build on or undercut him, aware that he is engaged in conversation with previous works, and that later works will exist in conversation with him.

Even a couple of decades later, I still remember feeling during my early forays that, to misapply Gertrude Stein, a "there" existed in my research but I wasn't sure what that "there" was or indeed where it was. Hall enabled me to map out how to get "there" and I'm sure anybody who has had the misfortune to read any of my works will espy the debt I owe to him, especially in the way that I approached the *Dirty Harry* film series as an articulation of conservative ideology at a conjunctural moment in American history, when the postwar consensus and 1960s liberalism frayed and ultimately were eclipsed by the renaissance of American conservatism. Similarly, I turned to Hall when writing *Silicon Valley Cinema*, as I thought about a different conjunctural moment, one closer to our present, and the way that Hollywood responded to the challenge posed by Silicon Valley corporations to our world.

Every now and again – well, when I get the time – I dig out one of Hall's essays, and each time I do, I get a little thrill of intellectual excitement, knowing that I'll read something that will once again tilt the world on its axis a little bit. That's why I always have his essays within arm's reach. Just don't get me started on *Essential Essays*, Volume II, or "Gramsci and Us," *Cultural Studies 1983*, or "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," or *Familiar Stranger*, or the brilliant *Policing the Crisis*, or, well, take your pick.

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DISCOVERING *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM* BY NELSON ALGREN

I don't know when I first heard of Nelson Algren. I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, and if, like me, you were a nerdish reader of a kid, you noticed his name here and there. The Chicago *Tribune*, a newspaper that, when Algren was alive, despised him around as much as he despised it, had a short-story prize named after him. Algren wrote novels and stories about down-and-out Polish people in Chicago; he won the National Book Award in 1950; and his 1951 book-length prose poem *Chicago: City on the Make* carried some kind of name recognition as a book that captured the corruption, which is to say the essence, of Chicago politics.[1] But, nerdish or not, the idea of reading a book-length prose poem wouldn't have crossed my mind until well past the age of eighteen. His 1956 novel *A Walk on the Wild Side* gave Lou Reed a title and a theme for one of his most famous songs, but that didn't lead me to Algren either. Maybe some parent or another had his books on their shelves – who knows. Anyway, Algren's name was kind of an extra, as in, a background artist, somehow, in my literary

[1] Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make*, fiftieth-anniversary edn, annotated by David Schmittgens and Bill Savage (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001; first published 1951).

education, less than a bit part: an obscure figure lurking in the corner while we focussed on Richard Wright or Gwendolyn Brooks, Upton Sinclair or Theodore Dreiser.

I know when I first read Nelson Algren, though: 2004, around the time I was finishing or maybe had handed in my PhD thesis, which in part was trying to figure out how a writer could be literary and also evince a commitment to political engagement without turning into a propagandist. My first novel was under contract. I'd already worked a couple of summers in Berlin, giving walking and bicycle tours to visitors, and it started to dawn on me that I knew more details about the history of this city I'd semi-adopted than I did about my own so-called hometown. I also wanted to start building some new project or projects on the foundation of the ideas about politics and literature I'd been thinking about for my PhD, but which my PhD didn't necessarily delve into too deeply. I started looking up books about Chicago.

I had a haphazard book list and some vague intentions, and I decided it was high time to read Nelson Algren. *The Man with the Golden Arm* seemed too long for a first foray into a writer from yesteryear about whom I didn't really know anything, so I picked his earlier and, more to the point, shorter novel *Never Come Morning*. The Seven Stories Press edition has a great photograph of Algren and an endorsement from Ernest Hemingway on the cover, so maybe those things factored into my decision, too. Never judge a book by its – anyway.

Never Come Morning blew the top off my skull before the night had fallen. It tells the story of juvenile delinquents, would-be prizefighters, prostitutes, the sadists who exploit their dreams and the legal system that holds exploiter and exploited alike in its grip: a brutal, harrowing, funny, sad novel that loves its characters, and revels in their idiosyncrasies at the same time as it casts a cold and sharp eye on their tragic flaws. It hits you hard early on, keeps pummeling, and still finds room to sucker punch you at the end. How, I wondered, exhausted and exhilarated from reading it, had I never read this guy before? How had I just finished a PhD writing stuff about stuff that I loved but that didn't knock me in the dirt the way this novel did? Come to think of it, who even the hell was Nelson Algren, apart from a name I'd heard in my nerdish book-reading youth?

Eventually I'd find out lots of great answers to those questions and more, and teach and write and publish and speak in public about more questions and answers of my own about the life and work of Nelson Algren, and, more importantly, the questions Algren himself raises in his work. Algren rose to prominence in the American literary scene in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, after which, though he kept writing until his death in 1981, he fell from prominence, thanks in no small part to blacklisting by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO program, though Algren himself would never know the extent to which the American government had played a role in what he perceived as his own failure. No less intriguingly, Algren lived an intense eighteen-year transatlantic relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, who, when she died, was buried next to Jean-Paul Sartre wearing the ring that Algren gave her. I would eventually trace the story of Algren's and Beauvoir's relationship and try to come to an understanding of its contours and importance in my 2016 novel *Noon in Paris, Eight in Chicago.*

But next I read Algren's big book, *The Man with the Golden Arm*. One exciting thing about reading the works of an outstanding writer – or even a good one – in some kind of sequential order (I started with Algren's third book, second novel, and then read the next one) is you get to chart the development of their use of their abilities, you get to see them learn, and you get to learn with them. *The Man with the Golden Arm* walks and gambles and fights and murders and drinks and

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shoots up in the same Chicago neighborhood, on the same Chicago street – Division Street – as *Never Come Morning*.[2] The same El trains chunter overhead, the same shadows spread beneath the tracks. But in *The Man with the Golden Arm* Algren's vision grows larger and sharper than in his previous work.

The novel tells the story of Frankie Majcinek: war veteran, petty criminal, backroom poker dealer, would-be jazz drummer, morphine addict. Really, though, the novel is about the whole neighborhood, and a wide cast of the downest and outtest down-and-out characters you're likely to find in literature: Sophie, Sparrow, Molly Novotny, Vi, Old Stash, Zero Schwiefka, Antek the Owner, Drunkie John, Blind Pig, Louie Fomorowski, Record Head Bednar – to name some of them. Algren's characters are – Algren's neighborhood is – driven by what he calls the "great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one."[3] I use the passive voice in that previous sentence because these characters don't actively seek much of anything at all, apart, maybe, from their own obliteration.

Algren commits himself fully to the task of writing these passive, degraded American lives that have "emerged from behind its billboards" by taking their attitudes seriously on their own terms,[4] whether those attitudes are right, wrong, noble, or depraved – and mostly they're wrong and depraved. That seriousness manifests as empathy, and Algren transforms his empathy into literature through prose that lends his characters' attitudes dignity that in front of the billboards America won't give them, nor they give themselves. Sentence by sentence, Algren insists on the poetry of these not so much forgotten as ignored lives, and in so doing he turns that poetry into a question both literary and political: where lies the moral center of a society that refuses even to look – not even in horror – at the least of its citizens?

This question and others that arise from Algren's work and life sit at the heart of my reading and thinking and teaching and writing. Algren transformed my ideas of what literature could be, of how literature can be, and of what literature can achieve.

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STUDS TERKEL'S *HARD TIMES: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION*

Explaining how a book redirected my work, my career, and my life is best done through stories.

My history dissertation involved nineteenth-century American urban history, the field for which I was hired by the State University of New York at Buffalo, a once-private university incorporated in a new state university, becoming the system's

[2] Nelson Algren, *Never Come Morning* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996; first published 1942).

[3] Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, fiftieth-anniversary critical edn, ed. William J. Savage and Daniel Simon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999; first published 1949), 19.

[4] Ibid.