“The Blot Inside: Jonathan Lethem’s *A Gambler’s Anatomy,* Lack, Dissent, and Corporate Power”

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Abstract

This paper argues that the blot in *A Gambler's Anatomy* (2016) exists in a long line of deep metaphors in Lethem's work, an ancestor of "Lack" in *She Climbed Across the Table* (1997) and the giant hole in the centre of Manhattan in *Chronic City* (2009). In the context of this story, which casts Stolarsky as the pantomimic capitalist villain, it can be interpreted as an ideological blind spot which prevents the protagonist from recognising his entrapment in a cycle of economic dependency. Its removal should signal an awakening, therefore, but Lethem resists this move. Instead, Bruno is forced to don a mask and is ensnared within a Stolarsky empire which seems to have no outer limits. Even the anti-capitalist riot in which Bruno becomes involved might well have been orchestrated by the arch-capitalist himself. *A Gambler's Anatomy*, then, represents Lethem's most committed critique of corporate power and asks whether it is even possible to step outside its structures and demands.

Keywords

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Article

The cover image of the first American edition of Jonathan Lethem's *A Gambler's Anatomy* (2016) adumbrates the complexities of the novel's psychological and political vision. A figure wears a mask designed to resemble a backgammon board; whoever this figure might be—presumably the gambler of the title—he or she is cast in shadow, anatomy obscured. It is the mask that occupies our attention, invites our speculation, produces both the effect of something hidden and the desire to access the hidden object. If one accepts that the mask thus functions in a similar way to the veil in Jacques Lacan's reading of Zeuxis and Pharrhasios, then one's desire must inevitably be attended by trepidation, the fear that what lies behind the mask is precisely nothing, or at least, *only* desire (Lacan 103). In this way, the cover of Lethem's novel promises a hoax, or a constitutive lack. At best, it promises the fruitless

search for something that is lost and never to be found. Inspired partly by The Million Mask Marches which began in 2013, *A Gambler's Anatomy* ends with a masked anti-capitalist protest, and yet the lack at its heart is precisely that of any meaningful, effective dissent or political action. I will argue here that in its deconstruction of the mask as symbolic object of resistance, in its insistence on the futility of the protest, it represents Lethem's bleakest political vision yet.

Lack and the associated desire for a lost or never-existing object have been consistent themes throughout Lethem's writing, and they emerge from a deeply personal cause. In his 2005 autobiographical essay "The Beards," which is the closest thing to an explicit confessional he has ever written, the author describes writing as a "meditation that's also a frantic compensation." He continues: "Each of my novels, antic as they may sometimes be, is fueled by loss. I find myself speaking about my mother everywhere I go in this world" (148, 149). Judith Lethem died from a brain tumor when Jonathan was thirteen years old, and in response to this tragedy every novel crystallizes around a traumatic, defining absence. In *Girl in Landscape* (1998), a science fiction western set on another planet, Lethem comes closest to a direct confrontation with his loss: teenage protagonist Pella Marsh's mother dies suddenly from a brain tumor early in the novel, a tragedy which precipitates the family's emigration to the mysterious Planet of the Archbuilders. Science-fictional tropes are employed in the service of mourning: cognitive estrangement becomes a traumatic symptom, and the alien landscape, scattered with ruins, an objective correlative for Pella's tragedy.

Elsewhere in Lethem's writing, the lack acts as a metaphor both for his personal bereavement and for a wider societal or cultural deprivation. In his debut novel, *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), a dystopian mash-up of Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick, the lack consists of collective amnesia accelerated first by a widely available drug called Forgettol and secondly by electronic boxes through which people's memories are abstracted,

"externalized, and rigorously edited" (224). The follow-up to *Gun*, the unashamedly Dickian *Amnesia Moon* (1995), depicts an America which has retreated into excessive localism and suspicion of outsiders following an unspecified cataclysmic event, such that the primary loss is a sense of wider community or solidarity and, in consequence, the possibility of meaningful social or political change. At the heart of Lethem's third novel, a cerebral campus comedy called *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997), is a hole in the fabric of the universe which is created in the physics lab of a California university. Nicknamed "Lack," it becomes part of an unlikely love triangle also involving the first-person narrator Philip Engstrand and his partner Alice. Both *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) and *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) return to the borough of Lethem's birth and to a preoccupation with the absence of parental authority figures, as well as a factitious ideal of neighborhood authenticity born of loss and nostalgia. As Lethem suggests, these early novels, in particular, combine genres in "antic" ways, and it is easy for readers to miss their political engagement. If one of the author's recurring ideas is "amnesia"—referring both to the medical condition and to a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the lessons of the past and the lives of disparate others, from which one might also learn something—then it is evident that amnesia as a kind of willed lack can be exploited as a political tool for division and control. In *The Fortress of Solitude*, for example, Brooklyn's gentrification, marketed in terms of regeneration and aesthetics, is to a large extent racially motivated and depends on the economics of exclusion.

More recent fictions have foregrounded the politics. *Chronic City* (2009), which is closest in spirit to *A Gambler's Anatomy*, recapitulates Lethem's concern with gentrification (and perhaps predicts his participation in the 2011 protests against Citigroup's naming of the former Shea Stadium site in Queens). In this novel, gentrification assumes a particularly aggressive character. Though the apparently random destruction of Manhattan's buildings might be caused, surreally, by a recalcitrant mechanical tiger, the creature should be

understood in material terms as "a municipally approved tool of gentrification" (Luter 101). As one of the main characters, the radical rock critic and cultural curator Perkus Tooth, declares: "That's how urban renewal works [. . .] You find an excuse to bulldoze stuff so that the developers can come in" (Lethem 2009: 164). In fact, though it is full of trademark surreal touches such as the tiger, and a polar bear floating on an iceberg in New York's harbor, *Chronic City* is expressly concerned with the predations of capital, exemplified by rampant gentrification, as well as with commodity fetishism and the ideological function of spectacular images. As the main characters make online bids for beautiful vases called "chaldrons," which they eventually discover exist only virtually, it becomes apparent that the fundamental lack is reality itself, or at least a reality that might exist outside the demands of the market. The Manhattan of *Chronic City* is one in which comforting or arresting images (as well as super-strong pot) deflect attention from spiraling real-estate prices, political corruption, and, of course, the giant hole that existed downtown after September 2001. Matthew Luter argues that *Chronic City* "lets Lethem function as a social critic" and express a "desire for language that speaks plain truths plainly" in a world increasingly dedicated to deception through the bedazzlement of advertising and anodyne fictions (103). In it, the author turns his critical attention to a contemporary western culture in which the lure of commodities and the dishonesty of the media—exemplified by the "war-free" edition of the *New York Times*—constitute a political conspiracy serving the interests of developers, corporations, and anyone likely to suffer were the populace's eyes fully opened (2009: 74). "The tiger is a distraction," one character asserts: if so, it is only one of many in a novel which demonstrates how difficult it is to focus one's attention on things that might really matter—friendship, community, ecological concerns (2009: 447).

Dissident Gardens (2013) is a multigenerational epic about American Communism, traveling back and forth through time between the 1930s and the Occupy movement of 2010.

It shows "the considerable difficulties [. . .] that people of progressive worldviews encounter in their attempts to turn their beliefs from abstractions to realities" (Luter 111). Beginning with the expulsion of Rose Zimmer from the party for dating a black policeman, and ending with her grandson Sergius's detention at the airport, the novel's vision is bleak. The lack takes several forms: the rejection of difference from a supposedly inclusive organization; the erosion of political gestalt over time; the subsuming of collective action into individual impulses. The last line of the novel describes Sergius, trapped in the non-space of the airport, as: "A cell of one, beating like a heart" (Lethem 2013: 366). Perhaps, after all, a note of optimism is sounded here: despite the fact that Sergius is alone and has no idea what the phrase "American Communist" even means, the heart is at least still beating, and Sergius's ill treatment at the hands of airport security might signal a reawakening of his spirit of active dissent against authority figures.

An admirer of Graham Greene, Lethem has remarked that in writing *A Gambler's Anatomy* (renamed *The Blot* for the 2017 UK edition) he wanted to capture the ambience of faded, dissolute expatriates familiar from many of Greene's works, "these unhappy men disintegrating in distant locales: the failing white man in the colonial backdrop" (Garner n.p.). In the first half of *A Gambler's Anatomy*, he succeeds. Alexander Bruno is a handsome, impeccably tailored, international backgammon hustler, managed by a disheveled man called Edgar Falk. Having lost a lot of money in Singapore, where he happened to bump into a childhood acquaintance called Keith Stolarsky, Bruno travels to Berlin to win back Falk's stake. Unfortunately, a combination of bad luck and a "blot" that distorts his vision and clouds his judgment conspires to separate Bruno from the rest of Falk's money. After collapsing during a high-stakes game at the home of a German millionaire, Bruno is rushed to hospital, receives his diagnosis, and is eventually flown, at Keith Stolarsky's expense, to his childhood home: Berkeley, California. Here he undergoes a gruesome operation, also at

Stolarsky's expense, and moves into an apartment owned, inevitably, by Stolarsky. After this, Bruno becomes friendly with a radical burger chef called Garris Plybon and ends up involved in an anti-capitalist happening which turns into a riot. When the action switches to Berkeley, it enters familiar Lethem territory, and the concerns—the adult's bipolar relationship with childhood; neighborhood gentrification; the importance of finding the best burger joint—reprise those of *Motherless Brooklyn*, *The Fortress of Solitude*, and *Chronic City*. What is new here is the explicit interrogation of the individual's relationship with capital, which is achieved through the figures of the blot and the mask and through Bruno's economic dependence upon Keith Stolarsky.

A Gambler's Anatomy seems to resist even the hint of optimism signaled at the end of *Dissident Gardens*. In fact, like *Chronic City,* its narrative describes the slow death of bohemianism, defined by Rivka Galchen as "a belief in there being an 'outside' of the market, a belief in the existence of, and habitability of, spaces not colonized by Capital" (Galchen n.p.). As the action unfolds in its various spaces—Singapore hotels; the house of the German millionaire; the Berlin hospital ward; an operating theater in California; various apartment buildings in Berkeley; the burger joint in which Bruno finds work—these spaces are revealed to be sites of corporate power where individual autonomy becomes attenuated, and the individual ever more subjected to external forces. Not only this: the blot, a huge meningioma that sits behind protagonist Alexander Bruno's handsome face—and is removed halfway through the novel by the Jimi Hendrix-obsessed (and obscenely expensive) "rock doc" Noah Behringer—shows how these forces are internalized (Lethem 2016: 126). Even one's *head space* is always already colonized: it is merely "an open door" and, as Doctor Behringer wryly observes: "Some shit [has] to be left inside" (131, 133). What is more, the patient pays handsomely for the privilege.

The blot is a hugely generative metaphor; indeed, one might say, rather grimly, a metastatic one, which, I will show, is integral to any political reading of *A Gambler's Anatomy*. Taken together with the associated image of the mask, it provides the basis for a study of reification; the interpellated self; and the disavowals necessary for commodity capitalism to flourish. *A Gambler's Anatomy* is about dependence, enslavement to capital, and about the desire for resistance. And yet it is by no means clear (and here the blot extends to the reader, struggling to locate an ultimate "meaning" or a way out of the impasse constructed in the story) how one can ever step outside the system in order to resist effectively, or even define what the system is. Bruno's blot has several intertextual ancestors, most obviously the brain tumor that kills Pella Marsh's mother in *Girl in Landscape*, but also the "cluster headaches" and fugue states from which Perkus Tooth suffers throughout *Chronic City*, and the horrific organ collapse that eventually claims his life (Lethem 2009: 16). Deadly these conditions may be, but death in both these cases precipitates a mourning process with a distinct, recognizable loss as its cynosure. Far more traumatic, potentially, is Bruno's emergence from anesthesia into a contemporary world he cannot understand, in which he finds himself drifting in a state of utter dependency. Stripped of the blot, the object that has come, ironically, to mark him as an individual, "his own small esoteric mystery" (28), Bruno comes to suspect that the absence in his head corresponds to a deeper societal lack. The post-operation narrative of the novel describes his creeping awareness of what the lack might be, and locates Bruno's individual trauma within a widespread political anxiety.

Inspired by his affection for comics and superheroes, one of Lethem's recurring tropes is hypostasis, "the embodiment of a concept as a material substance or being" (Singer 284). An illustrative example comes in his 1996 short story, "The Hardened Criminals," in which recidivists are literally built into the walls of a prison, and thus a narrative is formed from both the pun of the title and the embedded pun on "concretized metaphor." Another one

occurs in *Chronic City*: Perkus Tooth has a defective eye which acts as a metaphor, variously, for the inability to see reality and for the failure to locate a clear vision of an alternative to the dominant political system. The narrator of that novel, Chase Insteadman, ties himself in knots finding new adjectives to describe Perkus's eye: examples include "bad," "crazy," "distaff," and even "revelatory" (Lethem 2009: 4, 14, 26, 218). For Chase the unruly eye is a linguistic challenge: it exhorts him to acts of verbal dexterity to avoid the physical reality of Perkus's condition. It is therefore striking that Perkus responds with an emotion akin to relief when a woman at the canine apartments where he finds himself residing toward the end of the story addresses the issue directly: "Something wrong with your eye?" Perkus replies, with a smile: "From birth" (319).[1] In New York's "pocket universe" of virtual fakes and textual distractions, the closing chapters of *Chronic City* make many gestures toward the material, the bodily, the natural: the cathartic recognition of Perkus's eye condition; his friendship with the three-legged dog, Ava; the pregnant body of Richard Abneg's partner, the Hawkman (Lethem 2009: 386). These things offer the most plausible means of finding communal solidarity and an ecosystem that might act as a response to global capital.

As a close relative of Perkus's disobedient eye, Bruno's blot behind the eye carries comparable metaphorical weight. Likewise, the gruesome chapters in which the excision is described, the exposure of "the flapped lips and cheeks, the philtrum and the skin surface of the nose" (131), suggest a similar demand to acknowledge the material reality of the cancerous growth and of Bruno's physiognomy. For cynical Doctor Behringer, the material is everything: "it was all meat, the surface and depth alike" (125). However, the extraction of the tumor is a pivotal moment in the narrative because "extraction" also connotes

[1] A similar moment of directness and perspicacity occurs just before the climactic scenes of *Motherless Brooklyn*. Whereas everyone in Brooklyn regards Lionel Essrog's Tourette's as a performance or a routine, yet another example of Brooklyn craziness, an old man in Maine instantly and without judgement says to Lionel: "You got a touch of Tourette's syndrome there, son" (270).

"abstraction" (a word derived from the Latin for "draw away" or "detach"). Regardless of the fact that Behringer has saved his life, Bruno feels intensely the transformation of the physical entity into a ghostly absent presence which nonetheless continues to signify, and he is therefore reluctant to face a world and a personal identity no longer obscured by the blot. After the operation, he complains to the doctor, "I feel too much like myself" and requests that a cobblestone decorated in his own blood and made to resemble a backgammon die (his souvenir from a collapsing episode in Berlin) be placed inside his head where once the blot held sway (162). Such a substitution would, he supposes, excuse Bruno from the task of confronting the reality of his situation—alone, impecunious and back in the town where he was brought up as part of his mother June's hippie commune. Ever since his strange childhood, he has demanded nothing from life but exteriority as a means of silencing the "*crazy shrieking voices*" of his past: "*I don't want to be deep*, the child had thought" (26). Without the physical entity of the blot obscuring his vision, he might now be forced to encounter his inner demons.

His career as an international backgammon hustler derives from Bruno's desire to live a life only of glamorous surfaces, in which money substitutes for character, and humanity in all its unpredictability remains obscured by the distractions of capital accumulation. Of Wolf-Dirk Köhler, his backgammon opponent in Berlin, Bruno muses: "Köhler's big swank house was his true body. His money his true clothes" (10). Bruno participates in an activity which can easily be read as a representation of speculation, of a particular form of capital (a descendant of, for example, the poker game in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*). Most of Bruno's interactions with others consist in exchange, in exercising his subtractive powers, in viewing other people as commodities: Bruno's aim at Köhler's house is to "bare him of what he could in an evening" (10). Thus, the blot, even though it eventually contributes to his downfall as a backgammon player, develops *as a direct result of* Bruno's line of work. This is

the significance of its second, jargonistic meaning: a "blot" also refers to an "unprotected checker, sitting singly on a point" on the backgammon board (11). The blot is the concretization of the denials and disavowals necessary to maintain Bruno's belief in the fantasy world he has constructed: it is a version of what Bruno regards as the "inner mask" (164) and yet it is, crucially, "unprotected" and vulnerable to outside forces (as he is to discover during and after its removal).

If one accepts this idea of the blot as an ideological blind spot, one might expect its excision to facilitate an awakening into subjecthood, greater self-awareness, and a seeing of the world for what it is. At first, this appears to be the case: "Now the former blot was flooded with light and information, his interior eyelid stripped away. Journeying from the hospital, Bruno found himself in the grip of a world both riotous and raw" (173). And yet, as with so many things in this novel, matters are more complicated than they first appear. Having lost the blot, Bruno has indeed lost the object that he supposed enabled the self-imposed occlusion of his past and his sense of a deeper selfhood, his deliberate reduction of life to the exchanges of the backgammon board: the blot is, as we have seen, a concrete metaphor for Bruno's disavowals. However, what he fails to understand is that it is also a metaphor for selfhood per se, and necessarily a paradoxical one: a sense of unique and essential selfhood is only possible through disavowing the ways in which selfhood is ideologically interpellated and constructed, but also fundamentally alienated from itself by language and by capitalism. As an internal blockage, the blot stands for "*an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately 'is' the subject itself*," the impossibility of producing an adequate framework of subjectivity (Žižek 1999: 159). Seen in this way, the blot is both constitutive lack—of a sense of ontological integrity—and a symbol of excess, specifically "the contingent-excessive gesture that constitutes the very universal order of Being," whereby the subject attempts hubristically to place itself at the center of the universe and thus,

paradoxically, fabricates that universe (Žižek 1999: 160). It correlates with the blot that, in Lacan's words, "reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head" (Lacan 92) staring back at us from Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*.

For this reason, Bruno cannot possibly become "more himself" after his operation: the self is never identical with itself. Moreover, the "light and information" Bruno receives now reveals only that he is trapped, like everyone else, in a system of disavowals much more pervasive and oppressive than his gambling fantasies, and much harder to deconstruct. So, in Berkeley, the world, at first, becomes murkier, not clearer. For one thing, Bruno finds himself swapping one mode of dependence—his relationship with Falk—for another that turns out to be much more malignant, his ongoing debt to Stolarsky. Secondly, Bruno's vanity, his concern with surfaces, dictates that he immediately cover his facial disfigurement with a mask. He has merely replaced one disavowal with another, or one lack/excess with another excessive symbolic gesture.

What Bruno has not yet understood is that the blot, as "inner mask" or veil, did not function as protection from an underlying, troubling reality. Rather, like the mask adorning the cover of the novel, it represented the "unconscious fantasy structuring our social reality itself"; that is, the fantasy of a coherent self, coupled with the assumption of the commodity form in human relationships (Žižek 1989: 33), and the commodity's endlessly deferred promise of fulfilment and completion. The substitution of the mask takes this idea further. Like the blot, it is hypostatic, and furthermore demands to be read as an elaborate pun on the various contexts in which the term "hypostasis" can be used. It joins the long list of concrete metaphors in Lethem's work, but also leads to implied jokes on the hypostatic qualities of the superheroes that have inspired the author. After the operation, Bruno dons his mask and, forced to work in one of Stolarsky's burger restaurants, earns the nickname "The Martyr of Anarchy," as if he has become a superhero himself, a figurehead for the anti-capitalist

movement in Berkeley (240). The assumption of this secret identity suggests another meaning of "hypostasis," taken from psychology, which denotes the presentation of different selves, the donning of masks. In this regard the novel becomes a meditation on the shifting nature of selfhood. Finally, and of greatest significance, is the use of "hypostasis" to refer to the fallacy of reification—social relationships expressed through commodity exchange, the substitution of active objects for passive subjects. Just as the blot veiled the lack of a real self unshackled by fantasy, so the mask, while seeming to provide an active identity, hides only the truth of the individual's subjection to commodity culture.

Key to understanding this truth is the character of Keith Stolarsky. Unsurprisingly, he is the only person who fully understands Berkeley's economic and psychological realities, because he has been instrumental in shaping them. Stolarsky evidently stands for rampant, callous, utterly cynical capitalism. He owns everything and everyone in the neighborhood; his maneuvering remains largely mysterious; and, most importantly, he is expert at manufacturing and assimilating his own opposition. Even Garris Plybon, the leader of the supposedly underground resistance movement and instigator of the protest with which the novel climaxes, works in a burger joint called Kropotkin's (after the Russian advocate of anarchism), which Stolarsky purchased so that he could own a direct rival to his other, more mainstream restaurant. As Tina, Stolarsky's partner, laconically puts it: "Plenty of people draw a salary from their mortal enemy." She continues: "Why bother infiltrating dissident cells, when you can start one yourself, just to see what grows there?" (200). Stolarsky is indulging in what Mark Fisher calls "*precorporation*"—the preemptive formatting of oppositional desires and gestures, and Tina, like Garris Plybon, is fully aware of the fact (Fisher 9).

Even the mask Bruno sports in Kropotkin's, and which inspires the masked protest at the end of the novel, is a gift from Stolarsky. The mask becomes a marketable, fashionable

commodity, or an empty symbol, and the anti-capitalist riot mere "carnivalesque background noise," to employ Mark Fisher's memorable, if forlorn, image (Fisher 14). It is as if Stolarsky has fully imbibed Slavoj Žižek's theories. He understands that the mask in itself is not real and means nothing, that it does not even stand for ideology as "an illusion masking the real state of things" (Žižek 1989: 33). It is simply part of the fantasy in which all characters, protestors included, participate, knowing that their dissenting gestures, however impassioned they appear, are otiose, or even, as Chris McMillan notes, "a source of profit" (McMillan 2012: 102). Belatedly, Bruno realizes that he has, all along, been a checker in Stolarsky's malevolent game of backgammon: "It struck Bruno that he might owe his presence in Berkeley, the whole joke of his current existence, to Stolarsky's Stalin impulse to arrange for a thorn in his own paw [. . .] Stolarsky's local adversaries were too easily vanquished, Plybon included. So Stolarsky had plucked Bruno up from afar, a new enemy to stem his boredom" (270). Setting fire to the Jack London Apartments, where he and Garris Plybon have been living, Bruno begins to suspect that even this destruction has been orchestrated by Stolarsky: "It was only then that Bruno turned to search out the masked face of the bestower of lighter fluid: another burlap-nooseman like himself. Stolarsky had said he had dozens of the masks, if not hundreds. Bruno had never been out of sight of Stolarsky's operatives, he realized too late. He might even be an operative himself" (277). At this moment Bruno does indeed realize too late that the very figure of the masked superhero, the hypostatic embodiment of an idea of virtue, strength, community or dissent, has been precorporated, and is itself a commodity or brand.[2]

[2] Lethem and Karl Rusnak's 2008 reimagining of Marvel's *Omega the Unknown* also concerns itself with the superhero as brand. The Omega of the title is in fact one member of a franchise of similar figures. His antagonist The Mink has marketed himself as a superhero, despite having no superpowers but a spirit of ruthless capitalist enterprise. The teenage hero of the story finds his palms literally branded with the Omega symbol. *Omega*'s vision is similar to that of *A Gambler's Anatomy*: the America it portrays is one in which the notion of singular selfhood has been co-opted into commodity culture. As the nameless narrator opines: "The 'Individual' is one of our preferred marketing categories" (Chp. IX).

Stolarsky wins, inevitably. There is no way out. Bruno is banished from Berkeley and reinvents himself as a poker player, swapping one life of speculation and accumulation for another. If Bruno suffers multiple humiliations, then the final joke might nevertheless be on the readers. For Stolarsky is a villainous individual—that is beyond dispute. Presumably, however, he is also part of a much wider system. What Lethem chooses not to do in *A Gambler's Anatomy* is to look beyond the baleful individual to reveal what Mark Fisher calls "a dimension of totalitarianism which cannot be understood on the model of despotic command" (50). In this respect, the ideological blind spot is reproduced at the level of narrative interpretation. Stolarsky can vanquish his local foes with ease, but surely his machinations are local manifestations of global forces, products of uneven development? Surely his function is more synecdochal than metaphorical? By withholding access to the bigger picture, Lethem makes of his tale a Kafkaesque nightmare of late capitalism, where "there is no possibility of appealing, even in principle, to a final authority which can offer the definitive official version" (Fisher 50). A reader might have pause to reflect that scapegoating an obvious bad guy distracts from a bigger problem, and the best that can be hoped for upon reaching this conclusion is a sharper critical faculty. In his review of *Dissident Gardens*, Alan Wald criticizes Lethem for his "hyperawareness" of individual sensations and family dynamics, "unmoored from historical consciousness" (Wald 179). He misses the point: *Dissident Gardens* is partly *about* the difficulty of seeing the bigger historical picture through the miasma of personal relationships. *A Gambler's Anatomy* shares much the same concern. To return to the cover image with which this article started: when we open the pages of the novel, Lethem pulls away the mask, but only so far. Or, to put it another way, every reader has a blot: call it fantasy, or disavowal, or just some shit that gets left inside.

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