

**Reading Patrick Modiano's *The Black Notebook* as a  
Topographical Crime Novel**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides a new reading of Patrick Modiano's *The Black Notebook* (2016) as a topographical crime novel. This new reading adds strength to the perspective which believes that the literary genre of crime fiction has evolved over the past decades in its narrative subject matter, and many crime novels have conveyed local and topographical knowledge about their settings. 1960s Paris is the setting of Modiano's *The Black Notebook* since the city is his birth place and source of inspiration. Therefore, Modiano dedicates his novel to exploring the secretive life of the city and its urban topography. *The Black Notebook* is a long meditation on the topographical features, whether natural or man-made, of 1960s Paris, and this study alters the critical conversation about Modiano's novel and shows how it characteristically typifies the evolution of the literary genre from a fiction of crime into a fiction of touristic, topographical and geographic orientation.

**Keywords:** Patrick Mordiano, Topographical Crime Fiction, 1960s Paris, *The Black Notebook*

**قراءة "المفكرة السوداء" لباتريك موديانو كرواية بوليسية طوبوغرافية**

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مستخلص البحث

تطرح هذه الدراسة قراءة جديدة لرواية "المفكرة السوداء" (2016) لباتريك موديانو كرواية بوليسية طوبوغرافية. و تدعم هذه القراءة الجديدة المنظور الذي يفترض أن نمط الرواية البوليسية الأدبي قد تطور خلال العقود الماضية من حيث المادة القصصية، وأن الكثير من الروايات البوليسية قد ساقنت معرفة محلية وطوبوغرافية حول محيطاتها. و تعد باريس في ستينيات القرن الماضي هي مسرح الأحداث لرواية "المفكرة السوداء" لباتريك موديانو حيث أن المدينة هي مسقط رأسه ومصدر الهامه، و لذلك، يكرس موديانو روايته لاستكشاف الحياة السرية للمدينة وملاحها الحضرية. و عليه، تعد "المفكرة السوداء" بمثابة تأمل مستفيض في السمات الطوبوغرافية— سواء كانت طبيعية أو من صنع الإنسان— لباريس في ستينيات القرن العشرين. وتغير هذه الدراسة من مجرى النقاش النقدي الأدبي الدائر بشأن رواية موديانو وتظهر كيف أن روايته تجسد تطور النمط الأدبي من رواية بوليسية بحتة إلى رواية بوليسية ذات توجهات سياحية وطوبوغرافية وجغرافية.

## 1. Introduction

*The Black Notebook* (*L'Herbe des nuits*) is Patrick Modiano's 2012 novel that has been skillfully rendered into English from French in 2016 by Mark Polizzotti; one of Modiano's prominent translators. Jean is the first-person narrator of the novel (Jean is also the first name of the author whose full name is Jean Patrick Modiano). The novel is mainly about the black notebook which the author kept in his early adulthood in Paris during the 1960s, and in which he used to register different locations and features of the city. Modiano's Parisian book sheds the light on the sinister and criminal atmosphere of 1960s Paris in a narrative mood. The 1960s events in France are considered a clear evidence of the unrest which prevailed the European capital in that time. The civil unrest in France in May 1968 was initiated by demonstrations and protests across the country against American imperialism, capitalism and traditional institutions. The protests affected the economy seriously and fears of rebellion or civil war aroused. The protesters occupied many factories, universities and governmental buildings. However, the riots also created an artistic movement of songs, mottoes and graffiti.

*The Black Notebook* is set in the Montparnasse district of Paris during the period of French decolonization in the 1960's. Paris is the city in which Modiano was born, and it is also the source of his fascination and inspiration. In his Nobel Lecture, Modiano refers to the 19th century French novel: *Les mystères de Paris* (written by the French novelist Eugène Sue from 1842-43) and says: "The city – as it happens Paris, the city of my birth– is linked to my very first childhood impressions, and these impressions were so strong that I have been constantly exploring the 'mysteries of Paris' ever since" (para. 22). This reference to Sue's novel is not a coincidence since Modiano is regarded as his heir. Peter Brooks (2003) clarifies that Eugène Sue "opened to popular novelistic treatment a certain urban topography and demography, of crime and social deviance, finding and exploiting a new form of the narratable" (p. 147). This brings to mind the hypothesis of this paper which is to argue that Modiano's crime-fictional narrative treatment of 1960s Paris also traces and explores many of the topographical features of the city as clearly shown in *The Black Notebook*.

Modiano declares in his book *Pedigree: A memoir*, which is a brief account of his first 21 years, how he felt really happy while wandering alone in the Parisian streets when he was seventeen years old. Thenceforward, the urban geography of the capital, the precise description of locations and the names of streets have all been a feature of his narrative style (Modiano, 2015b). He also confirms this love for

registering the geography of the city when he says in an interview with E. Cameron "I have long been addicted to walking the different *quartiers* of Paris, and still feel a *flâneur*'s fascination for street names" (2015a, para. 3). In *The Black Notebook*, Jean (the author) wanders the Parisian streets trying to recall why he starts to associate with the Montparnasse gang that visits the Unic Hôtel regularly. He finds out some notes in his old black notebook and starts to journey the streets of Paris and its shabby cafés and hotels looking for a woman, Dominique Roger or Dannie, whom he loved forty years ago and who might have killed someone. Jean decides to reinvestigate the old case of Dannie's crime as he could be the only witness. *The Black Notebook* is thus like most of Modiano's novels which usually involve the protagonist's search for a woman he met in his young adulthood. In *Out of the Dark*, this woman is Jacqueline, the girl whom the narrator accompanies and with whom he escapes to London once committing a crime. In *Honeymoon*, this woman is Ingrid Teyrsen, the woman whom the narrator met in the south of France during the war. In *The Black Notebook*, Jean's attempt to find out about Dannie provides us with a clear topographical picture of Paris in the 1960s with its cafes, its squares, its labyrinth of streets and boulevards, its Métro stations, its quays, its bridges across the Seine River and its old demolished buildings in marginal and peripheral neighborhoods populated by a lot of drifting unemployed people who often involve in illegal activities or pass their times drinking or wandering aimlessly in the Parisian streets. Modiano's novels generally involve characters who use pseudonyms or change their identities, while locations, streets and addresses are absolutely precise as if Modiano has drawn an exact Parisian map. Modiano's citation of specific names of Parisian streets and sites in the fictional world of *The Black Notebook* accords the novel a topographical atmosphere. This paper traces Jean's saga with Dannie and the Montparnasse gang in order to show how Modiano's novel skillfully epitomizes the literary genre of topographical crime fiction.

## 2. Topographical Crime Fiction as a Literary Genre

Topographical crime fiction is recent genre of fiction in which crimes and criminals are fictionalized in real settings. This type of fiction not only investigates crimes, but also provides real topographical details about the personality of capitals, cities or rural areas and reveals a lot of secrets about their inhabitants via the topographical details that surround them. Topographical crime novels are always abundant in real descriptions of such features which topography surveys. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the term *Topography* and the topographic maps that are related to its field of research cover:

Natural features include relief, which is sometimes mistakenly understood to be the sole feature characterizing a topographic map, and hydrographic features, such as lakes and rivers; man-made features include other characteristics of the subject area, such as cities, towns, and villages, and roads, railroads, canals, dams, bridges, tunnels, parks, and other features (para. 1).

Topographical novels, sometimes called regional novels, have been known since the time of Thomas Hardy in the nineteenth century. Hardy, who is the most important topographical novelist of England, has been inspired by his native region and its landscape, and he is considered as a regional novelist who skillfully demonstrates the topographical features of his region in his novels' settings. Hardy is well known for his topographical description of Wessex, and his first Wessex novel comes to light in 1871. After that, topographical or regional novels have become an established literary genre of the literature of England. When it comes to topographical crime fiction, the obvious evolution of the literary genre from a fiction of crime into a fiction of topographical orientation has been due to the very nature of crime fiction whose plots can be placed in local or international locations. Contemporary crime fiction has no longer been concerned only with tracking down criminals and murderers. At the present time, crime fiction becomes less suspense-oriented and more focused on topography and geography. Eva Erdmann (2011) maintains:

The literature of enigmatic bodies, murders and crime scenes has developed into a geopolitical genre that conveys primarily one thing to the general public: an extensive knowledge of geographical orientation. Contrary to the current classification of crime fiction into thriller and mystery novel, it is apparent that the development of the genre over the past 50 years has produced a pivotal new feature: the description of geographical cultural settings. (p. 274).

Unlike crime fiction which developed in the early 19th century and in which crime and criminals are central to the plot, topographical crime fiction studies and focuses on natural and man-made features of cities more than just tracking crimes. Topographical crime fiction novels are set in real locations. This is what makes the genre appealing since its settings are recognizable to readers who become completely captivated while reading about real sites. In topographical crime novels, unlike the detective crime fiction of the nineteenth century, crimes are no longer committed in remote or locked places, but rather in real public locations that convey a lot of facts about the natural or constructed features of the areas in which the crimes are set. If a reader examines the recent works

that exemplify the genre, such as crime fiction novels by Valerie Wilson Wesley, Wolf Haas or the Chinese novelist Qui Xiaolong, he/she will find that cities and capitals throughout world are topographically revealed in a detailed way. Many capitals, cities, regions and locations have, because of topographical crime novels, been introduced to the reading public beyond their provincial borders. In addition, the genre has recently become an established one as a result of the masterpieces written by many crime fiction novelists who have revealed the topographical nature of their own countries. For example, Elizabeth George's crime novels have conveyed local and topographical knowledge about England, Henning Mankell's crime novels have done the same for Sweden and Manuel V. Montalbán's for Spain. Topographical crime novels can easily be identified by their titles or book covers; for instances, Robert Wilson's novel title *A Small Death in Lisbon*, the book cover of Patrick Modiano's *The Black Notebook* that shows a Google map shot of Paris, the book covers of the American novelist Donna Leon whose crime novels are set in Venice or the photograph of the Kremlin on Daniel Silva's crime novel *Moscow Rules*. Thus and apparently, the main focus of such literary works is not fictionalizing the crime scene, but rather the topographical description of it. Erdmann confirms:

The narrative focus of the genre has shifted away from the study of the social to the study of the topographical environment. Crime fiction no longer presents an analysis of social conditions in the local prostitutes' district or nouveau-riche villas in the exclusive suburb, but a topographical panorama that even includes underground geographies, such as Manchester's sewage network (Michael Robotham) and extends to risky and internationally shunned locations such as the border crossing on the Gaza Strip (p. 275).

Consequently, while reading the novel, the reader of a contemporary topographical crime novel envisions a detailed narrative description of the crime scene's surroundings. Consequently, readers do not need to look for a map in order to comprehend the topographical description of the novel's setting.

Using maps or web mapping, either by tourists, residents or strangers, is now a real life practice, and reading topographical crime fiction novels with their detailed narrative descriptions of topographical features and their precise specification of real locations helps readers create and envision locations due to the accurate topographical data the novels present. Many contemporary topographical crime fiction novels contain a map inside the front cover, and this is evident in the international book market. Many crime fiction novelists, such as Manuel V. Montalbán,

Minette Walters, Patrick Modiano and Stieg Larsson use maps inside their novels. The usage of maps inside novels, whether drawn maps or carried by the protagonist, is an old literary tradition; not a newly-devised literary technique by topographical crime fiction novelists. The map is a well-known element of adventure novels, travel novels and conquest fiction. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Sea Lions* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are good examples in this respect. In this way, topographical crime fiction novelists continue the tradition of using maps and providing detailed descriptions of locations such as their literary predecessors. However, unlike the other literary genres, topographical crime fiction novelists use maps, if they do, in a different way. In topographical crime fiction, real maps, not fictitious, and accurate specification of real locations play a vital role in introducing the plot and replacing the narrative description of the novel's locality with visual images as if the reader is reading a guide book. Accordingly, topographical crime novels, whether they contain real maps inside or the actual maps are carried by the novels' protagonists, present accurate topographical details about the novels' different localities and reflect the ingenious artistic talents of their novelists when developing the genre from a fiction of crime into a fiction of touristic and topographical orientation.

### **3. Modiano's Topographical Presentation of 1960s Paris:**

Paris, the French capital, lies in the north central part of France and spreads widely on the two banks of the Seine River which is a permanent topographical feature of Paris and to which Modiano's characters retreat for reflection. Paris is topographically characterized by two natural islands in the Seine; the Île de la Cité and the Île Saint-Louis. In addition, the city is divided into twenty arrondissements or administrative districts that lie on both sides of the Seine. Modiano employs this centrally located hydrographic feature, the Seine, as a physical divider of the city which was dispersed between rebellion and idealism in the 1960s. The river serves as a topographical demarcation or a reference point for the sharp social and intellectual dichotomy of the French capital in that period; that is the separation between the criminal and the legal, the secretive and the open, the radical and the conservative.

*The Black Notebook* is a topographical crime novel; this means that the incidents are set in real locations of 1960s Paris. The novel is a perfect example of the evolution of the literary genre from a fiction of crime into a fiction of touristic, topographical and geographic orientation. Apparently, the novel presents 1960s Paris topographically, and its main focus is neither fictionalizing the Montparnasse gang's crimes nor

investigating their criminal motives. A few details have been mentioned about the real nature of their crimes, and many questions are left unanswered. It is only on page twenty nine of the book that the first clear hint about crime fiction is mentioned when Jean refers to Aghamouri, Paul Chastagnier, Duwelz, Gérard Marciano, and others as the "Montparnasse gang", and adds that Dannie wants "nothing more to do with those losers" (p. 29). The second clear hint about crime fiction happens to appear on page fifty three of the novel when Jean mentions the Montparnasse gang and "their dirty tricks" which "will end badly for them, in prison or some obscure vendetta" (p. 53). Suspense is somewhat generated in the novel when Jean attempts to realize nature of Dannie's crime. In addition, we have never had any justifications regarding some obscure incidents of the novel: Whose house is the country house which Jean and Dannie frequent? Why does Dannie have a key? Why does Dannie steal a book, a record player, and some records from an apartment in Paris to which Dannie also has a key? What does Dannie do in return when the gang members provide her with false identity papers as well as a room in the hotel and allow her to use one of their cars? Even the "nasty incident" or crime that Dannie has committed remains unclear. Jean himself says "I believe that already, back then, I had understood that no one ever answers questions" (p. 48). All these unanswered questions indicate that Modiano's main concern has not been fictionalizing crimes as much as it has been surveying man-made and natural features of 1960s Paris.

In his fiction, Modiano tends to portray many of his characters as drifters who live at the periphery of bourgeois society. He describes the simplest details of his local region in a highly remarkable way, and there is always a flavor of regionalism in his fiction and the way he depicts characters in relation to their surroundings. Modiano's accuracy can be noticed in positioning the Montparnasse gang in that particular era of the Parisian history. As mentioned before, the unrest that prevailed the French capital in the 1960s benefits Modiano a great deal while imparting a criminal atmosphere to his topographical presentation. In *The Black Notebook*, Jean describes himself saying "I had no credit, no legitimacy. No family or defined social status. I floated on the Paris air" (p. 101). This act of wandering or floating "on the Paris air" is always occurring in real Parisian locations. Modiano's novel is simply a collection of memories set in real neighborhoods, and almost all of the locations mentioned in the novel can be found on the real map of Paris. Modiano's topographical survey of 1960s Paris provides a precise social commentary on the secretive world of the city, and it also serves a narrative purpose as the movement among the different locations and constructed features of the

French capital helps as reference points to the characters. Moreover, Modiano's employment of precise geographical locations of 1960s Paris is indeed a skillful attempt to recapture the past. According to Akane Kawakami (2014), Modiano's interest in representing these topographical features of 1960s Paris in his fiction gives the narrative a permanent access to the past as time translates into space. Kawakami writes "In Modiano's postmodern topography, certain geographical precisions function as points of extraordinary access into the past, privileged areas where time translates into space and space into time" (2014, p. 59). Kawakami also demonstrates that the precise geographical locations in Modiano's fiction serve as "stable points within the textual space from which the characters, as well as the readers, can orient themselves" (p. 56). Namely, the existence of specific geographical locations creates stable points from which readers, Modiano himself, or his narrator Jean, can gain access to or retrieve the pasts of the novel's characters.

Modiano elucidates the reason beyond mixing the topographical with the criminal. According to him, topography of big cities is always associated with themes of disappearance, investigations and criminality. He once told the Nobel committee that one may lose him/herself, disappear in a big city, change his/her identity or indulge in a long investigation to find a trace of malice. Modiano states: "Themes of disappearance, identity and the passing of time are closely bound up with the topography of cities" (2014, para. 34). *The Black Notebook* is Modiano's long meditation on the topography and urban mutability of 1960s Paris. This is the real purpose of keeping such a black notebook; in Jean's words, to "scan my past, and that expression makes me smile. It was from the title of a novel, *A Man Scans His Past*" (p. 36), or as he also says: "if I could read them again, the exact colors and smells of the nights and days when I wrote them would come back to me" (p. 37).

**The Montparnasse area.** It is an area of Paris which is located on the left bank of the Seine River in the 14th arrondissement of Paris. The area is centered at the intersection of the Rue de Rennes and the Boulevard du Montparnasse; between the boulevard Raspail and Rue de Rennes. Modiano starts his topographical presentation of 1960s Paris in the Montparnasse district; in these streets in the shadow of the railway station and the graveyard. The Unic Hôtel is a shabby hotel that is located in Montparnasse, and it is the permanent accommodation for Dannie, Paul Chastagnier, Aghamouri, Duwelz, Gérard Marciano and Georges; members of the Montparnasse gang. The mysterious and secretive atmosphere within the hotel reflects the political and social turbulence that prevailed the French capital in the 1960s. Jean and Dannie have no



home, live in shabby rooms in poorly maintained hotels and spend most of their time moving around the streets of Paris trying to avoid the menace that "hovered over everything" (p. 25). The threat is mainly from their unsafe bourgeois society and from the dangerous people with whom they associate. While walking in the Montparnasse district, Jean remembers the names of people he has met and their meeting locations; "short descriptions of different areas in that neighborhood, for a piece I planned to call 'L'Arrière-Montparnasse,'" (secret areas of Montparnasse) (p. 3). During the period between the two world wars, Montparnasse was a center of artistic and intellectual life. Many authors and artists such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Modigliani, Hemingway, Picasso, Jean Cocteau and Max Ernst frequented the cafés along Boulevard Montparnasse, such as Le Dôme, Le Select, La Rontaine, and La Coupôle. Jean has not forgotten in his topographical account of the Montparnasse neighborhood to register the address of the poet Tristan Corbière, and Jeanne Duval, the mistress of Baudelaire: "Corbière, 10 Rue Frochot, Jeanne Duval, 17 Rue Sauffroy ca. 1878" (p. 13).

Jean is much affected by the conditions of post-war Montparnasse that he thinks "had fizzled out since the war... had lost its soul. It no longer had the heart, or the talent" (p. 11). Jean first encounter with Dominique Roger or Dannie has been a good chance to provide more details about the Montparnasse area. Dannie finds a room in the Unic Hôtel in Montparnasse. One day, Jean accompanies her along Avenue du Maine and, then, he starts narrating his topographical description of the locality. They sit on a bench in the street that runs by side of the cemetery. Jean also pictures the quiet café on Place Monge where he meets Aghamouri after his evening classes at Censier, and the small apartment the latter has in "the sixteenth arrondissement, near the Maison de la Radio" (p. 9). Jean also takes his reader through a touristic tour through Rue d'Odessa; a famous street in the Montparnasse district which is 184 meters long and 84 meters wide. The street starts at rue du Départ and ends at boulevard Edgar-Quinet and boulevard du Montparnasse. Jean takes notes of even the simplest details of the constructed features of the street as if the reader is seeing a real picture of it. For example, he pictures "the large, dirty, white-and-beige building at 11 Rue d'Odessa" (p. 3) and the wide sidewalk. One Sunday, Jean and Dannie take cover from the rain in the lobby of Le Montparnasse cinema at the lower end of Rue d'Odessa: "That huge, dilapidated movie palace had caused me the same malaise as the neighboring streets" (p. 11). A smell of ozone fills the air as you walk past a metro grating. Among the audience inside the cinema, there are a few soldiers will take trains toward Brest or Lorient when night falls. Jean continues his tour in Montparnasse with his black notebook till he arrives

at Avenue du Maine, and he walks "alongside the tall new buildings on the even-numbered side. They formed a rectilinear façade. Not a single light in the windows" (p. 5). He also visualizes the former path of Rue Vandamme, where the "café was at the back of the street, which extended into a dead end that abutted the wall of the railroad yards" (p. 5). This is where Paul Chastagnier, a gang member, usually parks his red car "in the dead end, in front of the black wall. There was a hotel above the café, the Hôtel Perceval, named after a nearby street" (p. 5). As recalled by Jean, Chastagnier holds his appointments "in the southern part of town, that hinterland around the old freight depot" (p. 4). While walking, Jean also registers some streets and shop names of 1960s Montparnasse such as Falguière, Allera, Rue des Favorites, and some empty cafés to which Chastagnier used to take him. Currently, many buildings in Rue Vandamme have been erased by the new construction, but, fortunately, Jean has recorded every simple detail in the black notebook.

The same Sunday evening, while walking along the Quai Saint-Michel and where the street opens onto Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, Jean sees Dannie sitting together with Aghamouri on a café. The scene is one of touristic and topographical orientation more than that of love and jealousy. Jean provides a thorough detailed description of the café saying:

After the steps and the metal railing, was a large, brightly lit window, the back of a café whose front looked out on the fence surrounding the Jardin du Luxembourg. The interior of the café was dark, except for this one pane of glass, behind which patrons clustered around a semicircular bar until late into the night (p. 14).

The next day, Jean accompanies Dannie to the Luxembourg metro stop. Jean's wandering with Dannie has always been a good occasion to survey the constructed features of the areas they pass by. Dannie does not want to go home alone to the American Pavilion, and instead she asks Jean to take the metro with her. When they find out that the last train has departed. They decide to walk "but the prospect of following endless Rue de la Santé at that hour and skirting the high walls of the prison, then of Sainte-Anne Hospital" (p. 17) makes Jean's blood go cold, and Dannie pulls him toward the beginning of Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. They pass by the "66" Café, as Dannie calls it, and move toward the upper end of Boulevard Saint-Michel. After that, they walk around the fence of the Jardin du Luxembourg, and Jean becomes quite ready to confront the long and sinister Rue de la Santé which he hates to walk in. Finally, Jean's tour with Dannie ends up at the narrow streets around the Val-de-Grâce Hospital at the end of which there is a tall fence protected a garden.

Jean recalls another memory that is accompanied with more topographical surveying of the Montparnasse district. One day, he and Dannie walk "down the endless corridor of the Montparnasse metro station", and they are the only people "on the moving walkway" (p. 48). They walk "along the boulevard as far as the Dôme<sup>1</sup>" (p. 48), then suddenly change their direction and skirt the walls of the cemetery. In order not to cause Dannie troubles with Aghamouri, Jean departs and meets her the next day at "the Chat Blanc. That was a rather dreary café on Rue d'Odessa" (p. 52). On the narrative level, it is noteworthy to mention here that much Modiano's description of geographical references is highly metaphoric. Kawakami (2014) sheds the light on one of these metaphors and writes: "Geographical references have always been used as metaphors for temporal states in Modiano: walking down a slope, for instance, usually indicates a 'descent' into the past" (p. 118). In this sense, Jean's wandering with Dannie across the streets of Montparnasse district is simply a journey through memories and a yearned-for past.

**The country house.** It is simply a farmhouse to which Dannie has invited Jean to visit. It is about sixty miles from Paris, and it is called "La Barberie" (p. 28). On one page of the black notebook Jean writes: "Country house with Dannie" (p. 25) and nothing more. In another entry, Jean describes it as "Vintage home. Eure-et-Loir<sup>2</sup>. In hamlet between Châteauneuf and Brezolles" (p. 33). Jean's longing to his pleasant memories with Dannie leads him on a long journey so as to find more about that country house in which he has spent some unforgettable lovely days with Dannie. However, there is no much data registered in the black notebook about the exact location of that country house since it is not Jean's habit to write any entries about his intimate moments with Dannie. Again, this memory is accompanied with a lot of topographical, geographical and touristic account. Jean starts his topographical chronicle with pinpointing their exact meeting point just before setting off for the country house: "Avenue Victor-Hugo, building with two exits. Meet 7 p.m. at rear entrance on Rue Léonard-de-Vinci" (p. 25). As Jean does not remember at first the location of the country house, he takes the readers in an interesting journey outside Paris trying to identify the location of that country house. The journey is abundant in topographical and geographical details, and Jean recalls this memory with this geographical question:

Was it in the Paris region or farther out, near Sologne?... I believe the sound of their names reminded me of one where we'd stopped

<sup>1</sup>It is a famous café, restaurant and intellectual gathering place in Montparnasse, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> It is a department in northern France, named after the Eure and Loir rivers.

for gas. Saint-Léger-des-Aubées. Dormelles-sur-l'Orvanne. Vaucourtois. Ormoy-la-Rivière. Lorrez-le-Bocage. Chevry-en-Sereine. Boisemont. Achères-la-Forêt. La Selle-en-Hermoy. Saint-Vincentdes-Bois (p. 26).

As mentioned before, using real maps is a literary technique that characterizes topographical crime fiction. Jean brings a Michelin road map and it shows this designation: "Paris, 150-kilometer radius. North-South" (p. 26) and he also keeps "a Geological Survey map of the Sologne region" (p. 26). He spends many afternoons examining them, trying to retrace the route to the country house. He remembers that Dannie and he have "left Paris via the Porte de Saint-Cloud, the tunnel, and the highway" (p. 26). Then, they have taken the bus at Porte de Saint-Cloud. After that, the bus stops in a small town, and "the country house was about a dozen miles from there... not in Sologne, but in the Eure-et-Loir" (p. 27). Jean finally figures out the location by using the map: "I traced on the map, with my index finger, the route from Paris to Feuilleuse. I traveled back in time" (p. 27). He also manages to remember the exact location because of a natural topographical feature; the "ponds, not far from the house" (p. 27) and this, in turn, reminds him of that region.

Later, when Jean remembers the nights he has spent with Danny in the country house, his memory is always associated with the real places and locations in the area they have wandered in. He remembers the caretaker, who has occasionally taken them "to do the shopping in Châteauneuf-en-Thymerais<sup>3</sup>. Or else, closer to home, in Maillebois<sup>4</sup> and Dampierre-sur-Blévy<sup>5</sup>" (p. 32). These locations are well known for the beauty of their landscape, and Jean's appreciation of them is clear: "Those names lay dormant in my memory, but they hadn't been erased" (p. 32). Modiano's obvious love of the landscape and the countryside is one of the main threads in the novel as it is clearly demonstrated in his accurate topographical description of the country house with its "Park. Ponds. Stables" (p. 33).

**Rue de la Convention.** It is a 2120-meter street that is located in Saint-Lambert Javel district in the 15th arrondissement of Paris. It begins at Pont-Mirabeau roundabout and ends at Charles-Vallin square. This is the neighborhood where Dannie first settles on arriving in Paris. Jean has not forgotten to outline a topographical chart of the street as he passes by

<sup>3</sup> A city in northern France; it lies in the south of Normandy and Drouais, and east of the Perche.

<sup>4</sup> A town in northern France through which the Eure River runs.

<sup>5</sup> A French village which is located in the department of Eure-et-Loir, and it is also integrated in the town of Maillebois.

it reflecting on his past memories with Dannie. He first follows "Rue de la Convention toward the black façade and fences of Boucicaut Hospital" (p. 38). He then follows the same route he and Dannie used to go by. They used to "stop in a café down the street, at the corner of Rue de la Convention and Avenue Félix-Faure, just opposite the metro entrance" (p. 39). Jean proceeds to narrate more topographical details about the street as if he is providing readers with a guiding itinerary. He remembers well when Dannie arrives in Paris "at the Gare de Lyon"<sup>6</sup> (p. 39). She takes the metro, and after many transfers, she reaches Boucicaut station. But she makes a wrong transfer at some point and finds herself at Michel-Ange-Auteuil<sup>7</sup>. Jean and Dannie's frequent tours through Rue de la Convention make readers well aware of its main landmarks. One day, they walk up "Rue de la Convention toward the Seine" (p. 40), or they "sometimes follow the same route when she had an appointment on the Right Bank, on Avenue Victor-Hugo" (p. 40), or they may go "the church of Saint-Christophe-de-Javel"<sup>8</sup>, where she went regularly" (p. 40). In the evening, Jean and Dannie prefer not to "take the metro at Javel station", as they used to do so as to go to the Right Bank. Instead, they turn "around and headed back down Rue de la Convention" (p. 40). Dannie is intent on showing Jean the building where she used to live. They reach a café, and then they turn onto Avenue Félix-Faure and walk on the right-hand sidewalk until they reach the flat in a building in that place. When Jean revisits the place after thirty years, it seems that he does not "know the exact address of the building, and the façades and entrances in that part of Avenue Félix-Faure looked too much alike" for him to recognize the right one. However, some man-made features such as "Burgunder telephones" and "Hôtel Aviation" guide him to his destination. The building is just "before the intersection where the avenue met Rue Duranton" (p. 47).

**Censier.** It is the site of The New Sorbonne University which is a public university in Paris. It is also known as University of Paris III. Despite the civil unrest that prevailed France in the late 1960s, the frequent reference to new university branch reflects the intellectual richness and multiculturalism of France in that time. One evening, Jean accompanies Dannie to "the Censier campus by metro, Duroc to Place Monge direct" (p. 8). They follow Rue Monge, and reach their destination "a kind of esplanade, or rather an empty lot surrounded by squat, half-demolished buildings. The ground was hard-packed dirt... In back, a

<sup>6</sup> It is one of the six large principal railway stations termini in Paris.

<sup>7</sup> It is a metro station in Paris in the 16th arrondissement of Paris.

<sup>8</sup> It is a Roman Catholic church located on Saint-Christophe Street in the 15th arrondissement of Paris. It is considered as part of the French heritage.

modern skyscraper that was barely finished, still with its scaffolding" (p. 8). In addition, Jean's memory of Aghamouri is also associated with the Censier branch of the university "over near Place Monge, standing half finished at the back of a no man's land, suddenly seemed to belong to another city, another country, another life" (p. 11). One day, Jean reads on one page of his black notebook: "Tuesday. Aghamouri. 7 p.m. Censier" (p. 55). He immediately recalls the 1960s topographical contour and the man-made features of the local area. He recollects walking "around the wasteland in front of the new university building", and remembers the inscriptions on some buildings and warehouses that he has registered in his black notebook:

*Sommet Brothers—Leathers and Pelts*  
*B. Blumet & Son—Forwarding Agents for Leathers and Pelts*  
*Beaugency Tanneries*  
*A. Martin & Co.—Rawhide*  
*Salting and Tanning—Paris Leather Exchange*  
*Hundred Maidens Hospital* (p. 56).

On his way to the Censier, Jean smells "the nauseating odor of pelts and rawhide" since "they slaughtered animals in Vaugirard<sup>9</sup> and La Villette<sup>10</sup>, then brought their skins here to be sold" (p. 57). Jean meets Aghamouri, and they walk across the empty lot, "avoiding the puddles" then they walk "toward the Jardin des Plantes" (p. 58). Suddenly, Aghamouri pulls Jean to the opposite sidewalk, and they skirt "the gates of the Central Wine Market, bathed in shadow and even more deserted and silent than the street" (p. 59). Then, Aghamouri suggests going to a café on Rue Jussieu.

**Rue Jussieu.** It is a 413-meter street in the 5th arrondissement of Paris in Saint-Victor district. On the way to the café which Aghamouri suggests a café on Rue Jussieu, Jean gives a detailed visualization of the area. They have first "passed through the gateway behind him and entered a large courtyard surrounded by half-demolished buildings, like the ones in the former leather exchange" (p. 61), and as they walk toward Rue Jussieu, Jean has registered the following observable locations:

*Marie Brizard & Roger*  
*Butte de la Gironde*  
*Fine Wines of Algeria*  
*La Loire Warehouses*  
*Libaud, Margerand & Blonde*  
*Brandies and Liqueurs. La Roseraie Cellars . . .* (p. 61).

<sup>9</sup> Rue de Vaugirard is the longest one way street (4.3 km) inside Paris' walls.

<sup>10</sup> Rue de la Villette is a public road located in the 19th arrondissement of Paris.

After that, they come to "a modern building with a brightly lit vestibule, which bore on its façade the inscription FACULTY OF SCIENCES" (p. 62). They walk through "the vestibule and then through another patch of waste ground up to Rue Jussieu" (p. 62), and Aghamouri points at the café which is "across the street, next to the Lutèce Theater" (p. 62). Later and after thirty years, Jean has not forgotten this meeting with Aghamouri in which he confides to him a lot of secrets regarding Dannie, the Montparnasse gang and even Aghamouri's private life. Jean wishes to go back in time, take the metro back to Jussieu and find Aghamouri, take him to Jussieu station and "get off at Église-d'Auteuil<sup>11</sup>, the end of the line" (p. 69). There, Jean hopes to reassure Aghamouri and relieve all worries that weigh heavily on his mind. Back in time, when Jean's encounter with Aghamouri is over, Jean notices a nice touristic hint; he observes that Aghamouri is not going back to the Cité Universitaire or "he would have taken the Porte d'Italie line". He is going to the Unic Hôtel and "he would get off at Duroc" (p. 73).

**Dannie's confession tour.** It is a long tour made by Dannie and Jean through different locations of 1960s Paris. During this tour, Dannie confides to Jean some of her top private secrets concerning her past and her worries. This tour has been a perfect example of literary geography; a touristic pilgrimage through several locations of 1960s Paris. Actually, this brings to mind Modiano's main focus while writing *The Black Notebook*; that is the actual representation of Parisian urban areas in the 1960s through the process of fictionalization. The precise pinpointing of Parisian streets and neighborhoods in the novel is also of a great historic value since it has registered how the French capital looked in the 1960s. That day, Jean meets Dannie in the neighborhood where he grew up, and they go "past the Royal Saint-Germain<sup>12</sup> and arrived in front of the Hôtel Taranne" (p. 78). They both sit on "the bench between the taxi stand and the Hôtel Taranne" (p. 78). It is noteworthy that, after thirty years, when Jean revisits the same place once again, he walks on the block where the Royal Saint-Germain and the Hôtel Taranne used to be located, "but neither one existed anymore, as if they had wanted to alter the crime scene to make people forget" (p. 80). They have even removed the bench next to the taxi stand where Jean and Dannie sat that evening. This clarifies one of the significant themes in *The Black Notebook*; that is the inevitability of change in human condition. When Jean and Dannie reach Saint-Christophe-de-Javel, he wishes to tell Dannie everything that

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<sup>11</sup> It is a metro station in the 16th arrondissement of Paris.

<sup>12</sup> A three-star hotel in Rue De Rennes in Paris.

Aghamouri has said regarding that "ugly incident" (p. 80) that Dannie has committed, but he hesitates at first.

Jean and Dannie continue touring some of 1960s Parisian streets and their tour provide readers with significant details regarding the natural and artificial features of these localities. They first take "Rue de Rennes and follow it to Montparnasse" (p. 80). Jean asks her several questions regarding her past and her relationship with Aghamouri, and Dannie has "frozen on the sidewalk, in front of what is now a Monoprix department store and what was then an abandoned garden plot that sheltered dozens of stray cats" (p. 80). Then, they choose not to take Rue de Rennes, and they decide to walk toward the river Seine and arrive "in front of the École des Beaux-Arts" (p. 82). Dannie starts to confess more secrets regarding her relationship with Aghamouri and the Montparnasse gang, and how they help her get false papers. Dannie takes Jean's arm and they cross over the Pont Royal<sup>13</sup>. Jean says "I don't know why I always felt a burden lift when I crossed the Seine on that bridge, toward the Right Bank" (p. 84). It seems that Dannie has committed "something serious"; she has murdered somebody and "two projectiles struck the victim. One of the two projectiles was fired point-blank. The other was fired neither point-blank nor at a short distance" (p. 84). Jean is completely absorbed in Dannie's narration. Still, the tour continues and Jean has not forgotten to provide readers with more topographical details. They walk through the Tuileries<sup>14</sup>, and Jean comments on the view saying "I see patches of snow in the Carrousel gardens and on the pavement where we walked next to the Tuileries. In front of us, the lampposts under the arcades on Rue de Rivoli are shrouded in a halo of fog" (p. 85). The snow and the fog are symbolic of Jean's traumatizing experience as he becomes quite sure of Dannie's alleged criminal past.

Dannie wants to invite Jean to dinner, so she leads him to a nice restaurant which she recommends. The proposed dinner grants readers of the novel another tour in different 1960s Parisian areas. Dannie pulls Jean "to the right, under the arcades of Rue de Castiglione" (p. 88), and together they skirt the Opéra "in the Paris of the twentieth century", follow "Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin" until they reach "Trinité Church<sup>15</sup>" with "its dark façade like a giant bird at rest" (p. 89). The restaurant is there at the beginning of Rue Blanche. They skirt "the square in front of the church" (p. 90) and arrive at the restaurant which is exactly located

<sup>13</sup> It is a bridge that crosses the river Seine in Paris. It is the third oldest bridge in the French capital.

<sup>14</sup> It is a public park located between the Place de la Concorde and the Louvre in the 1st arrondissement of Paris.

<sup>15</sup> It is a Roman Catholic church that is located in the 9th arrondissement of Paris. The church was built in the Second Empire period between 1861 and 1867.



"at the corner of Rue Blanche and the small side street that led back to Trinité Church" (p. 90). Modiano even describes the interior of the restaurant in case any reader is interested in knowing how cafés or restaurants may look in 1960s Paris. Jean says: "The curtains were drawn behind its front windows... A large bar all the way in back, and on either side a row of round tables with white tablecloths. The walls looked dark red because of the muted light" (p. 90). After the dinner, Dannie retreats and asks Jean to forget everything she has said regarding her criminal past. Later in the novel, Jean finds out from the case file that is given to him by Langlais more details concerning the crime that Dannie has committed. The two projectiles that killed the anonymous man have been found. In the case file, Jean reads the following note: "The two slugs corresponding to the two spent shells were found. The concierge at 46-bis Quai Henri-IV<sup>16</sup>" (p. 113). Jean immediately flies back in time and remembers that day on which Dannie accompanies him along the quays toward Île Saint-Louis<sup>17</sup> Island. There is abundant topographical report of natural and man-made features of 1690s Paris accompanying the memory. Dannie and Jean get off the train at the Gare de Lyon metro station, and instead of returning to the Unic Hôtel, they decide to walk to Rue de l'Aude. Dannie leads him "along the quays toward Île Saint-Louis" (p. 114), and they follow the Quai Henri-IV which is mentioned in Langlais's case file. They stop by building number 46-bis, and since Dannie seems tense, she prefers to wait for Jean on "the bridge that slices through the tip of Île Saint-Louis" (p. 114) until Jean asks the householder when Dannie can call. It has never been known the real purpose behind this visit or this inquiry. After that, they cross the bridge and go along the Quai de la Tournelle<sup>18</sup>. While walking, Jean ponders the beauty of 1960s Paris as represented in "the ancient building façades, the trees, the lit streetlamps, the narrow streets that spilled onto the quay" (p. 116). He also admires the quietness of the "silent avenues over which the leaves of the plane trees formed a vault, the occasional lit window in the building façades, and the Belfort lion keeping watch, eyes fixed toward the south" (p. 118). Dannie and Jean keep walking until they reach Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre<sup>19</sup>. They watch together a group of people sitting on the benches and chairs in front of the American bookshop listening to jazz music that comes out from the shop. They sit together on "the steep flight of steps leading to Rue de l'Aude" (p. 118) and listen to the nearby sound

<sup>16</sup> It is a quay located along the River Seine in the 4th arrondissement in Paris.

<sup>17</sup> It is a natural island in the River Seine in Paris. The island is connected to Paris by four bridges to both banks of the Seine and it is located within the 4th arrondissement.

<sup>18</sup> It is a path located along the River Seine in the 5th arrondissement of Paris.

<sup>19</sup> It is a Greek Catholic church in Paris and one of the capital's oldest religious buildings.

of running water. Dannie then asks Jean not to forget what she has said or what has happened.

**The courthouse.** One winter morning in 1964, Jean is summoned to the courthouse in the thirteenth arrondissement at 11 a.m. In his black notebook, he has written the following entry: "14 Quai de Gesvres. Langlais. Nerval. Rue de la Vieille-Lanterne" (p. 17). The courthouse exemplifies all the topographical landmarks that witnessed the interrogations of protesters after the demonstrations and massive strikes that happened in France during the period of civil unrest in the 1960s. In the courthouse, Jean is questioned by Langlais, a police investigator, about his relationship to the Montparnasse gang. Jean quickly maps the police station so as to provide the precise location of the place. After receiving the summons from Langlais, Jean arrives at the police headquarters on the Quai de Gesvres at ten and spends a long time waiting in one of the offices. Through the window, he gazes at "the flower market and the black façade of the Hôtel-Dieu" (p. 16). It comes to Jean's mind that it is Langlais's office where Gérard de Nerval<sup>20</sup> has hanged himself, or where one can find a section of the former Rue de la Vieille-Lanterne if just he/she looks around the cellar. After leaving the court, Jean finds himself on the pavement of Place d'Italie<sup>21</sup>. Of course, the place now is completely different from that in the 1960s. When Jean comes back to the same place after twenty years from his summons, he finds out how the topography of the place has greatly changed. "The skyscrapers hadn't existed in 1964, but they gradually dissolved in the limpid air to make way for the Clair de Lune café and the squat buildings of Boulevard de la Gare" (p. 101). There is also now a subway station of the Paris Métro located at the Place d'Italie in the 13th arrondissement of Paris, and ATMs are everywhere. Jean sadly remembers "the paulownias with their mauve flowers in Place d'Italie" (p. 101), and he walks toward the former place of the Clair de Lune café. Jean circles Place d'Italie, and thinks of taking a room in a small hotel, "like the Coypel, if it still existed" (p. 101). He arrives at "the corner of Avenue de la Soeur-Rosalie" (p. 101), and on a café there, he meets Langlais once again after all these years.

Jean's starts talking with Langlais about Dannie's charge and her relationship with the Montparnasse gang, and the latter gives Jean a case file that includes all the necessary details about Dannie's criminal past. It

<sup>20</sup> A pen name for the French author, translator, and poet Gérard Labrunie. He committed suicide by hanging himself from the bar of a cellar window on 26 January 1855 in the rue de la Vieille-Lanterne; a narrow lane in Paris.

<sup>21</sup> It is a public square in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. It is situated on the left bank of the River Seine, and it is home for a lot of restaurants, cafés, shops and cinemas.

is true that much of Jean's talking with Langlais has been regarding this respect. However, their frequent references to the topographical changes in the neighborhood alter the narrative mode from a fiction of crime to a fiction of topographical orientation. Langlais points to a skyscraper on the corner of Avenue de Choisy and says: "That's where the Clair de Lune used to be" (p. 106). They walk together toward Square de Choisy since Langlais wants to give Jean the case file. Then, they continue walking to the Langlais's house at 159 Avenue de Choisy to bring it. Their walk happens to be a nice occasion to comment on the area's features. Jean says:

I had a clear recollection of this public garden, which looked more like a park; of the large redbrick building called the Institut Dentaire, and of the girls' school way in back. On the other side of the avenue, after the high-rises, were modest houses of the type I remembered. But how much longer would they be there? (p. 106).

On the corner of a blind alley, Langlais stops before a small building with a Chinese restaurant on its ground floor while Jean, waiting for him alone on the pavement, ponders "the leafless trees in Square de Choisy and, farther on, the dark red mass of the Institut Dentaire" (p. 106). Apparently, Jean has shown great interest in surveying topographical man-made features and landmarks since the very beginning of *The Black Notebook*. Even in the darkest moments in the novel; moments in which Jean is busy-minded with finding out Dannie's past life secrets, the novel characteristically exemplifies the new literary genre as its main focus is often on the topographical more than the criminal. While waiting for Langlais to bring him the case file, Jean says:

That building had always struck me as an anomaly in this park. My memories of Square de Choisy were not memories of winter, but of spring or summer, when the foliage on the trees contrasted with the dark red of the institute (p. 106).

This always helps readers of Modiano's novel keep envisioning an actual topographical description of the novel's setting.

**One last memory.** A period of twenty years has passed, but Jean still remembers and loves Dannie. His memory of her is always associated with the topographical features of the locations they have met in. Jean has never returned to certain places that he used to tour with Dannie. Jean says:

One doesn't often return to the southern part of Paris. The area ended up becoming an internal, imaginary landscape, and it seems extraordinary that names like Tombe-Issoire, Glacière, Montsouris, or Château de la Reine Blanche can exist in reality, spelled out on

city maps. I've never gone back to Rue de l'Aude. Except in my dreams (p. 119).

But when Jean drives along the Quai Henri-IV so as to go to the Gare de Lyon, he usually feels a pang in his heart and some sort of unrest since it is the same street in which Dannie has committed the supposed crime. Now, every location they have passed by in the 1960s is just a memory. Some places have been demolished; "They tore down La Petite-Roquette. In its place stretches a public park" (p. 128). As stated by Langlais, La Petite-Roquette is the prison where Dannie has spent a period of time after being accused of shoplifting. On the other hand, some other natural or man-made features are still scattered pieces of evidence for an unfinished love story. Jean still remembers when they used to stroll "in the Bois de Boulogne<sup>22</sup>", or follow "the avenue up to La Muette. As we walked on the path along the lakes, I felt as if a weight had lifted. So did she" (p. 129). The last memory that Jean bears in mind is when he walks together with Dannie "along the Jardin d'Acclimatation<sup>23</sup>" and arrives "at the edge of the Saint-James Pond" (p. 130). They sit together on a bench and Dannie reassures him that one day he will get back the black notebook which he has forgotten at the country house. He finally admits the real purpose behind registering all these topographical features in his black notebook and in his mind. Jean says: "You must be hiding out in one of those neighborhoods... Sooner or later I'll find the street. But every day the hours grow shorter, and every day I tell myself it will be for another time" (p. 131). Thus, it is a ceaseless everlasting quest that starts in the 1960s and goes on up to the time of writing the novel in 2012; a quest urged by nostalgia and an ongoing love story.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper is meant to alter the critical conversation about Patrick Modiano's *The Black Notebook* via providing a new reading of Modiano's novel. The study hypothesized that Modiano's novel epitomizes the evolution of the literary genre from a fiction of crime into a fiction of touristic, topographical and geographic orientation, and the conducted textual analysis proved how Modiano's fascination of Paris, since it is his birth place and source of inspiration, motivated him to author such a skillfully-written topographical crime novel. Apparently, *The Black Notebook* did explore many man-made and natural features of 1960s Paris and its urban topography. Modiano drew a wonderful topographical

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<sup>22</sup> It is the second largest public park in Paris, and it is located along the western side of the 16th arrondissement. It has several lakes and gardens.

<sup>23</sup> It is a zoo and children's amusement park located in Paris in the northern part of Bois de Boulogne. It was established by Napoléon III and Empress Eugénie.

picture of the city and numerous references were made in the novel to the French capital, its hydrographic or natural features such as the Seine River, the natural ponds of Eure-et-Loir, the lakes of Bois De Boulogne Park and Saint-James Pond. Modiano also mentioned the natural islands of Île Saint-Louis where Jean and Dannie used to walk.

When it comes to man-made topographical features, the novel was really abundant in such references. Since it was written, *The Black Notebook* has been a wonderful itinerary for those who are interested in envisioning a real picture of 1960s Paris and its landmarks. Several references were made to the French capital's famous 1960s bridges, quays, squares, railway stations, metro stations, public gardens, parks, buildings, attractions, ancient churches, educational institutions, hospitals, hotels, cafés, avenues, streets, roads, suburbs and communes. This confirmed that Modiano's main focus was not to fictionalize the criminal world of the Montparnasse gang and their criminal motives, but rather to topographically present 1960s Paris in an attempt to divulge its secrets.

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