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Trauma, Solitude, and the Architecture of Conscience: A Psychosocial Study of Harry Bosch in Michael Connelly's *City of Bones*

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Abstract

This article presents a psychosocial study of Detective Hieronymus "Harry" Bosch in Michael Connelly's *City of Bones* (2002), focusing on how childhood trauma, institutional distrust, and professional dedication shape his character. It briefly situates Connelly as a leading contemporary crime novelist and a major chronicler of Los Angeles. Drawing on trauma theory, institutional sociology, and scholarship on hard-boiled and police-procedural fiction, the article examines Bosch's foster-care childhood, his mother's murder, emotional guardedness, ritualized habits, personal code—"everybody counts or nobody counts"—and his strong attachment to West Coast jazz. It argues that Bosch's exceptional detective abilities are inseparable from the qualities that make him a difficult institutional subject: his intolerance of procedural indifference, refusal to abandon cold cases, and identification with powerless victims repeatedly place him in conflict with LAPD hierarchy. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how popular crime fiction can offer psychologically and sociologically meaningful representations of trauma, professional identity, and institutional conflict. The study ultimately highlights how Bosch's trauma, moral code, and professional identity intersect to shape his resistance to institutional authority and his commitment to justice.

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For much of the twentieth century, detective and crime fiction occupied an uneasy position at the margins of literary scholarship, dismissed as "formula" writing produced for mass consumption rather than considered art. John G. Cawelti's landmark study *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) did much to reverse this assumption, proposing the first general theory for analysing popular literary formulas and arguing that formulaic crime writing rewards the same kind of close, historically situated reading traditionally reserved for canonical literature (Cawelti). Cawelti's central insight that formula fiction both reflects and reinforces the collective consciousness of its historical moment underpins the sociologically inflected character study attempted here.

Later scholarship has built on this legitimation rather than qualified it. Sean McCann's *Gumshoe America* situates hard-boiled crime writing within the ideological currents of New Deal liberalism, treating the genre's characteristic loner-investigator as a figure through which a culture works out its anxieties about corrupted institutions and diminished collective solidarity. Catherine Ross Nickerson's edited *Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* extends this legitimation to the police procedural specifically, tracing its emergence as a form capable of registering "fear, desire and anxiety" across a mass audience and arguing that popular and literary genres continually "influence and shape each other" rather than existing in separate, hierarchically ordered spheres. Megan Abbott's *The Street Was Mine* similarly reads the hard-boiled detective not as an escapist fantasy figure but as a barometer of "masculinity in crisis," a textual site where anxieties about race, class, and gendered authority in twentieth-century America become visible and workable through narrative.

Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch series belongs to a later, and in certain respects more sociologically explicit, phase of this tradition: the contemporary American police procedural, in which the detective is not a freelance private investigator standing wholly outside institutional structures but a serving, salaried officer whose competence and integrity are perpetually tested against the institution that employs him. This positioning makes Bosch a rich object for psychosocial analysis, because his interiority, memories, appetites, tastes, and habits are continually narrated in relation to, and often in friction with, the bureaucratic apparatus of the Los Angeles Police Department. *City of Bones*

(2002), the eighth novel in the series, is especially well suited to a character study of this kind: it foregrounds Bosch's own childhood victimisation by connecting it explicitly to his compulsive identification with a murdered child, and it is structured as a novel about endings and reckonings, closing with Bosch's temporary retirement from the force. The novel thus offers a relatively self-contained, thematically concentrated portrait of the psychological economy that sustains and periodically threatens Bosch's career.

A text like this belongs squarely within serious literary-critical and social-scientific inquiry, not at its margins. Popular fiction read by tens of millions of readers constitutes primary evidence of how a culture imagines justice, trauma, institutional authority, and masculine interiority; a close reading of Bosch's characterisation is, in this sense, also an inquiry into the cultural common sense that a bestselling procedural both draws upon and helps to produce. The Bosch series is definitely worthy of serious research consideration especially in psychology and cultural studies. Any character study of Harry Bosch benefits from situating Connelly himself within the contemporary landscape of crime writing, since Bosch's psychological credibility is inseparable from the working method that is investigative, research-driven, journalistic through which Connelly has built him across more than three decades. Connelly's career began not in fiction but in journalism: after co-authoring a 1986 newspaper article on a Florida plane-crash survivor that was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize, he was hired as a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Times, the paper of the city Raymond Chandler, his acknowledged literary idol, had made mythic. This apprenticeship in factual crime reporting matters beyond biography; it is the basis of the documentary texture, procedural accuracy, and institutional realism that distinguishes the Bosch novels from earlier, more atmospheric hard-boiled writing, and that gives Bosch's psychology room to be examined seriously rather than treated as mere genre furniture.

Connelly's achievements as a novelist are, by any measure, extensive. His debut novel, *The Black Echo* (1992), won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel, immediately establishing Bosch within the genre's first rank. Connelly is, according to his publisher's own biographical materials, the bestselling author of forty-two novels and one work of

non-fiction, with more than ninety-two million copies of his books sold worldwide and his work translated into forty-five languages. He is the only writer to have been twice elected President of the Mystery Writers of America, serving in that capacity in both 2003 and 2004, and he has received, across his career, a wide sweep of the genre's major honours: the Edgar, Anthony, Macavity, Shamus, Nero, Barry, Dilys, and Audie awards domestically, together with international recognitions including Japan's Maltese Falcon Award, France's .38 Caliber Award and Grand Prix de Littérature Policière, and Italy's Premio Bancarella Award. In 2012, *The Black Box* was awarded the RBA Prize for Crime Writing, at the time the world's most lucrative crime-fiction prize; in 2018, the UK Crime Writers' Association honoured Connelly with its Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained career-long excellence; and in 2022, Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Writing Festival recognised him with its Outstanding Contribution to Crime Writing award. Most recently, the USC Libraries named Connelly the recipient of its 2026 Scriptor Literary Achievement Award, with the selection committee explicitly framing him as Chandler's contemporary inheritor and the writer who has done for Los Angeles "from 1992 to the present" what Chandler did for the city's mid-century decades.

What marks Connelly as a genuinely new-age figure in the crime-writing tradition is less his prolific output than the scale and design of the fictional universe he has built, and how successfully that universe has crossed into other media. Beyond the Bosch series proper, Connelly has developed the interlocking Mickey Haller (Lincoln Lawyer) novels, the Jack McEvoy and Terry McCaleb thrillers, and the more recent Renée Ballard and Detective Stilwell series, deliberately interweaving characters and cases across these separate lines so that the whole functions as a single expansive fictional Los Angeles rather than a set of discrete franchises. This architecture has translated well to the screen: the television series Bosch (2014–2021) and its continuation Bosch: Legacy ran a combined ten seasons on Amazon Prime Video, the spin-off Ballard premiered in 2025, a further prequel series is in development, and the Netflix adaptation of *The Lincoln Lawyer*, created by David E. Kelley, has run multiple seasons since 2022; Connelly's 1998 novel *Blood Work* was earlier adapted by Clint Eastwood, who both directed and starred in the 2002 film. Taken together, the journalistic

grounding, the sustained critical and popular recognition, the structural ambition of an interconnected, multi-series fictional world, and its transition into prestige television, Connelly's career supplies exactly the kind of authorial context that legitimises close character-based scholarship on Bosch: a writer working at this level of craft, institutional recognition, and public reach is producing texts whose characterisation rewards sustained critical attention rather than resisting it.

Scholarship on hard-boiled and procedural detective fiction has developed along three broadly convergent lines relevant to this study: genre-historical accounts of the form's cultural function, masculinity-centred critiques of the detective figure, and sociological work on institutions that illuminates the detective's structural position within organisations such as the police department. Cawelti's foundational account treats the hard-boiled detective story as a variant of the mystery formula distinguished by its cynical, socially marginal investigator and its vision of a world in which corruption reaches into the institutions nominally responsible for order (Cawelti). This account remains the starting point for genre criticism because it insists that formulaic elements, the detective's isolation, his moral code, his physical toughness are constitutive of the genre's cultural work rather than incidental to it: they allow readers to rehearse, at a safe narrative distance, anxieties about whether justice is achievable within compromised institutions.

A second body of scholarship, exemplified by Abbott and by Christopher Breu's reading of masculinity in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, approaches the hard-boiled detective as a site of gender crisis rather than gender stability. Breu argues that hard-boiled masculinity is constructed reactively, through violent encounters that are as much about staving off dissolution of the self as about solving crimes; Abbott extends this insight across the genre's history, arguing that even ostensibly "tough" detectives such as Chandler's Philip Marlowe are organised around "gender panic" rather than secure mastery, their manhood "constantly under threat." This body of work bears directly on Bosch, whose aloofness and discomfort with sustained intimacy can be read not as simple stoicism but as a defensive structure organised around the threat that closeness poses to a self that trauma has already destabilised.

A third strand, sociological rather than literary in origin, supplies the institutional vocabulary this study requires to read Bosch's relationship to the LAPD. Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power and the modern bureaucratic institution, and Erving Goffman's analysis of role distance and the strategies individuals use to preserve a sense of self within "total" or quasi-total institutions, together provide a framework for understanding Bosch's characteristic stance toward his employer: he is inside the institution but perpetually holding it at arm's length, complying with its procedures only insofar as they serve the case, and treating its disciplinary apparatus (Internal Affairs, the chain of command, departmental politics) as an obstacle running parallel to, rather than supporting, the pursuit of justice. Judith Herman's clinical account of complex trauma, meanwhile, offers a vocabulary for the childhood material *City of Bones* foregrounds: the loss of a parent to violence, the passage through multiple foster placements, and later combat exposure in Vietnam together constitute a trauma history whose hallmark symptoms like hypervigilance, difficulty with trust and intimacy, and a compensatory need for control map closely onto the behavioural profile Connelly gives his detective.

Finally, scholarship specifically on Connelly, though still a comparatively young field relative to Chandler or Hammett studies, has begun to identify the qualities that distinguish Bosch from his hard-boiled forebears. H. Eric Branscomb's overview for EBSCO's Research Starters series notes that Connelly's Bosch novels "fit neatly into the convention of hard-boiled detective fiction" while also displaying "his insights into the psychological makeup of both the criminal" and the detective, a formulation that supports the contention here that Bosch's characterisation rewards sustained psychological reading rather than only genre-formal analysis. This article extends that critical opening by applying trauma theory and institutional sociology systematically to a single novel, treating *City of Bones* as a concentrated case study rather than surveying the twenty-four-novel series in the aggregate.

This study combines close textual reading of *City of Bones* with two complementary theoretical lenses. The first is trauma theory, understood broadly in the tradition established by Judith Herman, which treats early relational trauma and later combat trauma as cumulative rather than discrete, producing an adult

personality organised around hypervigilance, difficulty trusting others, and a compensatory reliance on control and competence in circumscribed domains. The second is institutional sociology in the tradition of Foucault and Goffman, which supplies a vocabulary for describing Bosch's simultaneous embeddedness within and alienation from the LAPD as a bureaucratic, disciplinary structure. The analysis that follows moves through Bosch's early life, his aloofness, his behavioural quirks, his moral code, his relationship to food, and his absorption in jazz, before synthesising these strands into an argument about the sources of his detective competence.

Bosch's biography, as it is recalled in fragments throughout *City of Bones*, establishes a pattern of early and repeated attachment rupture. His mother, Marjorie Lowe, worked as a prostitute in Hollywood and was murdered when Bosch was eleven years old, an event that propelled him into a succession of foster homes and youth facilities rather than into the care of extended family. Connelly uses this detail structurally rather than as background colour: in *City of Bones*, Bosch's murder case involves a young victim, Arthur Delacroix, whose life in an abusive household and eventual death at age twelve rhymes uncomfortably with Bosch's own institutionalised childhood. Bosch's compulsive attachment to the Delacroix case, his insistence on using the boy's name rather than the clinical "vic," noted with quiet surprise by his partner Jerry Edgar illustrates the mechanism trauma theory would predict: unresolved early loss finds displaced, repetitive expression in adult vocational choices, and identification with victims whose circumstances echo his own becomes a primary motivational engine.

The second formative trauma is Bosch's service as a "tunnel rat" in the Cu Chi tunnels during the Vietnam War, a role that required him to enter the same dark, narrow, and lethal underground spaces his enemies also occupied. Bosch's recurring memory of what tunnel rats called "lost light", an inexplicable ambient glow in the tunnels that some soldiers attributed to the ghosts of the dead "from both sides" recurs across the series as a governing image for Bosch's relationship to death and to the war's moral ambiguity, and *City of Bones* is the novel in which this image is first fully articulated, as Bosch shares it with his new romantic interest, the rookie officer Julia Brasher, herself a former world traveller who

visited the same tunnels as a tourist. The juxtaposition is telling: what is horror and formative trauma for Bosch has become, for a younger generation, an object of touristic curiosity, and the gap between these two relationships to the same physical space marks the distance trauma has placed between Bosch and those around him, Brasher included.

Read through Herman's framework, this double history of relational loss (the mother's murder, the foster placements) compounded by combat trauma (the tunnels of Vietnam) produces the adult profile the novel depicts: a man for whom the world's justice systems and safety structures have already, twice, been shown to be inadequate or actively lethal, and who has therefore reorganised his adult identity around a private, self-authored code of vigilance and reciprocity that does not depend on institutions to hold. Bosch is not to be considered as another determined trope model of a relentlessly focussed detective but as a complex and quirky human being.

Bosch's characteristic aloofness, his discomfort with small talk, his terseness with colleagues who are not immediately useful to the case at hand, his tendency to work alone even when partnered is frequently read, in popular commentary on the character, simply as a stylistic inheritance from Chanderlesque hard-boiled convention. A Foucauldian and Goffmanesque frame suggests a more specific reading: Bosch's aloofness functions as a strategy of role distance within an institution he regards as structurally compromised. Goffman's account of role distance describes the ways individuals signal, through small behavioural refusals, that they are not fully identified with the role an institution assigns them; Bosch's habitual friction with LAPD hierarchy, his impatience with departmental politics, and his willingness to bend or break procedure when he judges it obstructive to justice are precisely such signals. He performs the role of homicide detective with total competence while refusing full identification with the institution that defines that role, a posture *City of Bones* makes explicit in Bosch's ongoing tension with Deputy Chief Irvin Irving and with the department's concern for public image over case resolution.

This aloofness extends into Bosch's personal relationships, most visibly in his rapid, intense, and ultimately doomed romance with Julia Brasher within the novel. Bosch is capable of connection like his relationship with Brasher is

genuine, and its collapse wounds him but his default orientation toward others is diagnostic and evaluative rather than socially fluent: he reads people the way he reads crime scenes, alert to inconsistency and withheld information, a habit of mind that serves him well professionally and poorly interpersonally. The novel's ending, in which Bosch abruptly resigns from the LAPD after a case that has cost him a great deal personally, can be read as the logical terminus of this aloofness: having exhausted his tolerance for an institution he has never fully trusted, Bosch removes himself from it altogether, at least temporarily, rather than continuing to negotiate the role distance that has structured his entire career.

Bosch's quirks in *City of Bones* function as more than isolated eccentricities: they operate as a set of small rituals that manage the hypervigilance trauma theory associates with his history. His habit of driving alone at night along Mulholland Drive, looking down at the lights of the city he is sworn to protect, functions as a recurring meditative ritual that restores a sense of scale and purpose after periods of intense casework; the city, viewed from above, becomes briefly legible and containable in a way that individual cases rarely are. His close, near-obsessive attention to the physical details of a crime scene, his insistence, for instance, on personally excavating and cataloguing the buried remains in the Delacroix case rather than delegating the task reflects professional rigor, but it also points to a psychological need for direct, unmediated control over information that might otherwise be distorted or withheld by others. That need reads clearly as trauma-linked hypervigilance. His terse, almost telegraphic conversational register, especially under stress, likewise functions as a form of self-management: economy of speech reduces the occasions on which he must manage the emotional demands of sustained social exchange.

Equally significant is Bosch's relationship to physical space and possession. He lives modestly, in a cantilevered house perched in the Hollywood Hills that is itself a recurring symbol across the series of precariousness, a home built, quite literally, on a foundation that could give way. His attachment to this house, rather than to any accumulation of possessions or comforts within it, suggests that Bosch's sense of security is bound up with vantage and vigilance, the house looks out over the city rather than with domestic comfort in any conventional sense.

Bosch's explicit moral code "everybody counts or nobody counts" is the single most important key to his characterisation and to *City of Bones* specifically. The novel's plot turns on a victim, Arthur Delacroix, whose death might easily have gone unsolved or under-investigated: a boy from a chaotic, impoverished, and already-forgotten family, killed twenty years earlier and reduced, until the accidental discovery of his bones, to institutional indifference. Bosch's refusal to allow the case to be treated as a low-priority cold case, his anger at colleagues and superiors who would rather see the investigation closed quietly than pursued rigorously, and his insistence on speaking the victim's name are all direct enactments of this code. Sociologically, the code functions as a private substitute for an institutional commitment to equal protection that Bosch has concluded, from bitter experience, the department does not reliably honour; his moral code is, in effect, a personally administered corrective to institutional failure, and this is precisely what generates his repeated conflicts with a bureaucracy more attentive to political exposure and case-closure statistics than to victims who lack social capital.

This code also has a self-referential dimension: Bosch's own childhood, the son of a murdered, marginalised woman, himself passed through a system that offered him little individualised care means that his advocacy for socially invisible victims is simultaneously an advocacy for the child he once was. The moral code is therefore not an abstract ethical commitment arrived at through reflection alone but a lived, embodied identification, one that lends it force while also making it, at times, difficult for Bosch to hold at a professionally manageable emotional distance.

Where many literary detectives are given elaborate culinary sensibilities, Nero Wolfe's gourmandise or Rebus's pub culture, for instance Bosch's relationship to food in *City of Bones* is conspicuously undeveloped, and that absence is itself significant to his characterisation. Bosch eats to sustain himself for the next stage of investigation rather than for pleasure or ritual: takeout food, diner meals, and coffee consumed in large, functional quantities recur far more than any dish savoured for its own sake. Coffee in particular operates as Bosch's primary consumable, less a pleasure than a tool, consistent with his broader orientation toward consumption as instrumental rather than restorative. This

pattern fits the broader picture of a life organised almost entirely around casework, in which domestic ritual like cooking, shared meals, the slow accumulation of comfort has been steadily displaced by the demands of the job. Where food appears at all as a site of connection, as in his dinner with Brasher during their courtship, it functions narratively as a marker of Bosch briefly stepping outside his habitual solitary economy of consumption, which makes the subsequent dissolution of that relationship a return to, rather than a departure from, his customary pattern.

If food is characterised by absence, music is characterised by an almost liturgical presence. Bosch's devotion to instrumental jazz in *City of Bones* specifically Bill Evans, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, John Coltrane, and Clifford Brown, according to Connelly's own published listing of the music referenced across the series constitutes one of the most consistent and psychologically legible elements of his characterisation. Connelly has explained that he listens exclusively to instrumental jazz while writing because the absence of lyrics removes any "intrusive" verbal layer and because improvisational playing suits the compositional process; the same logic illuminates why jazz suits Bosch as a listener. Jazz without lyrics offers structured yet improvisatory sound: a form built on a stable underlying chord structure not unlike Bosch's fixed moral code that nonetheless leaves room for extensive improvisation and tension, much as the process of detection itself is difficult, non-linear, and often frustrating. Listening to Bill Evans or Coltrane late at night in his cantilevered house, Bosch is not seeking escape from the case so much as a sonic correlate for the kind of disciplined improvisation the case itself demands of him.

Jazz also functions as one of Bosch's few reliable channels for emotional expression otherwise foreclosed by his aloofness. Because he rarely articulates grief, anger, or tenderness directly, his musical choices in scenes of quiet reflection operate as an emotional subtext the reader is invited to decode, a technique that allows Connelly to communicate interiority without requiring Bosch to break his own established taciturnity. In this sense, jazz operates for Bosch much as it has historically operated within noir cinema and fiction more broadly: as a sonic marker of urban melancholy, moral ambiguity, and solitary

reflection, personalised here into something closer to a private discipline than a generic atmospheric backdrop.

The preceding sections converge on a single, perhaps counterintuitive, argument: the qualities that make Bosch professionally exceptional are continuous with, rather than separate from, the qualities that make him a difficult employee, an inconsistent romantic partner, and, by his own late-novel reckoning in *City of Bones*, someone whose capacity for sustained institutional belonging is limited. His hypervigilance, read clinically as a trauma symptom, is functionally identical to the sustained, exhaustive attentiveness that allows him to notice the significance of a skateboard, a scar, or a discrepancy in a confession that other detectives might overlook. His difficulty trusting institutional authority, which produces his repeated friction with LAPD command, is the same scepticism that prevents him from accepting a convenient but insufficiently corroborated confession at face value, a scepticism the novel validates when the confession initially offered in the Delacroix case fails to withstand scrutiny. His trauma-rooted identification with socially invisible victims, which strains his emotional equilibrium, is also precisely what compels him to pursue a twenty-year-old case with a marginal, already-dead victim when the institutional incentives point toward quiet closure.

This argument aligns with, but sharpens, the genre-critical observation that hard-boiled and procedural detectives are typically distinguished less by superior technical method than by moral seriousness and personal risk. Cawelti's account of the hard-boiled formula's cultural function, rehearsing anxieties about compromised institutions depends on a detective figure whose worth is measured against, and often opposed to, the institution's own standards of success. Bosch is a good detective by conventional departmental metrics (his clearance rate, his investigative thoroughness), but he is arguably a great detective specifically where those metrics fail to capture what matters: his willingness to keep working a case the institution would rather close, his refusal to let a victim's marginal social position determine the intensity of the investigation, and his capacity to sit, literally and figuratively, with the darkest material the job requires without flinching from it, a capacity his tunnel-rat history has, at devastating cost, already prepared him for. Bosch's competence, in other words, cannot be extracted from

his wound; it is the wound, disciplined and redirected, that produces the detective the novel asks us to admire even as it asks us to recognise the cost of his admirable qualities to Bosch himself.

Taken together, the psychosocial elements examined above with the early relational and combat trauma, institutionally strategic aloofness, hypervigilant ritual behaviours, a victim-centred moral code, an instrumentalised relationship to food, and a compensatory absorption in the structured improvisation of jazz cohere into a portrait of professional excellence built on, rather than despite, psychological injury. This coherence is significant for genre studies because it demonstrates that the contemporary American police procedural, exemplified by Connelly's Bosch series, has developed a more psychologically and sociologically textured version of the hard-boiled detective than earlier scholarship, focused on Hammett and Chandler, might lead one to expect. Bosch's aloofness and competence are organised around the more specifically clinical vocabulary of trauma and institutional role distance, suggesting that the genre's psychological repertoire has expanded alongside broader cultural literacy about trauma over the decades between the classic hard-boiled period and Connelly's contemporary procedural.

The study also suggests a methodological point of broader relevance to crime fiction scholarship: character traits conventionally treated as incidental, taste in music, habits of eating, small behavioural tics are not decorative surplus but load-bearing elements of characterisation that reward the same close, theoretically informed attention given to plot and theme. In Bosch's case, jazz and coffee are not simply verisimilitude-producing detail; they are compressed statements about how a traumatised, institutionally alienated, morally serious man organises an inner life that the plot itself has little occasion to narrate directly.

This article has argued that Harry Bosch's characterisation in *City of Bones* rewards sustained psychosocial reading, and that the qualities that make him a compelling and admirable detective his relentlessness, his moral seriousness, his refusal to abandon socially marginal victims are continuous with the trauma history and institutional alienation that also make him a difficult colleague, an inconsistent partner, and, by the novel's end, someone who briefly removes himself from the institution he has served. In demonstrating this

continuity through close reading supported by trauma theory, institutional sociology, and the established critical vocabulary of hard-boiled and procedural scholarship, the article also reaffirms the broader case, made by Cawelti and extended by subsequent genre critics, for treating popular crime fiction as legitimate and rewarding material for literary and social-scientific inquiry. Bosch's fictional interiority, read carefully, offers an informative case study in how contemporary popular narrative imagines the relationship between early trauma, institutional belonging, and vocational excellence, a relationship of considerable interest well beyond the boundaries of genre fiction alone.

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institutional approvals, participant protections, informed consent requirements, and legal or regulatory requirements have been fulfilled. For studies not involving human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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