ignored by most writers of "Washington novels." Maureen Corrigan observes that "Pelecanos has both celebrated and eulogized the city rarely seen by the politicians, the tourists and the suburban commuters . . ." (BW03). Similarly, Ben Greenman writes that Pelecanos's representations of the city have "little to do with murder on the Mall or dirty deeds in Foggy Bottom. It is a rough patch of urban real estate populated by guttersnipes, snitches, dealers . . . [and] plenty of decent and hardworking citizens who have to stand by and watch as their neighborhoods go to hell" (90).

³By focusing on African-American investigators in the Strange-Quinn series and in *The Night Gardener* (2006), Pelecanos has aligned himself with an ongoing trend toward diversity in hard-boiled detective fiction. As Lewis D. Moore points out, "[t]hrough the 1970s, the hard-boiled detective novel is . . . largely white and male. Beginning with Marcia Mueller's Sharon McCone in San Francisco, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski in Chicago, and Liza Cody's Anna Lee in London, females play an increasingly significant role in the genre's development. Also, Walter Mosely's Easy Rawlins and James Sallis's Lew Griffin introduce black American hard-boiled detectives and Bruce Cook does the same with Chico Cervantes, a Chicano" (269). Maureen T. Reddy argues that feminist writers have produced a "countertradition" in detective fiction which emphasizes "the violation of linear progress, the ultimate absence of authority as conventionally defined, and the use of dialogic form. This countertradition shares with feminist work in other genres an essential subversiveness . . . exposing the genre's essential conservatism" (2).

⁴In some ways, this calamity is the principal link between *Hell to Pay* and *Soul Circus*. The earlier novel concentrates on the violent death of one child and the repercussions of that horrific event; *Soul Circus* implies that innumerable children in inner-city Washington are in danger of becoming the next Joe Wilder.

⁵*Hard Revolution* (2004), a “prequel” to the Strange-Quinn novels, reveals that the detective is all too familiar with Granville Oliver’s family. In the spring of 1968, Oliver’s father Alvin Jones murdered Strange’s brother Dennis. Strange, a rookie police officer at the time, avenges the killing by shooting Jones at the height of that year’s riots in Washington and then resigns from the force.

⁶Durham feels as exultant as Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) when he realizes that he has killed a woman. Bigger thinks of his inadvertent suffocation of Mary Dalton as a kind of rebirth: “He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take away . . . Elation filled him” (119, 120). Similarly, Mario feels transformed when he assaults Olivia: “The revolver from the pocket of his Tommys appeared in his hand. He gripped it by its barrel. . . . She looked up at him, at the gun, and her eyes went wide, humble and afraid. He liked the way it made him feel. He was strong, handsome, and tall, everything he had never been before” (117).

⁷As a consequence of her attempted fusion of motherhood and marijuana sales, Nancy Botwin is tormented by fears of violence and imprisonment and repeatedly accused of hypocrisy. In the pilot episode, for example, a teenage drug peddler named Josh ridicules the “pot-dealing mom”: “Everything that comes out of Josh’s mouth is a sarcastic comment about the hypocrisy of adults generally—especially the ones who use dope—or of Nancy specifically, since she is dealing but, at the same time, ordering him not to sell to kids” (Franklin 156).

⁸In *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos generally articulates his political convictions through Derek Strange. Near the end of the novel, for example, the detective is annoyed by a politician’s disingenuous posturing with respect to gun control: “Deep inside [the front section of the *Washington Post*], a congressman from the Carolinas dismissed the need for further handgun laws and vowed to continue his fight to hold Hollywood and the record industry accountable for the sexual content and violent nature of their product” (373).

⁹In some ways, Durham’s relationship with Dewayne echoes that of Ma Jarrett (Margaret Wycherly) and her son Cody (James Cagney) in *White Heat* (1949). Durham is not directly involved in her son’s crimes, but like Ma Jarrett she makes those crimes possible by endlessly comforting and praising her son. As James Maxfield asserts, “Cody regards his mother as an altogether positive influence on his life: she comforts him when he is in pain, assists him in his career of crime (at one point she says to him, ‘I’ll help you, Cody, like always’), and builds up his ego . . . But despite, or perhaps because of, the warmth of Cody’s feelings for his mother, her influence on him in the end is entirely destructive” (66).

¹⁰With his usual attention to the history and culture of the District, Pelecanos situates Durham’s townhouse in “the Walter E. Washington Estates.” Walter Wash-

ington, the city's first black mayor and the incumbent Marion Barry defeated to become mayor in 1978 (Colburn and Adler 203-205), has come to represent the kind of respectable upward social mobility the Durhams fail to achieve. Born in a small farming town in Georgia, Washington studied public administration and law at Howard University and began his career as a D.C. government official by working for the Alley Dwelling Authority, an agency established in the 1930s to help poor families move out of the slums. Needless to say, Washington would have been dismayed to learn about a family that escaped from the inner city through crime instead of education, hard work, and progressive social programs.

¹¹A number of commentators have argued that *Weeds*'s portrayal of James is saturated with racist stereotypes. In *The New Yorker*, for instance, Nancy Franklin asserts that "[t]here is one shoddy aspect of *Weeds*, however, and that's the depiction of Nancy's supplier, Heylia (Tonye Patano) . . . a monotonously sassy black woman who is meant to be a tongue-in-cheek indictment of the way blacks are represented in pop culture" (156).

¹²Noël Carroll and Scott D. Wilson also conclude that Livia Soprano's transgressions help to explain why so many viewers empathize with her murderous son. Carroll points out that "[i]n important instances, Tony is more sinned against than sinning: no one deserves a mother as manipulative and poisonous as Livia" (131). Similarly, Wilson emphasizes that "Livia is a black hole of depression who does not recognize any of the good things Tony does for her. . . . Why does Tony spend so much time and effort trying to have a good relationship with her? Because she is his mother, and as he says to [Dr. Melfi] . . . 'You're supposed to take care of your mother'" (89).

¹³When characters in *Soul Circus* refer to fatherhood, they almost invariably mention the dearth of fathers in inner-city neighborhoods. Ulysses Foreman, for example, observes that the absence of steady paternal guidance has fueled the rise of urban gang violence: "[As long] as there was poverty, long as there wasn't no good education, long as there wasn't no real opportunity, long as kids down here had no fathers and were looking to belong to something, then there was gonna be gangs and a need for guns" (63).

¹⁴As Matthew J. Bruccoli points out, Raymond Chandler, like many other writers of mid-twentieth-century detective fiction, was seldom motivated by political concerns: "It has become a commonplace that the private eye figure . . . was a response to the corruption of the twenties and the social injustice of the thirties. However, it is not necessary to seek politico-socio causes for Marlowe's concern with honor and justice, which were moral concerns for Raymond Chandler. He was not political, and his work included no political ideas apart from his distrust of power" (22).

¹⁵Another compelling source of detailed, complicated narratives about current conditions in American inner cities is the HBO series *The Wire*, to which Pelecanos contributes as a producer, writer, and story editor.

¹⁶The *MLA Bibliography* lists only five items relating to Pelecanos: four brief interviews and “Between Origins and Art,” an essay in which Pelecanos discusses his creative methodology.

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