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> Palm trees finger the sky, and there's enough sunshine to lay some off on Pittsburgh. But that's all on top. L.A., truth to tell, is not much different than a pretty girl with the clap.
>
> **Coleman and Zippel, *City of Angels***

Thanks to James Bond's filmic popularity, the two rival mixologies of the vodka Martini are well known: the shaken and the stirred. Indeed, one might easily imagine a Levi-Straussian work of cultural anthropology, along the lines of *The Raw and the Cooked,* exploring how these two mixing methods have come to encapsulate whole attitudes toward life, love, and libations. The mixological niceties of the White Russian, by contrast, remain relatively unremarked upon, even among libationists familiar with the Dude. For, while it's conceivable that the Martini is to James Bond what the White Russian—or to use the preferred dudism, the *Caucasian*—is to the fortuitously eponymous protagonist of the Coen brothers film *The Big Lebowski,* it is not so clear what impact his Belarusian leanings have had on his favorite collation's cultural place, beyond the cult of Lebowski enthusiasts.

The upshot of this is that when you order a White Russian, you leave it to the bartender to mix it, without any special instructions, beyond whether or not to put it on the rocks. And, while the official Absolut vodka website, for example, instructs the attentive tippler to "float"

come in handy. Moreover, it's a bartending utensil used primarily for mixing, deployed in this special case for separation. So, we've got a little anatomy lesson built into a bartending lesson. Third, it is perhaps the only recipe for the White Russian that defines what it means to "float" the cream. It puts the word in quotation marks, thus alerting us that we are encountering not only a bartending lesson and an anatomy lesson, but a vocabulary lesson as well. While it is the nature of recipes and handbooks and guides of this kind to be didactic, this description engages in a kind of salacious hyper-didaxy: too much teaching, not enough drinking. Similarly picayune, Wikipedia, at last check, even insists on "fresh" cream. (The Dude, at least nominally, shares this insistence, as he is careful to smell the cream for freshness—or, perhaps, to ascertain that it is not yet *too* sour—before using it.)

On the other side of this mixological divide are the homogenizers, the most outspoken of whom may well be David Biggs, who directs us to "shake" the ingredients in order "to mix" them, in *The Cocktail Handbook*. In his follow-up volume *Legendary Cocktails,* published two years later (and thus giving the lie to his earlier book's title), Biggs imagines that the White Russian "probably reminded its inventor of the glistening snow of Siberia," before he instructs his readers to "shake the combination well and strain" (95). (Parenthetically, one might wonder whether this is not the recipe the Politburo applied for ensuring order in its Siberian work camps: "shake [. . .] and strain"; in any case, a twentieth-century inventor of such a drink might be forgiven for muddying the Stalinist snows of Siberia with a touch of Mexico's warmer, more sensual Kahlúa.) Whatever its origins, the homogenized White Russian is less refined in its mixology. Alan Axelrod, a *sturm-und-drang* mixologist with a shaker's torque built into his name, exhorts the intellectually disinclined in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mixing Drinks* to "shake vig-

the White Russian by making it an exception to the general rule. It also defers the question of authority and agency by employing the passive voice: White Russians "are meant to be served not fully mixed." To put it another way: the passive voice in this formulation does not so much *hide* agency as avoid it. It makes a claim without taking a position.

This apositionality is, I suggest, key to grasping the stakes of the Dude's mixing method. For the whole point of this middling mixology is not to worry too much about precise methodology. And, while Michael Flocker recommends the White Russian in *The Metrosexual Guide to Style: A Handbook for the Modern Man,* he indicates it is particularly suitable to those "who dig dairy" (31). That "dig"—the sly Dudism—belies the book's (and the drink's) appeal to metrosexuals who imagine themselves "spies and international gigolos" (31). It transposes us from Malibu or the Standard Lounge to the cluttered and overboozed sidewalks of Venice Beach.

The middle way, it appears, is the Dude's way, for it avoids the effort of shaking and straining, on the one hand, and the refinements of layering and floating, on the other. "Weathervane," a contributor to the online information forum "Everything2," calls attention to precisely this point in a post on "The White Russian" discussion board:

> Check out the way The Dude mixes his [White Russians] in *The Big Lebowski*. Seriously casual, barely even paying attention while he mixes it. None of this "half an oz. of *this* and *that*" nonsense. [. . .] Relax. Smoke a joint.

The "White Russian" page, despite its title, is not devoted solely to the drink. Since "Everything2" is a manifestly Ramist website, each topic is positioned as a "node," crisscrossed by lines of thought tangled at other nodes: the list of linked nodes at the bottom of the page suggests the variety of associations made possible by this rhizomatic organization;

15.3. The middling mixologist at work.

it includes "diphenhydramine," "Dostoyevsky," "Anal Sex," "Why you never see baby pigeons," and, inconspicuous among the others, "Leon Trotsky."

Trotsky, in fact, is doubly implicated in this drink. First, as Vladimir Lenin's lieutenant, he led the Red Army successfully against the anti-communist White Russian army during the Russian Civil War (1917–1921) to seal the communist *coup*. Second, after losing favor with the Soviet establishment under Stalin, he fled, finally, to Mexico, Kahlúa's country of origin.[2] Trotsky, as the insider/outsider and nationalist/exile, emerges, in this formulation, as a figure of permeability, a boundary crosser, a virgule (fr. L. *virgula,* little rod [not little virgin]; for the severing of which, see below). And, while he might have suffered some separation anxiety as he floated southward across the big water into balmy exile, perhaps a bottle of Russia's little water with

him, he also triangulates the mythical center of this otherwise decentered drink, a triangle which, like the very one through which he would have passed, threatens to swallow up an otherwise linear cultural analysis.

And so, the place[3] the Dude occupies—or, more accurately, his placelessness—confers upon him a Trotskian positionality. For just as his careless mixology negotiates the poles of unity and stark separation, the Dude likewise manages to finesse, without flourish—employing, in a moment of supreme indifference, non-dairy creamer—the impasse of metrosexual masculinity, on the one hand, and of the nostalgic "man's man" masculinity, on the other: the former celebrating and enacting a kind of post-castration phallic masculinity, and the latter insisting on the masculinity's fundamental ontological and historical unity.

Such finesse appears remarkable, considering how prevalent figures of separation and impotence are in *The Big Lebowski*. Throughout the film, U.S. president George H. W. Bush's insistence that Iraqi aggression "will not stand" serves as a leitmotif auguring both virile aggression and castration; Maude Lebowski refuses to interact with her father, stripping him of controlling interest in one of the family's corporations; Walter Sobchak and his wife have divorced, leaving him with only his post-Vietnam frustrations and an adopted Orthodox Judaism that immobilizes him one day each week; Donny Kerabatsos is continually excluded from Walter and the Dude's conversations; a severed toe serves as a kidnapper's threat; Mr. Lebowski, who has lost the use of his legs, seems unable to keep his wayward wife out of trouble. And, as if "aggression" that "will not stand," a daughter's antipathy, a corporate ouster, divorce, Sabbath-keeping, exile, amputation, flaccidity below the waist, and infidelity don't clearly enough suggest castration anxiety—a very special kind of separation anxiety—German nihilists unleash a feral "marmot" in the Dude's bath (!) as an explicit threat of

genital mutilation, while in a hallucinatory blackout, the Dude imagines those same nihilists, bearing giant scissors, chasing him. All of which, it's worth noting, started because of the loss of a rug, which "tied the room together," as the Dude repeatedly comments. Since, as Lisa Donald notes in her provocative essay "Bowling, Gender, and Emasculation in *The Big Lebowski*," "'rug' is a common, though unflattering, slang term for female genitalia," the Dude, it seems, is threatened with the loss of maternal unity, and thus with the anguish of castration.

In this regard, it's tempting to think of the Dude's milky mélange as somehow symbolic of an anxiously Oedipal over-attachment to the maternal. So understood, the White Russian becomes a means for the Dude to abate, for a few moments at least, a repressed longing for renewed unity with the forever forbidden, forever distant primal mother.

Such a longing would precisely symptomize castration anxiety, because the wish for maternal unity would serve as a powerful disavowal of the genital difference that, according to Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, is the anxiety's foundational trauma. Along the same lines, Maude's non-dairy creamer would thus announce her rejection of traditional maternity, while the Dude's frequently milk-soaked beard, surrounding his two lips, visually collapses the genital and mammary attributes of maternal femaleness.

It is the trope of femaleness coded as threat on which Donald dwells, arguing that the Dude embodies those anxieties about American masculinity that have emerged since women's liberation. I wish to make precisely the opposite claim: that the Dude's status as "a man for his time and place," according to the Stranger's introductory voice-over (rather than a man *of* his time and place)—that is, as an antidote for, rather than a symptom of his milieu—and the cult status of the film are results of the Dude's *immunity* to anxiety, and particularly castration anxiety. When Maude, for instance, begins her disquisition on her

... the Dude's frequently milk-soaked beard, surrounding his two lips, visually collapses the genital and mammary attributes of maternal femaleness.

"vaginal" artworks and scoffs at the casual ease with which men talk about their own genitals, the Dude registers almost no reaction at all. Her approach to art and feminism—an all but manifest send-up of Eve Ensler's essentialist, facile notions of embodied womanhood in *The Vagina Monologues,* right down to her severe haircut—seems to have no effect on the Dude, so little do they provoke anxiety. Far from threatening castration, Maude succeeds in seducing the Dude, whom she has chosen as the sire of her offspring precisely because he does not suffer from modern masculine melancholia.

So, while the Dude's lactic predilections and Maude's milk substitute seem to put maternity in play, none of the (very infrequent) moments of anguish the Dude exhibits in waking life is gendered; indeed, when the Dude does seem to suffer something like anxiety (over the severed toe or his increasingly battered car), Walter's outbursts always rise above the Dude's angst, diminishing it by comparison. Only in his vivid and exaggerated dreamscapes does the Dude's anxiety get linked to castration, and then the scenarios are so stylized, so playful, so symbolically de trop that he seems to be merely going through the motions of castration anxiety, acting out a set of behaviors that, far from marking out some deep psychic traumatic space, rather show us, and the Dude himself, the very place that he never really occupies: the space of anxiety.

In this regard, then, castration, maternity, the femme fatale, and the usual trappings of film noir's signature embattled masculinity become feints, prestidigitations that continually lure the viewer or the analyst into dead ends. If these interpretive blind alleys[4] mark the investigatory spaces of modernist epistemologies, then *The Big Lebowski's* pastiche

of these figures invites us to imagine other, postmodern pathways and patterns of knowing, places and spaces that do not depend upon fixity and permanence to secure their ontologies. In fact, the film seems to celebrate a kind of unflappable, impenetrable identity, all play and surface, not just unmarked, but ungendered.[5] In short, the film seems to invite us to think Los Angeles, the city toward which every tumbleweed, separated from its stalk, blows. Like the drink to which the Dude is devoted, the city itself, according to Mike Davis's celebrated work of urban criticism, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles,* is "essentially deracinated": without center, without roots (18). Neither entirely homogenized, nor imperviously stratified, Los Angeles, like the Dude, seems to occupy a middle position between the mixed and the layered. All of which is to say that, as one of the legendary sites for *film noir* gender angst, the city here becomes the site for a postmodern *film blanc.*

The *film blanc,* in this formulation, emerges as a post-masculine negotiation of anxieties of all kinds, even mixological ones. As a pastiche of *noir*—or *blanc* parody, to borrow Fredric Jameson's formulation—it deflects plot and narrative, turning them into play, just as figures like "the Jesus" and as Donny, Walter, and the Dude's repartee in the bowling alley deflect and finally defer the doubly linear logic of bowling. And, apropos of this essay's own collusion in decentered cultural production, it is there, in the pit, that Walter drags the red—no pun intended—herring of V. I. Lenin through the wild (or grey?) goose chase on which the Dude, and we enthusiasts who try to pin him down, have been sent.

It seems somehow appropriate that the World Wide Web should emerge as the primary "place" in which discussions of *The Big Lebowski* and the White Russian should establish themselves and carry on, this volume's bookishness notwithstanding. After all, like Los Angeles, the decentered city in which the film is set, the sprawling history of the

sprawling nation after which the drink is named, and the tangled, metastasized plot of both *The Big Lebowski* and *The Big Sleep* (1946), to which its name alludes—the latter famously too tangled for its famously tangled screenwriter, William Faulkner, to follow—the Web offers the promise of anonymity, liquid liberation, and mixing without mixology.

Notes

1. Because floaters seem, by and large, unaware of any alternative to floating, and homogenizers to mixing, perhaps *faction* is not quite the right term here, as it suggests a self-consciousness of one's oppositional relationship to another faction.

2. Where he had an affair with Frida Kahló. Khaló/Kahlúa . . . what might Walter say?

3. Or, perhaps, the places: an apartment on whose rent he is behind; the imaginary dreamscapes; Malibu, from which he is banned; the temporary, transitory spaces of the bowling alley, the car, the diner, and so forth. These all testify to an essentially divagatory impulse animating the Dude.

4. Perhaps bowling alleys, but also alleys of the sort down which Sam Spade's partner, Miles Archer, was lured to his death in Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*.

5. Regarding the play of surfaces, it's instructive to note how much attention the camera lavishes upon the various smooth, reflective, retro-1950s surfaces that abound in this film, particularly in the bowling alley, including the finish on the floors, the buffed sheen of the balls, and the play of light on metal, vinyl, plastic, and wood.