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# A Critical and Cultural Poetics of the End: Self, Space, and Volatility in Los Angeles

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**A CRITICAL AND CULTURAL POETICS OF THE END:  
SELF, SPACE, AND VOLATILITY IN LOS ANGELES**

by

PAMELA ALBANESE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**Abstract**

A CRITICAL AND CULTURAL POETICS OF THE END:  
SELF, SPACE, AND VOLATILITY IN LOS ANGELES

by

PAMELA ALBANESE

Adviser: Professor Ammiel Alcalay

A Critical and Cultural Poetics of the End: Self, Space, and Volatility in Los Angeles delineates the correspondences between Los Angeles spaces—exterior, topographical, architectural, and imaginary—and aspects of the self—interiority, identity, experience, and desire—in fictional and non-fictional depictions of Los Angeles. Through close readings of key Los Angeles novels, essays, and films, this project emphasizes how the narrative "I" traverses urban space, focusing on the dissolution of boundaries between self and place. Los Angeles' sprawling, decentralized layout and rapidly-shifting landscape have a profound influence on narrative identity, generating a volatile and disquieting sense of self; this project also explores how the city's unique spatial orientation contributes to a literature and cinema of disillusionment exclusive to Los Angeles.

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## **Introduction**

### A Critical and Cultural Poetics of the End: Self, Space, and Volatility in Los Angeles

delineates the correspondences between Los Angeles spaces—exterior, topographical, architectural, and imaginary—and aspects of the self—interiority, identity, experience, and desire—in fictional and non-fictional depictions of Los Angeles. Through close readings of key Los Angeles novels, essays, and films, this project emphasizes how the narrative "I" traverses urban space, focusing on the dissolution of boundaries between self and place. Los Angeles' sprawling, decentralized layout and rapidly-shifting landscape have a profound influence on narrative identity, generating a volatile and disquieting sense of self; this project also explores how the city's unique spatial orientation contributes to a literature and cinema of disillusionment exclusive to Los Angeles.

Myriad writers and critics have described Los Angeles as an unstable and exceptional city, on the verge of destroying itself through both manmade and environmental means. Themes of disillusionment, disintegration, and calamity are prevalent in Los Angeles literature and film, and this project investigates the reasons for this tendency. If the frenetic claustrophobia, existential isolation, and economic inequality of the modern and postmodern metropolis elsewhere have driven countless fictional characters to physical or psychological dissolution, then what sets Los Angeles apart from examples of urban alienation and spatial dislocation in fictional and critical representations of other cities? Rather than approach "the city" in film or literature as an all-encompassing construct, applicable to London, Cairo,

Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, Buenos Aires, St. Petersburg, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, or New York, this project connects the idiosyncratic attributes of Los Angeles's urbanism to its anomalous aesthetic tendencies and temporal and spatial orientations (and disorientations).

A facet of this project investigates Los Angeles's *image* as a singular place—a futuristic city devoid of history and on the brink of catastrophe—both in terms of how the city projects, distorts, and magnifies its self-image through literature and film, and how the self or narrator negotiates the disconnect between such an imagined community and the sensation of being there in the present. How does Los Angeles destabilize linear and centralized notions of time and space? Furthermore, is an insistence on Los Angeles's exceptionalism another illusion to mask the ordinariness—or emptiness—beneath the surface sheen? Conversely, are mundane actions and dissociative states a defense mechanism for psychological extremes—instigated by an earthquake-prone, combustible landscape and an illusory Hollywood dream factory?

The concept of a place existing in the imagination before it is experienced in reality is a common thread throughout the cultural history of Los Angeles. This originates in the "pre-history" of California itself—named and conceived in the sixteenth century Spanish imagination before explorers arrived on its soil.<sup>1</sup> This project highlights the interplay between preconceived notions of a place based on cultural transmission of fact and fiction, and firsthand experience for the narrator, character, or observer in literature and film. To describe the experiential and imaginary modes of urban narratives of Los Angeles, this project measures the dissonance between anticipation and experience in works that both reveal the

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<sup>1</sup> In Landscape of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles, William Alexander McClung writes: "The name [California] had been adopted from Rodriguez de Montalvo's Las Sergas de Esplandián (1510), a romance about an island near the Earthly Paradise, full of gold and Amazons..." (40); "Sabed que a la diestra mano de las Indias existe una isla llamada California muy cerca de un costado del Paraíso Terrenal; y estaba poblada por mujeres negras, sin que existiera allí un hombre, pues vivían a la manera de las amazonas."



connection between identity and landscape, and concurrently engender and expose a mythologized sense of place in the region.

### **Conceptual Foundations**

A range of models for examining literary and cultural space have influenced my own approach to investigating Los Angeles writing and film. The problem of defining and theorizing urban space recurs throughout twentieth-century post-structural thought; David Harvey, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Henri Lefebvre have all proposed methods—from Foucault's heterotopias, to Harvey's spatial practices, to de Certeau's idea of a city as anonymous, universal subject, to Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. In the January 2007 PMLA's special issue on cities, Patricia Yaeger responds to Lefebvre's skepticism about the effectiveness of applying codes from literary texts to the mapping of space. She addresses the formidable task of defining a poetics "for entities as large, chaotic, historically differentiated, and geographically various as world cities," by proposing a *metropoetics*, "a poetics of infrastructure," or "a strategy for understanding the history and phenomenology of cities through acts of cultural and literary making, or *poesis*..." (21-22) A form of "space-mapping" occurs through the ever shifting, unfixed nature of literary codes; the vast associations, connections, and evocations generated by a work of literature correspond to the defamiliarizing and infinitely mutable qualities of the city. Yaeger's *metropoetics*—synthesizing questions of ecology, diachrony, colonialism, poverty, utopia, citizenship, memorial, insularity, and enclosure—offers a novel approach to channeling the immensity of a city's cultural production into an "urban imaginary."

Literary and critical texts about other cities reveal how Los Angeles deviates from and corresponds to various models of the urban narrative, while demonstrating the breadth of modes in which fictional works and critical studies have portrayed and represented cities. References to approaches such as Walter Benjamin's essays on the flâneur, Roland Barthes' Empire of Signs, and Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities complement the roles that ambivalence, decentralization, and perception play in the literary construction of Los Angeles, while calling attention to qualities of fragmentation, material transaction, and ephemerality that are pervasive in Los Angeles' narrative and cinematic presentation.

Rather than arrange this project around a linear or generic structure, I have organized it thematically, synthesizing an interdisciplinary array of sources and examples from critical thought, essay, literary criticism, film, and fiction according to conceptual relevance. I look to a preeminent work of literary-philosophical scholarship as a model: Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space is a phenomenological study of literature and the imagination that concerns intimate spaces. In keeping with his broader project to apply the elemental divisions of matter—fire, water, air, and earth—to varying levels of consciousness and perception, he divides the book into chapters that correspond to physical interiors of domesticities. Bachelard ponders interior spaces by citing poetic images of interiors, and concocts an apposite metaphorical structure. Uniting form and content emphasizes the thematic connection between literary reference and empirical evidence; this project approximates a resonant organizational structure to build a sound methodological bridge between the anecdotal, the theoretical, and the imaginary in the critical fashioning of urban space.

In Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, Reyner Banham draws a direct comparison between the traditional, elemental divisions of matter and the infrastructural and

topographical composition of Los Angeles. He classifies his architectural study into four distinct “ecologies” that epitomize the cultural and physical landscape of the city: *Surfurbia* describes the beach towns and coastal communities; *Foothills* describes the neighborhoods that ascend into the Santa Monica mountains; *Plains of Id* describes the surrounding flatlands and valleys; and *Autopia* describes the extensive freeway system. Akin to Bachelard, the formal composition of Banham’s study parallels the physicality of the space it demarcates, but in Banham’s case, it is a more literal and less figurative analogous representation; my approach merges Bachelard’s metaphysical, interior spaces and Banham’s topographic, cultural spaces.

Also foundational to this project, Michael Jacob Rochlin's collection of essays, diagrams and photographs in *Ancient L.A.* encapsulates another dimension of Los Angeles's volatility—its reversal of linear notions of time and space. Rochlin reinstates a dialogue between the decimated indigenous culture and the contemporary city through an examination of the landscape from various geographic and historical perspectives: from street to satellite, or from seven thousand years ago to the late twentieth-century.

To describe Los Angeles as a city that “lacks history” is platitudinous, and many writers and critics echo this misleading sentiment when examining the culture of print and image in the region. The geographic area that is now Los Angeles County was the site of an advanced indigenous culture before Anglo, Spanish, and Mexican settlement. Rochlin reveals a vital dialogue between the past and the present by uncovering a series of palimpsests over a landscape that experienced an exponential amount of industrial development in the last two hundred years. Banham makes a similar observation, but only refers as far back as colonial history. His chapter titled “The Transportation Palimpsest” describes the *Camino Real*, the

Spanish military road used during the mission period of Spanish settlement, following the present-day Wilshire Boulevard (57), whereas Rochlin's diagrams demonstrate how the present day's freeways and boulevards are superimposed over pre-Columbian indigenous migration routes, and that the site of the multiple communities that comprise Los Angeles County have their origins in the location of indigenous villages. Moreover, Rochlin dispels theories of urban space that simplify the complexity of the city, and demonstrates how the layout of Los Angeles, a hybrid of urban planning models and geologic upheavals from multiple cultures and epochs, is in a continuous state of flux.

In my examination of Los Angeles, looking beyond linear and conventional models of time and space serves a twofold purpose: first, to highlight the major ruptures from tradition that compel a city to dominate the realm of the imaginary; and second, to simulate the way in which cultural knowledge, anticipation, and myth influence how the subject experiences a city in literature and film. The integration of the above approaches provides the structure for a modified poetics of urban space, in which the interplay between the literal, figurative, and interpretive dimensions of Los Angeles narratives comprise a phenomenology of place.

### **Relevant Background Literature**

The following summarizes the texts that also served as the foundation, and in many cases, the subject material, for this project, while acknowledging a few significant works dealing with the visual arts that I omitted to streamline my focus. Texts that seek to define and document the literary production of Los Angeles invariably adopt an interdisciplinary approach to illustrate how cultural and economic factors are indispensable towards an

understanding of why Los Angeles eludes classification under European or East Coast theoretical models, prevailing schools of literary criticism, and regionalist approaches. Literary studies and anthologies of Los Angeles writing, such as David Fine's Imagining Los Angeles and Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays, and David Ulin's Writing Los Angeles, emphasize how the mechanics of the city's cultural, economic, and infrastructural development contributed to the omnipresence of a dialectics of hope and disillusionment in Los Angeles writing. Fine and Ulin both acknowledge the influence of Hollywood, the aerospace and agricultural industries, booster propaganda, and patterns of migration in generating a distinctive literary ethos. Ulin's Writing Los Angeles is an anthology comprised of interdisciplinary essays about Los Angeles by writers, artists and journalists; Fine's Los Angeles in Fiction is an anthology of critical essays about Los Angeles fiction, and his Imagining Los Angeles is a critical study and inventory of the seminal literary works and movements in Los Angeles fiction. In Imagining Los Angeles, Fine traces the origins and development of genres such as the detective novel, the Hollywood satire, and apocalyptic postwar fiction by writers who made major contributions to the development of a local literature, including Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Joan Didion, John Fante, Thomas Pynchon, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, James Ellroy, and Alison Lurie.

Paul Vangelisti's anthology, L.A. Exile, provides excerpts and journal entries from the numerous writers, musicians, filmmakers, and philosophers who fled European totalitarianism or the constraints of East coast or British tradition only to encounter a new form of cultural dominion through capitalism, the culture industry, or McCarthyism. Vangelisti's introduction echoes David Fine's assertion in the preface to Imagining Los

Angeles, that exile is an inherent condition of the writer in Los Angeles. Fine speaks of exile in a metaphorical sense, as a mode of identification and a measurement of displacement for the writer regardless of where he or she was born, while Vangelisti's anthology covers an exile population in the literal sense. Vangelisti then suggests that cultural exile is "accommodating" for the writer, and touches on a vital paradox when he asks, "where or what, then, is the *elsewhere* writers here find themselves at home in?" (13)

Carey McWilliams' Southern California: An Island on the Land is a comprehensive study of the cultural, political, and environmental history of the region through the 1940s. He describes the paradoxical nature of the climate—"a desert that faces the ocean" (6)—and debunks the myth of Native Americans living in peaceful prosperity in the California missions. His careful evaluation of history and climate exposes the mechanics behind the tendency for mythmaking in the region: "the newness of the land itself seems, in fact, to have compelled, to have demanded the evocation of a mythology which could give people a sense of continuity in a region long characterized by rapid social dislocations." (71) McWilliams also provides detailed accounts of other idiosyncratic regional phenomena, including the prevalence of alternative religion, the politics of water, and the impact of Hollywood.

William Alexander McClung follows in McWilliams' footsteps in Landscape of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles by analyzing the Anglo appropriation and propagation of myth through visual and artistic media, including painting, photography, advertising, architecture, and literature. Also preoccupied with the visual, Rochlin's exploration of the landscape in Ancient L.A. juxtaposes "before and after" photographs of specific sites throughout the city, and graphs and diagrams of indigenous settlements with contemporary layouts. In the tradition of McWilliams, he aims to shatter misconceptions

about the region; Rochlin coalesces a contemporary view of an unstable city with a deeper historical consciousness that pre-dates Anglo-European settlement.

Recent collections focusing on the visual arts look at the emergence of underground and avant-garde artistic movements in Los Angeles throughout the twentieth-century. Two examples include Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & His Inner Circle, edited by Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, and Utopia and Dissent. Art, Poetry, and Politics in California, edited by Richard Cándida Smith. Duncan and McKenna's Semina Culture explores the cryptic yet influential work and milieu of artist Wallace Berman. His interdisciplinary journal of literature, photography, and collage, Semina (published from 1955-1964), was unprecedented for its time and its autonomy from any established artistic movement, yet it connected a disparate and diverse group of artists and personalities to form a seminal underground art collective. In Smith's Utopia and Dissent, a cultural history that emerges from a combination of personal statements—both written and oral—and creative work contributes to a more layered view of the artistic movements he traces; subjective memory is a vital component in the process of constructing a history.

In another cross-disciplinary approach, The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory, subjective memory is intrinsic to the preservation of place. Norman Klein coins the phrase "social imaginary" to describe his method of combining fiction and memory in his sociological history of Los Angeles. Klein believes that it is only through fiction that a narrative can reveal the "truth" of a city and its population—a section of his book contains fictional, first-person accounts of a Vietnamese-American based on interviews Klein conducted with members of the Vietnamese community—and like Smith, stresses the

importance of the interview process and oral testimony in the reconstruction of cultural memory.

Finally, Mike Davis' all-encompassing social histories, Ecology of Fear and City of Quartz, are major interdisciplinary contributions to Los Angeles scholarship for their detailed inventories of intellectual, environmental, political, and economic events throughout the history of the city. Davis emphasizes the link between cultural and geographic volatility in the region by tracing the interaction between the thriving real estate, aerospace, and movie industries, racial and economic disparity, the privatization of public space, literary and cinematic destruction scenarios, and the severity of the human and ecological transformation of landscape.

### **Chapter Outline**

The four chapters of this project, *Light and Exteriority*, *Landscape and Spatiality*, *Movement and Temporality*, and *Submersion and Interiority*, attempt to harmonize with Banham's elemental, four-part structure by corresponding to fundamental, emblematic attributes of the city. To further cement the interplay between form and content, or text and element, I have divided this project into twelve parts to comprise a Los Angeles "zodiac," a descriptive structure to simultaneously reflect and interpret the environmental, intellectual, iconic, cultural, and symbolic landscape of Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> Invoking Los Angeles' history of magnetizing alternative spiritual practices, as well as the influence of the elements in formulating its ontology and mythology, the twelve-part structure corresponds to geometric, aesthetic, and arbitrary systems that seek to establish order in the midst of entities as vast and

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<sup>2</sup> In astrology, the zodiac is comprised of twelve signs, each denoting an animal, entity, or human being, whether real or mythological, and corresponding to one of the four classical elements: fire, earth, air, or water.



chaotic as global cities—while taking into consideration that the twelve sections are interrelated and overlap. Additionally, the twelve-part structure is a homage to two influential figures who, exiled from Europe by the Nazi regime in the thirties and forties, lived in Los Angeles for a significant period of time: Theodor Adorno, whose year-long study of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column in the Stars Down to Earth reveals the sinister depths of irrational ideas propagated by “star systems” such as the Hollywood dream factory and astrology; and Arnold Schoenberg, who revolutionized and democratized music by inventing the twelve-tone technique—in which each note has equal importance—and who, incidentally, suffered triskaidekaphobia, or fear of the number thirteen.

### **Chapter One: *Light and Exteriority***

The first chapter, *Light and Exteriority*, explores the distinctiveness of the region’s light, as well as the topographical, sociological, and metaphorical dimensions of the pervasive image of Los Angeles burning. Instances of fictional and historical conflagrations and taxonomies of light and disaster comprise this section, ranging from references to fiery, end of the world scenarios in novels and films, riots and class warfare, and the dynamics of hope and disillusionment in advertising the hopeful image of sunshine and oranges to a desperate populace. Here, I trace how Los Angeles projects itself onto the imagination, focusing on the influence of landscape, migration, and the movie industry in contributing to a regional literary tradition, dystopian depictions of Hollywood, and manifestations of despair and disenchantment generated by social inequality and geographic volatility.

For centuries, cultural, economic, and meteorological forces have driven the city’s long legacy of exporting a mythology to attract a populace on a quest for a better life. To

borrow Mike Davis's dichotomous terms from the "Sunshine Noir" chapter in City of Quartz, the "Boosters" and the "Debunkers" contributed to the vicissitudes of the city's image throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, first with the highly successful advertising campaigns in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that drew thousands of ailing Midwesterners to "the land of sunshine and oranges" for its salutary benefits and land speculation opportunities, followed by skepticism and doubt about the limits of material success and the false promise of the movie industry depicted in the satiric, Hollywood novel of the 1930s—particularly Nathanael West's portrayal of an absurd and chaotic Hollywood in The Day of the Locust. West's novel is frequently cited in literary and critical studies of Los Angeles because the interaction between disillusionment, destruction, and imagination reverberates strongly with metaphorical observations of Los Angeles; for example, in the essay "Los Angeles Notebook," Joan Didion pierces the depths of Los Angeles' propensity to burn by connecting The Day of the Locust to the 1965 Watts Uprising.

In his preface to Imagining Los Angeles, David Fine underscores that up until recent decades, Los Angeles writers almost always came from somewhere else, and the condition of the writer in Los Angeles is closely akin to that of the migrant or immigrant writer throughout the United States:

Like immigrant fiction, Los Angeles fiction is double-edged: implicitly, at least, it is about both the place discovered and the place left behind, what is gained and lost in the process of extirpation and resettlement... Paradoxically, in the city located at the farthest edge of the continent and dedicated to new beginnings and liberated from the past (which lies in the East), history—the claim of the past—is never far away in consciousness, never escapable. (Fine viii)

In contextualizing Los Angeles fiction outside of any pre-existing literary tradition and among writers for whom "the past is an elsewhere," Fine suggests that the condition of exile is relevant in approaching a definition of Los Angeles literature, and establishing what makes it distinctive from other cities. If a sense of removal and displacement is an intrinsic quality of a particular regional literature, then emphasizing tense relationships between the individual and the environment are critical to highlighting the qualities that make it unique. As the individual projects a personal experience of history onto a city that lacks a coherent version of its own, this same individual becomes susceptible to the complexity of an urban space, in this case, one that is hybrid, sprawling, fragmented, and lacking a center. The city's position as a temporal and spatial terminus—its status as the final destination at the end of westward expansion—explains the apocalyptic mood in much of the writing about Los Angeles and its regional literature.

## **Chapter Two: *Landscape and Spatiality***

The second chapter, *Landscape and Spatiality*, investigates references to the terrain and layout of Los Angeles in fiction, documentary, and critical thought. The city's lack of a unified aesthetic and an established center profoundly influences how a subject traverses, interprets, and recollects its contours. With a focus on the destabilizing effects of the physical and sociological characteristics of the landscape, this chapter examines the razing of historical buildings and neighborhoods, ensuing erasures of memory and history, and fictional representations of historical events—such as the 1933 Long Beach earthquake in John Fante's Ask the Dust. Cinematic works that transcend the boundaries between documentary and fiction, such as Thom Andersen's Los Angeles Play Itself and Kent

Mackenzie's The Exiles, will counteract prevailing, mythologized notions of the city as mere image and spectacle.

A pervasive motif in Los Angeles literature, the search for a better place ends in California. Yet an encounter with a terminus such as the endpoint of the continent or the limits of opportunity generates an unsettling blend of desperation, anticipation, and dislocation. David Fine's observations about exile and migration evoke crucial questions; for instance, how does one reconcile being an outsider in the place one calls home? And how does this oxymoronic state of existence manifest in fictional representations of Los Angeles, and intensify the dissonance between self and place? Such paradoxical relationships generate an absence, and thus create a blank slate for reinvention to occur. Applying a post-structuralist model such as Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play" shows how de-centralization allows for a constant reinterpretation, or a continuous play of signifiers. The empty center creates a space for the reinvention of identity and genre in Los Angeles mythmaking; in addition, the city's lack of a cultural center intensifies the relationship between fictional and municipal space.<sup>3</sup>

Examining the legacy of crime fiction and noir film in Los Angeles illustrates how indeterminacy promotes the continual transformation of the noir genre throughout the twentieth-century, and provides a historical and thematic context to resolve yet another paradox: why does crime fiction bloom in the "land of sunshine and oranges?" The transformation of genre allows for a paradoxical deconstruction of tradition to create a more

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Davis gives an historical account of Los Angeles' lack of an urban center in City of Quartz, as well as the continued battle between the Westside and Downtown to function as the city's cultural center. Roland Barthes, in Empire of Signs, uses Los Angeles as an example of a city with an empty city center: "Quadrangular, reticulated cites (Los Angeles, for instance) are said to produce a profound uneasiness: they offend our synesthetic sentiment of the City, which requires that any urban space have a center to go to..." I discuss this in more detail in chapter two.

accurate reconstruction of the past as well as the present. Robert Altman's modernization of Raymond Chandler's The Long Goodbye exemplifies how the reinvention of genre contributes to a contemporary representation (in 1973) of Los Angeles. Altman depicts Los Angeles as a city comprised of counter-cultural milieus and isolated personalities, in which clues and connections do not cohere: the detective mode is the apposite form for the city that made it emblematic. Altman projects a seventies revision of Philip Marlowe—victim to the whims of causality, slightly sarcastic, and self-referential—into a world that features a classic mystery plot and a detective's investigations through secluded, disconnected neighborhoods. In another example, David Lynch, in his cinematic Los Angeles trilogy, Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive, and Inland Empire, deconstructs identity and genre to construct a synthetic unconsciousness not only of individual characters, but of place—Los Angeles, and plot—derived from crime fiction, the quintessential Los Angeles narrative.

As Norman Klein points out in The History of Forgetting, the noir aesthetic was intrinsic to the manufacturing of the myth of a seedy downtown Los Angeles, and influenced public opinion enough to contribute to the eventual razing of the Bunker Hill neighborhood. Klein's premise, that illusion—in the form of fiction and myth—distorts memory and perception to the extent that it transforms the physical contours of Los Angeles, is integral to this chapter.

### **Chapter Three: *Movement and Temporality***

The third chapter, *Movement and Temporality*, circumnavigates the city, examining how the freeway and the automobile serve as metaphorical sites of self-dissolution and liberation in a variety of literary and cinematic works. Furthermore, I investigate the

temporal paradoxes that correspond to extreme states of desire, delusion, and disenchantment within the backdrop of the film industry and the freeway system. Cinema and driving share attributes that invert subject/object relationships, creating ambivalent spaces for the disintegration of identity and the manufacturing of fantasy and escape. Iconic features of the cultural landscape of Los Angeles, film and freeway provide a synthetic “viewfinder” for the subject to regain the semblance of authority and control.

Reyner Banham's The Architecture of Four Ecologies, Jean Baudrillard's America, Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays, and Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange: A Novel, all preoccupied with Los Angeles' massive expanse of freeway and the conflicting feelings of isolation and freedom it provides, engage in an ambivalent relationship to movement throughout the city. The traveling subject exists in the indeterminate space between a departure and a destination, thus evoking Walter Benjamin's concept of the flâneur. As the automobile is the central mode of transportation throughout Los Angeles, multiple novels and films depict characters embarking on aimless highway expeditions—either for the pursuit of leisure or as a means of disassociation: this chapter explores the act of driving as a postmodern form of freeway flânerie.

In this chapter, I also draw from Theodor Adorno's critiques of the culture industry in Minima Moralia, as well as his commentary on the omnipresence of the occult in The Stars Down to Earth, to highlight crucial resonances between the phenomenon of unconventional spiritual practices in Los Angeles, hope and disillusionment, and the fleeting fulfillment of desire through consumerism, the movies, and belief in irrational systems. Combining Adorno's observations with Walter Benjamin's concept of the flâneur and Edward Dimendberg's writings on cinema and the highway provides the underlying, conceptual

framework for an *autodynamics*, or a mode to examine the interplay between self and infrastructural space in the Los Angeles narrative.

Reyner Banham's documentary, Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, and David Lynch's fictional film, Mulholland Drive, also highlight psychological and subjective traversals of time and space along the region's all-encompassing freeway system and film industry. In Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, as well as Architecture of Four Ecologies, Banham immerses in the two native languages of Los Angeles, cinema and driving, "in order to read Los Angeles in the original." (5). In Lynch's Mulholland Drive, the fragmentation of self and narrative corresponds to excesses of desire and despair, in which the Hollywood dream factory is both cause and catalyst for fantasy and escapism. References to classical Hollywood cinema, juxtaposed with surreal sequences, conspiracy plot elements, and enigmatic doublings depict the sinister workings of an omnipotent movie industry underworld.

#### **Chapter Four: *Submersion and Interiority***

The fourth chapter, *Submersion and Interiority*, outlines the domain of the interior, paying particular attention to how the self interiorizes and appropriates place. Situated at the end of westward expansion, the Pacific Ocean represents the boundary of the limits of anticipation and desire; the coastal encounter invites an investigation of the unconscious, the fracturing of identity, the instability of the domicile, and the breakdown of the borders between dream and reality in Los Angeles literature and film. Furthermore, the final chapter examines the collision between humankind and the environment, using the drying and paving of the Los Angeles River—an iconographic image in cinema—as a metaphor to denote the

industrialization of landscape, the exploitation of the individual and the natural world, and the privatization of public space.

Continuing along the trajectory of chapter three, David Lynch's film, Inland Empire, Joan Didion's novel, Play It As It Lays, and Robert Towne and Roman Polanski's film, Chinatown, explore the depths of conspiracy, manipulation, and subterfuge in the dark, behind-the-scenes machinations of powerful film industry forces and tycoons of infrastructure. Whether through political maneuverings or technological innovation, ecology and identity are equally susceptible to manipulation and transformation, to the extent that they become distortions of their former selves and states: unrecognizable or infinitely mutable.

The emphasis on deception and distortion in fiction and film is an extreme manifestation of the role fantasy and invention play in the city's exponential development and expansion. Los Angeles is an intensely self-reflexive city, composing its own fiction and mythology through the lure of a new and improved life. The experience of failure or the realization of futility—by individuals who have migrated west to reinvent themselves—is not a prerequisite to disenchantment; the pervasive sense of things not being quite right in a place that promises, and perhaps even provides fulfillment, is a result of the vast distance, temporal and spatial, between past and present. When David Fine explores the role of migration in generating a unique literary ethos in Los Angeles, he suggests that the individual must project his or her own past onto a city of amorphous origins and traditions, hence creating a disorienting and isolating experience of place. Furthermore, the interplay between memory, anticipation, and invention, as a mode to reconcile past and present, triggers a dissonant, and



in the case of Didion's writings and Lynch's films, fragmentary representation of identity and reality.

In Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Joan Didion is acutely aware of the inherent contradictions of a destination as mythologized as California. In her essay, "Notes From a Native Daughter," she captures the paradoxical coexistence of doom and optimism that pervades representations of the West coast: "California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent." (172) Didion's observation encapsulates the psychological implications of the geological boundaries of westward migration. A foreboding sense of disillusionment lingers beneath the surface, intensified by a paradoxical collision of canonical disappointment and apprehensive prosperity, where "immense" opportunity, under a sky "bleached" by hopeful sunshine, ends abruptly at the Pacific Ocean.

## Chapter One: Light and Exteriority

*In the aftermath of the wind the air was dry, burning, so clear that she could see the ploughed furrows of firebreaks on distant mountains. Not even the highest palms moved. The stillness and clarity of the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perception of depth, and Maria drove as carefully as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity. Taco Bells jumped out at her. Oil tankers creaked ominously. For miles before she reached the Thriftmart she could see the big red T, a forty-foot cutout letter which seemed peculiarly illuminated against the harsh unclouded light of the afternoon sky. (Joan Didion, Play It As It Lays, 76-77)*

### Part 1: Illuminations on Exceptionalism

#### A Paradox of Place

Environmental factors create ideal conditions for the reinvention of self, the manufacturing of mythology, and the generation of fiction and illusion in the cultural history of Los Angeles. This section concentrates on the element of light and its permutations—in geographic and phenomenological terms—as it applies to the film medium and industry; the volatility of self and community in literary representations of Los Angeles; and the dynamics of hope and disillusionment in the westward migration towards prosperity.

Countless writers, filmmakers, artists, and architects have ruminated on the distinctive qualities of the light in Los Angeles and its influence on artistic production. In Southern California: An Island on the Land—a seminal work that laid the foundation for cultural studies of Los Angeles by identifying the precarious balance between the region’s exceptionality and its booster mythology—Carey McWilliams describes the light as having “no counterpart in the world,” and attributes its incomparable qualities to the collision

between the desert to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west: “Basically the region is a paradox: a desert that faces an ocean.” (6) McWilliams observes how the confluence of two contrasting geographic entities contributes to atmospheric effects that transform the landscape from ordinary to extraordinary:

When the sunlight is not screened and filtered by the moisture-laden air, the land is revealed in all its semi-arid poverty. The bald, sculptured mountains stand forth in a harsh and glaring light. But let the light turn soft with ocean mist, and miraculous changes occur. The bare mountain ranges, appallingly harsh in contour, suddenly become wrapped in an entrancing ever-changing loveliness of light and shadow; the most commonplace objects assume a matchless perfection of form; and the land itself becomes a thing of beauty. The color of the land is in the light and the light is somehow artificial and controlled. (7)

The language of McWilliams’ description of the southern Californian landscape replicates the same paradoxical qualities he observes. The natural world assumes an otherworldly and idealized dimension: the proximity of desert and ocean produces “miraculous changes;” “commonplace objects” achieve a “perfection of form;” and the light’s effect is elusively “artificial and controlled.” McWilliams conveys the exceptional qualities of the natural environment by equating it with the synthetic; to represent the region as like no other place in the world, the language of his account must augment the ecological paradoxes and sustain its supernatural qualities—McWilliams does not speculate as to who or what is behind the artificial and controlled light. McWilliams delineates the region’s remarkable topographical and meteorological attributes with a judicious blend of hyperbole and subtlety.

McWilliams conveys an additional paradox about the landscape; the most vital elements of the region are in fact insubstantial entities, specifically the light and air that comprise the climate. Yet the highly predictable and agreeable climate suffices to offset the region's lack of natural resources and attract periodic population booms, industrial development—especially in film, aerospace, and agriculture—and infrastructural innovations to sustain a water supply and a working harbor. For McWilliams, the pairing of climate and technology transforms the region's anomalies and deficiencies into significant advantages:

As a region, Southern California lacks nearly everything: good soils; natural harbors... forest and mineral resources; rivers, streams, and lakes; adaptable flora and fauna; and a sustaining hinterland. Yet the region has progressed amazingly by a succession of swift, revolutionary changes, from one level of development to another, offsetting natural limitations with an inventive technology. Its one great asset, in fact, is its climate. (6)

A lack of resources necessitated innovations to make the land more inhabitable, and climate is both cause and catalyst: it lured a population to the region while providing a means to develop the systems and industries to sustain the influxes. McWilliams suggests that a deficiency of resources and the exceptionality of its intangible entities (light and air) trigger the region's accelerated progress and "revolutionary changes." The interplay between absence and innovation resonates with vital dynamics in the cultural history of the region, specifically in terms of reinvention and exceptionalism. Whether in regards to the formation of a literary identity or the development of sustainable technologies and industries, a void or lack invites acts of invention that are singular and outside the bounds of tradition.

McWilliams' description in itself is unbounded by precedent, kindled by novelty, and infused with originality. His conception of the area's climate is expansive and amenable to revelatory layers of connotation and opposition: he portrays it as simultaneously natural and artificial, tangible and intangible, and beautiful and marketable:

The climate of Southern California is palpable: a commodity that can be labeled, priced, and marketed...it is the most consistent, the least paradoxical factor in the environment. Unlike climates the world over, it is predictable to the point of monotony. In its air-conditioned equability, it might well be called "artificial." The climate is the region. It has attracted unlimited resources of manpower and wealth, made possible intensive agricultural development, and located specialized industries, such as motion pictures. It has given the region its rare beauty. For the charm of Southern California is really to be found in the air and the light. Light and air are really one element: indivisible, mutually interacting, thoroughly interpenetrated. (6-7)

McWilliams uses terms and phrases such as "least paradoxical," "monotony," "consistent," and "predictable" to describe a climate that is in fact inextricably linked to a mutable light and a volatile landscape. McWilliams' highly influential and frequently cited account of southern California's environment offers a detailed, nuanced representation of the physical attributes and allure of the region, but the text itself is laden with paradox and inconsistency, and appropriately so. His account absorbs the unique, contradictory environmental conditions he seeks to convey, and considering the broad range of writing about the Los Angeles landscape that follows—whether focusing on apocalyptic undertones, numbing banality, or transcendent beauty—it is quite fitting that McWilliams's keenly

observant yet wavering text is foundational in elevating writing about Los Angeles weather into a literary trope.

The language of his classification of the region's seasons, which he categorizes into "two springs, two summers, and a season of rain," reflects extremes, ranging from an idyllic pastoral—rain like "the gentlest baptism imaginable"—and an oppressive, urban alienation—"the dry season has now begun to fray nerves, to irritate nostrils, and to bear down on the people." (9) In the conclusion to his section on seasons, adjectives such as "deceitful" and "illusory" denote the presence of imported, non-native trees and greenery; McWilliams description of the modern landscape transcends the physical and geographic and encapsulates a long tradition of dissemblance and development: "Today the appearance of the region is deceitful and illusory, for essentially it is a barren, a semi-arid land." (12) "Illusion and deception" are all-encompassing terms appropriated by Los Angeles's boosters and debunkers alike, and comprise the most alluring and disturbing features of the city.

### **Taxonomy of Light**

A more contemporary meditation on Los Angeles attempts to locate a scientific explanation for the distinctiveness of its light, and in doing so, synthesizes observations from poets, astronomers, meteorologists, painters, architects, and filmmakers. Lawrence Weschler's 1998 essay entitled "L.A. Glows," or "*Why Southern California doesn't look like any place else,*" begins with the author entranced by the late-afternoon light in the television footage of the O.J. Simpson car chase. Weschler pairs two quintessential features of the city—the criminal and the photic; yet the quality of the evening light overshadows the infamous 1994 highway pursuit, thus emphasizing the degree to which the "light of Los

Angeles—golden pink off the bay through the smog and into the palm fronds” (90)—can affect and enthrall an individual.

Weschler uncovers parallels between his interviews with various experts and authorities on the subject of light, and organizes his findings into an escalating structure—identifying additional varieties of light as the essay develops. He begins by citing artists David Hockney and Robert Irwin, who support the idea of a duality to the light; both observe that the region is characterized by either strong, deep shadows, or an eerie absence of shadows in the brightest daylight. Interviews with Caltech scientists Hal Zirin and Glen Cass delineate the workings of thermal inversion and how it accounts for the stability of the air, as well as the manner in which light and air interact with each other. Cass’s description of “airlight,” the technical term for the phenomenon in which air particles reflect light and distort visibility, even inspires Weschler to quote McWilliams’ abovementioned observation of the indivisibility of light and air from An Island on the Land. (94)

Further inquiry into the phenomenon of “airlight” unveils a third dimension to the duality previously established in the beginning of the essay. Architect Coy Howard suggests that a “multiplicity” of light comprised of the object, its shadow, and a reflection is more common than the duality of high contrast light. Howard elaborates, “Things in the light here have a kind of threeness instead of the usual twoness.” (94) Poet Paul Vangelisti reinforces Howard’s observation about the sense of threeness, then takes it a step further by suggesting a link between absence and introspection in terms of the preternatural qualities of the light: “And a weird thing is how that light yields a sense of distance and of flatness: things seem very sharp up close and far away, with nothing in between. And the uncanny result is that

you lose yourself—somehow not outwardly but, rather, inwardly. Here the light draws you inward.” (95)

In his attempt to capture the city’s photic idiosyncrasies, Weschler’s investigation explores temporal phenomena as well as spatial phenomena. A New York transplant, his fascination is fueled by nostalgia for Los Angeles’s light, which he defines as “A light I’ve found myself pining for every day of the nearly two decades since I left Southern California.” (90) Temporal factors also trigger negative associations, as film director Peter Bogdanovich explains, “I miss seasons and I hate the way the light of the place throws you into such a trance that you fail to realize how time is passing.” (95) In historicizing the light of Los Angeles, Weschler contrasts his musings with the shadowy, seedier side of the city in the form of a “countervision.” Chronicling a 1992 exhibition at MOCA, entitled “Helter Skelter,” curator Paul Schimmel describes a reactionary stance against notions of L.A. light from the sixties and early seventies that contemporary artists had written off as academic and cliché. Some of the works that showed in the 1992 exhibition were preoccupied with the “bleak social transformations that were eroding the city itself,” (96) culminating in the Rodney King riots that erupted less than a week after the show’s closing. Weschler also refers to the Manson murders of the late sixties and the darker, nocturnal and interior settings of crime novels and films of the thirties and forties. Moreover, in keeping with the contrasting vision of the “dark” side to Los Angeles, it is an actual crime that elicits Weschler’s ruminations on the city’s light in the first place.

Weschler surmises that responses to the light are of two extremes, although more nuanced responses are grounded by an observation of subtle variation over time. Structurally, the essay is more than just a dichotomy between positive and negative reactions; in seeking



to pinpoint the varieties of light in the region, the essay evolves from a dualistic theory of contrasts, to a triadic one incorporating its reflective properties, and finally resolves with a quadratic theory that proposes styles of light to evoke four distinct seasons. Close to the essay's conclusion, writer Don Waldie expounds upon the four Los Angeles lights he has identified:

To begin with, there's the cruel, actinic light of late July. Its glare cuts piteously through the general shabbiness of Los Angeles. Second comes the nostalgic, golden light of late October. It turns Los Angeles into El Dorado, a city of fool's gold...It's the light the tourists come for—the light...of unearned nostalgia. Third, there's the gunmetal-gray light of the months between December and July...the light can be as monotonous as Seattle's. Finally comes the light, clear as stone-dry champagne, after a full day of rain. Everything in this light is somehow simultaneously particularized and idealized: each perfect, specific, ideal little tract house...And that's the light that breaks hearts in L.A. (96-97)

The detailed imagery that pervades Waldie's categorization, though devoid of romanticism and primarily pessimistic, bolsters the concept that the region's light has a profound influence on how individuals experience the city, and alludes to fundamental themes in cultural studies of Los Angeles. Waldie, who has lived in the region his entire life, employs imagery that demonstrates an absorption and internalization of the components of his surroundings. First, "cruel, actinic light," or light that registers on film, is a metonym for the region's most significant industry, and juxtaposes the "shabbiness" of urban reality with the glare of cinematic unreality. The second light, infused with "unearned nostalgia" and the myth of "El Dorado," encompasses the quest for a better life and the yearning for reinvention

that lured population booms throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The third light indicates the drab monotony of anticipation with violent undertones evoked by the “gunmetal” hue, while the fourth elevates the repetitive landscape—the “ideal little tract houses” that comprise Waldie’s Lakewood neighborhood—into an idealized, particularized perfection that ultimately deflates the clear, hopeful light that follows rain and “breaks hearts in L.A.”

Hence the imagery of Waldie’s nuanced rumination on the four lights of Los Angeles corresponds to the fluctuating, contradictory states of hope and disillusionment. Yet imagery and landscape—whether physical or cultural—are one and the same in Waldie’s meditation; a style of light and its poetic representation are inextricably linked, and at times, even indistinguishable. The relationship between referent and metaphor is such that it augments the psychological dimension of place. Cultural and literary histories of Los Angeles frequently highlight the interplay between myth and reality and psychological and environmental volatility that trigger such experiential extremes in subjective or first person accounts by residents—whether fictional, journalistic, or autobiographical.

### **Meeting on Shaky Ground**

Resonant with the mutable, man-made attributes of the topography, the theoretical landscape of Los Angeles lends itself to pliable interpretations of causality, particularly in attempts to construct a coherent narrative of the city’s intellectual, literary, and cultural history.<sup>4</sup> For instance, whereas Wechsler would portray David Hockney as an artist who is drawn to the area for its inimitable light, in City of Quartz, Mike Davis classifies Hockney

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<sup>4</sup> An exploration of this theme continues with my analysis of Norman Klein’s History of Forgetting in chapter two. The current chapter attributes this tendency to geographic and infrastructural attributes of the city, while Klein’s book illustrates how fictional representations of neighborhoods contribute to the mythologization of place and influence public policy and opinion.

along with other celebrity artists who were imported to Los Angeles at a premium—even though the city channeled few resources into the development of community or grassroots cultural programs. (22) Davis may be stripping Hockney of volition, and Weschler may be omitting the commercial and logistical circumstances of Hockney’s relocation. Regardless, both writers may be accurate in their estimations without canceling each other out; romanticized and critical readings of the city are complementary and concurrent, enriching one another while contributing to an apropos hermeneutic instability. An incendiary city comprised of movie studios, telescopes, and an otherworldly light deserves a plethora of simultaneous yet contradictory possibilities.

To further distinguish the two approaches, whereas Weschler introduces McWilliams as “the poet laureate of California historians” and directly invokes his earlier reference to “airlight” in An Island on the Land (3), Davis labels McWilliams as a key debunker of early twentieth century propagandist myths, and his abovementioned book as “the climax—and terminus—of Popular Front attempts to unmask booster mythology.” (24) Indeed, McWilliams’ book is much more than a meditation on climate and geography: not only does he detail the plight of an indigenous population that was decimated and displaced to serve the mission society (which Davis describes as a “seldom-told story of genocide and native resistance”); McWilliams postulates reasons for the predominance of cults in the Los Angeles area—detailing the vicissitudes of figures such as Amy Semple McPherson, notorious pioneer of the Four Square Gospel cult that swept the city by storm in the 1920s; he follows the rise and fall of periodic population and economic booms and busts with an emphasis on labor and immigration; he uncovers the trials and tribulations of utopian politics, socialist movements, and the emergence of a consistent liberal progressive majority; he

explores the extreme ebbs and flows of the imported water supply; and he chronicles the strict racial and socioeconomic divides of the city's isolated and segregated neighborhoods, as well as the far-reaching influence of Hollywood (or the motion picture industry) and its unique insularity. In summary, nearly every chapter contains an acknowledgement of how its subject matter—whether it be occultism, migration, or climate—is exceptional and unprecedented in its southern California manifestation. Davis—whether his focus is primarily sociological, as in City of Quartz, or environmental, as in Ecology of Fear—similarly operates from the basic premise of regional idiosyncrasy when he argues that the continuation of prevailing policies and tendencies will contribute to social and ecological catastrophe.

Regardless of disciplinary orientation or critical stance, writers such as Davis, McWilliams, Weschler, Joan Didion, David Fine, and David Ulin are all united and ignited by the notion of Los Angeles's idiosyncratic qualities. The tendency towards exceptionalism, extremism, and paradox in the social, cultural, and spatial theorizing of Los Angeles is deeply connected to the region's propensity toward reinvention of self and genre, and comprises the vital ingredients towards defining a Los Angeles literary tradition.

## **Part 2: Self-Destructive Fires of Creativity: Approaching a Local**

### **Literature**

#### **Towards a Regional Urbanism**

In his introduction to Writing Los Angeles, David Ulin draws a direct link between subject and surroundings in Los Angeles literature:

The story of Los Angeles has always been, on the most basic level, the story of the interaction between civilization and nature...L.A. continues to be an idiosyncratic hybrid of the urban and the elemental, a metropolis carved from the desert and ringed by ocean and mountains, whose pure, flat light<sup>5</sup>...can lend a deceptively tranquil quality to an environment where uncontrollable forces remain at work. There is a geographic instability that may prefigure some of the emotional and social instability that has so often provided subject matter for Los Angeles writers; in a landscape where nothing can be certain, there is an inevitable feeling that anything goes. (Ulin xvi)

Amid external and environmental vicissitudes and volatility, the self, as represented in Los Angeles writing, equalizes and reflects the unstable space it inhabits. In addition, Ulin highlights another significant facet of Los Angeles exceptionalism when he refers to its “hybrid of the urban and the elemental.” To elaborate on Ulin’s observation, urban alienation is not only present, but it is also compounded by the influence of unpredictable elements—

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<sup>5</sup> Ulin is referring directly to Weschler’s “LA Glows.”

such as fires, flash floods, and fragile fault lines—and inimitable meteorological features, including Weschler’s “tranquil light” that distorts time and space and seduces its beholders.

Ulin’s examination of the idiosyncratic merging of the “urban” and “elemental” corresponds to David Fine’s approach in formulating a comprehensive history of a localized, Los Angeles literature. In his introduction to Imagining Los Angeles, Fine qualifies the need to incorporate both urban and regional literary models in his study: “Both categories present problems...that help to define the local tradition and distinguish it from literature produced elsewhere.” (Fine, viii) For one, the “low-density, horizontal spread” and decentralized sprawl contrasts with cities that possess defined centers, such as New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. Writers arrived to discover “a pastiche of architectural styles...an unreal city...a fragile and temporary place that could be torn down at any moment if it didn’t collapse first in an earthquake.” (Fine, viii) Furthermore, as Fine elaborates, because most Los Angeles writers came from elsewhere, they lacked the roots and “relationships to the land” that are indicative of Southern or Midwestern literary traditions. Fine resolves to blend urban and regional approaches to define a unique local sensibility.

“Los Angeles writing” encompasses a composite of urban and regional tendencies, but other paradoxes sustain its marginalization from established, spatial literary modes. To develop Fine’s distinction a step further, a Los Angeles writer—whether native or migrant—faces the challenge of connecting to a land and culture that oscillate between dulling banality and thrilling—or threatening—mutability. The metropolitan landscape does not resemble a typical city, and transcends space and time in its appropriation of anachronistic architectural styles. It is superficially malleable enough to morph into any place or time period, but fleeting and easily dismantled. The lack of a foundation to the façade that is sustained and

intensified by the film industry—the very industry that attracted many writers to the city in the first place—triggers a distinctive brand of urban alienation and disillusionment, as well as extremes of emptiness and abundance.

In addition, Los Angeles's elemental composition encompasses the polarities of predictability, as reported by McWilliams, and environmental catastrophe, as documented by centuries of damaging earthquakes, fires, and floods, and explored in great detail in Davis' Ecology of Fear. Davis' study, which considers the region's vulnerability to ecological disaster in light of unbridled development and opportunistic attitudes, projects a doomed future for the city unless a drastic overhaul of prevailing policy takes place.

### **Doom and Disillusionment**

In his introduction, Ulin cites references to environmental instability by two seminal Los Angeles writers, Joan Didion and Raymond Chandler. Didion's essays, such as "Fire Season," "Los Angeles Notebook," and "Quiet Days in Malibu," blend personal history with accounts of Santa Ana winds and raging infernos that can obliterate homes, keepsakes, and livelihoods. "Los Angeles Notebook" in particular takes note of the influence of the combustible winds on moods and mental states:

There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension...I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it because we feel it...To live with the Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior. (Didion, STB 217)

Didion's description of the Santa Ana winds demonstrates the relinquishment of control and volition in the presence of geographic unpredictability and instability. Concurrent

sensations of contingency and surrender pervade her writing on the Los Angeles environment.<sup>6</sup> The Santa Ana compels her to “rekindle a waning argument with the telephone company, then cut my losses and lie down, given over to whatever is in the air,” (217) while the threat of fire in “Fire Season” requires her to “keep the snapshots in a box near the door, ready to go when the first fire comes.” (Ulin, “Fire Season,” 509)

The juxtaposition of the elements with the minutiae of daily life corresponds to the individual’s resignation and defenselessness. Details such as “snapshots” and “arguments with the telephone company” serve as synecdoche for a troubled self, antagonized by an analogous environment. The dynamics of identity and place in Didion’s writing represent a profound internalization of space; their impact manifests in quotidian images and thus magnifies the influence of the unstable elements on the individual. Ulin emphasizes this phenomenon in an example from Chandler’s novella, “Red Wind.” Chandler also employs quotidian imagery to underscore the threat that wind and fire play on domestic stability: “Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks.” (Ulin, “Red Wind,” 170)

In explaining the selection process of the anthology, Ulin chooses Chandler, Nathanael West, and John Fante to emblemize the theme of disillusionment. Ulin regards Chandler as an “inventor of a mythic Los Angeles,” yet also considers him the “progenitor” of noir, a genre that reflects a “disillusioned, world-weary sensibility;” Chandler’s status is therefore paradoxical, because by dispelling one myth (that of the American dream), he contributes to the manufacturing of a new one (that of a seedy, crime-ridden downtown)

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<sup>6</sup> Chapters three and four explore themes of surrender in Didion’s novel *Play It As It Lays* as they pertain to Los Angeles’s most iconic attributes—the film industry and the freeway, as well as landscape, ecological disaster, and causality.



through the widespread influence of noir.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the disillusionment in Fante's Ask the Dust and West's The Day of the Locust (both published in 1939) is such that ambition, desire, and the pursuit of a better life eventually lead to self-dissolution, self-delusion, and unrequited fulfillment—both romantic and artistic.<sup>8</sup>

As epitomized in West's novel, the illusory/delusionary qualities of the city and its impact on the individual are rooted in the influence and omnipresence of the film industry. In Los Angeles in Fiction, David Fine attributes the arrival of the “first significant generation of Los Angeles writers” to the invention of sound in film at the end of the twenties, and the ensuing demand for scripts. (Fine 2) In the thirties, a long list of writers—including James M. Cain, John O'Hara, Aldous Huxley, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Christopher Isherwood, William Faulkner, as well as Nathanael West—set out to Hollywood for the steady work and decent pay that script writing afforded. (Fine 2) Many writers who broke from tradition back East to travel to Hollywood to work as screenwriters were deeply disillusioned by the experience, yet the dislocating, surreal qualities of both city and industry also inspired a number of noteworthy Hollywood novels, particularly West's The Day of the Locust.<sup>9</sup> Fine writes: “More relentlessly than the Hollywood novelists who came before him, West traced the connection between the fantasies produced by the studios and the fantasies so desperately pursued by the American public.” (159)

The Day of the Locust is the quintessential dramatization of an insidious disenchantment with the customs and aesthetics that are inextricably linked to the movie

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<sup>7</sup> See Norman Klein's History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss John Fante's Ask the Dust in more detail in chapter two.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 6 in Fine's Imagining Los Angeles for detailed descriptions of the careers of writers such as Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, James M. Cain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

industry. The diversity and absurdity of West's descriptions of fashion and architecture overtly evoke costume and set, while interpersonal dialogue fluctuates between insincerity and melodrama—histrionic characters such as Faye Greener and her father, Harry, communicate as if they were delivering poorly rendered lines from a script. West also uncovers a violent and menacing dimension when the protagonist's apocalyptic painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," comes to life in the finale.

In his chapter about the Hollywood novel in Imagining Los Angeles, Fine describes the "real" subject of West's novel as

...the pernicious effect of mass culture on individual and collective identity... With the coming of the movies, Hollywood became the epicenter of an entire culture cheated by the puerile fantasies of the industry. Fed on dreams of glamour and celebrity (which in the Hollywood myth is just around the corner), the migrant crowd in West's novel wanders the streets of Hollywood, in costume, striking movie poses, impersonating screen types. (158)

The protagonist, Tod Hackett, vacillates between contempt for the "bored and desperate types" who comprise the crowd of screaming fans at movie premieres, and frustration about his inability to sate his lust for Faye Greener, a wannabe actress who embodies grotesque extremes of myth-fueled opportunism and posturing. Hackett, like West himself, is both witness to and victim of the Hollywood myth, as well as the incessant blurring and immense disparity between reality and illusion.

### **Western Verisimilitude**

Along with being the quintessential representation of the dissonant encounter between east coast tradition and west coast reinvention (and its grotesque permutations), The Day of

the Locust exemplifies the crucial interplay between creativity and destruction and hope and disillusionment in Los Angeles literature. Sets, scenes, and situations—illustrative of Los Angeles in the thirties—are filtered through Tod; hence, West personalizes the idiosyncrasies of the city and uses plot and characterization to propel a scathing critique of Hollywood. Tod, a scene painter for a movie studio and an East coast transplant, sublimates desire for Faye and disdain for Los Angeles's fashion, culture, and architecture into his visual opus, "The Burning of Los Angeles." Tod's observations of dietary faddists, architectural anomalies, directionless deadbeats, and dysfunctional, interpersonal encounters contribute to a vibrant and oft-referenced satire that straddles the tragicomic lines between violence and absurdity and reality and illusion.

West's Los Angeles is populated with opportunists, fanatics, and quacks, out to capitalize off the people "who have come to Los Angeles to die"—the "desperate types" who have traveled to the West coast seeking health, leisure, and prosperity and have become disillusioned after the sunshine, oranges, and movie theaters are no longer satisfying. With numerous references to costuming and the built environment in Hollywood, the novel also exposes the extremes of façade and artifice. In the opening scene, Tod observes two cavalries dressed in period costume marching on the set of an historical epic. Shortly after, on his walk home from work, he criticizes the clothing worn by the evening crowd on the street:

A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes...The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and the Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (60)

In the next paragraph, he refers to the crowd as “masqueraders;” cinema’s influence—represented by the cavalry marching on the set just before Tod’s walk home—unequivocally extends to the “costuming” of people on the street, and to strengthen the dynamic between spectator and spectacle, Tod also observes the downtrodden, somberly-dressed “people who had come to California to die,” who stare at the decked-out passersby with “eyes filled with hatred.” As the ultimate voyeur of voyeurs, Tod’s derision separates him from direct engagement with the Hollywood milieu, and further alienates him from the questionable “culture” of his surroundings.

As Tod continues his walk home, he remarks on the juxtaposition of discordant, heterogeneous architectural styles: “But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor Cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.” (61) Like the costuming of the passersby, the temporal and spatial diversity of a residential street mirrors Hollywood staging. Tod almost excuses the stylistic clashes when he notes the flimsiness of the building materials, but he is ultimately troubled by the futile attempts at beauty and romance that result in an aesthetic he deems “truly monstrous.”

The novel’s emphasis on the visual, the exterior, and spectacle in The Day of the Locust is a device to self-reflexively confront cinema’s influence on the physical and cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Tod’s role as set designer and visual artist embeds him as the ideal, detached observer of the Hollywood milieu, while his contempt protects him from accountability and identification. Yet Tod’s desire for Faye, a character who is overtly deceitful, manipulative, and in a persistent state of pantomime, implicates Tod as being

susceptible to the illusory charms of Hollywood. As a metaphor for his powerlessness before the Hollywood façade, as embodied by Faye, he unsuccessfully attempts to overtake her physically and sexually throughout the novel.

### **Ambivalent Representations**

Tod's ambivalent status as observer and participant makes him an ideal conduit to represent violence and social upheaval. His pictorial depiction of Los Angeles's destruction in

“The Burning of Los Angeles” is a festive and fiery celebration of the city's ruin:

He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd. (West, 118)

Tod inverts the synthetic and the authentic in his canvas of the city on fire. The landscape, “the desert sun,” is a backdrop for the apocalyptic spectacle in the foreground; place and the conflagration become indistinguishable as the fantastic event merges with a terrain already scorched by climate. To capture the paradoxical qualities of Hollywood, he showcases violence and destruction in the midst of a celebration. The painting itself is a diversion, serving a dual purpose of entertainment and escapism: Tod sublimates an obsessive and irrational fixation on Faye by painting the enthralling portrayal of Los Angeles's doom; and injured and trapped in a mob of hysterical, Hollywood stargazers that instigate a riot at a movie premiere in the book's final scene, Tod escapes the pain of his injury by imagining himself at work on the canvas: “He had almost forgotten both his leg and

his predicament, and to make his escape still more complete he stood on a chair and worked at the flames in an upper corner of the canvas, modeling the tongues of fire so that they licked even more avidly at a corinthian column that held up the palmleaf roof of a nutburger stand.” (West, 185)

Fire engulfs the city’s dissonant architectural, botanical, and dietary anachronisms and juxtapositions that the “corinthian column,” “palmleaf roof,” and “nutburger stand” reflect. The thrill of imaginary ruin captivates Tod’s attention, rather than the immediacy of the present, surrounding pandemonium. Tod’s compulsive sparks of creativity, his simulation of destruction in his artwork, at once mirror and negate the ignition of violence and disaster around him. The ambiguous final paragraph, in which Tod’s confusion about whether he is generating the ambulance siren that is taking him away degenerates into absurdity—he begins to mimic the sound anyway—suggests that the dissonance between reality and illusion, intensified by the extremes of Hollywood spectacle and desperation, is too powerful to spare his sanity.

Even the most glaring criticism or glowing meditation can provide a nuanced examination of the metaphorical dimensions of an urban space as singular as Los Angeles. Both extremes are integral to a deeper understanding of the paradoxes that comprise the city’s physical and cultural makeup. Works such as Nathanael West’s Day of the Locust shatter propagandist illusions and portray Hollywood as a surreal dystopia and a flimsy facade, yet reveal a rich, metaphorical repository of a waning mythology. West’s scathing, cultural critique is also a conduit for innovation and creativity, and by contributing to the formation of a vital local literary tradition through satire and exposé, paradoxically lessens the severity of the very cultural morass he chronicles. Literary and cinematic works that

incorporate self-critique or self-reflexivity (specifically that expose the city's flaws and conundrums through the lens of its most influential—and problematic—medium, cinema), ultimately contribute to the development of a refined metaphorical dimension that is mediated by the myriad manifestations of the region's fundamental elemental composition: fire and light.

### **A City Engulfed**

When Joan Didion pierces the depths of Los Angeles' susceptibility to fire in "Los Angeles Notebook," she incorporates representative images of social, meteorological, and fictional upheaval. Didion emphasizes how landscape and lifestyle are inextricably linked; instability, volatility, and unpredictability characterize the interaction between cultural and physical space:

The city burning is Los Angeles's deepest image of itself: Nathanael West perceived that, in The Day of the Locust; and at the time of the 1965 Watts riots what struck the imagination most indelibly were the fires. For days one could drive the Harbor Freeway and see the city on fire, just as we had always known it would be in the end. Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse...the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are. (Didion, STB, 220-221)

The above quotation is often cited in cultural and literary studies of Los Angeles for its succinct merging of social cataclysm, ecological disaster, and fictional apocalypse to capture the incendiary quintessence of the city. For Didion, the elements function as the common denominator between an eruption of violence triggered by decades of repression,

racism, and dwindling prospects in South Central Los Angeles, and a fictional narrative depicting a riot outside a movie premiere interspersed with descriptions of an imaginary work of art titled “The Burning of Los Angeles.” West’s riot and the Watts Uprising are discrete, causally unrelated events, but their ontology is rooted in Los Angeles exceptionalism and mythology. The promise of a better life that spurred migration booms and upgraded expectations intensified the disappointment and disillusionment of marginalized masses, of African Americans who left the segregated south to pursue manufacturing jobs in Los Angeles during and after the second World War, only to endure widespread unemployment, discrimination, and ghettoization; or the migrants from the Midwest and east coast who traveled to Los Angeles to make it in the movies or to seek the curative powers of “the land of sunshine and oranges.” West’s novel vividly portrays how the failed search for a better life triggers boredom, despair, and violence.

In attempting to identify the underlying causes of the Watts Uprising in Fire This Time, Gerald Horne makes several references to the heightened sense of disillusionment for black migrants for whom exclusion and racial bias exacerbated the harsh realities that clashed with their expectations of the so-called “Promised Land.” (37) Horne also emphasizes Los Angeles’ unrivaled population growth, lack of infrastructure, and unique status as both social laboratory and crystal ball in contributing to the violence and fires in Watts in 1965:

The deft chronicler of Southern California Carey McWilliams saw this region as a great laboratory of experimentation, a forging ground, a place where ideas, practices, and customs move, prove their worth, or are discarded. In L.A. in the 1960s many blacks came to feel that this great laboratory had produced a Frankenstein monster of



bias that deserved to be discarded. L.A. had been subjected to enormous strain as a result of massive migration; this combined with unique racial tensions and related subjective factors produced an explosion. (30)

Akin to McWilliams, Horne addresses the idiosyncratic elements and tendencies that contribute to a cultural landscape that is prone to violence and social experimentation. Horne's reference to Frankenstein captures the ambivalence of technological "progress" and its destructive consequences when such experimentation and development are unbridled, unregulated, and unethical. To apply the Frankenstein metaphor to the conditions leading up to the Watts Uprising, adequate jobs, housing, and infrastructure elude the "massive" influx of workers who have been lured by the promise of a better life and the transitory post-World War II economic boom, while discriminatory real estate and employment policies further deteriorates conditions for African Americans.

Horne also states that Los Angeles fiction can provide insight into how the dynamics of corruption and disillusionment instigated the uprising, from Liabna K. Baebner's exploration of fraud, deception, and depravity in "Raymond Chandler's City of Lies," (30) to Chester Himes' suggestion that "L.A. is both unique and an incubator of future trends" (31)—namely, the disintegration of the working class in his novel, Lonely Crusade. Horne's alliterative phrase, "Nathanael West nightmare," underscores the image of Los Angeles "as a symbol of chaos and collapse," and is antithetical to the myth of the "American Dream" dispelled in S.U. Peters' essay, "The Los Angeles Anti-Myth." (374, note 32).

In another reference to West, Horne summarizes his theory about the prevalence of hate groups in Southern California:

Nathanael West suggested that Southern California bred more hate groups than the rest of the country combined. He attributed it to the bitterness of people who came to live in the sunshine and glamour and found instead boredom and disappointment. No doubt there was something to this. The image transmitted by mass media of Southern California could easily leave the impression that everyone in this distant place was a tanned movie star having fun, but this stereotype failed to capture the entire Euro-American experience. (90)

Horne traces a tendency in perceptions of Los Angeles by migrants, mass media, literary chroniclers, and residents alike; false representations and exaggerated projections insidiously and paradoxically feed the flames of the violence and disenfranchisement that such images attempt to mask. The manufacturing of the American dream and the social realities of the mid-sixties act as catalysts to one another and are byproducts of the illusory Hollywood West depicted in The Day of the Locust, the frenzy of boosterism, real estate booms and busts, and the institution of religious cults McWilliams documented in An Island on the Land. A shared dynamic between social and literary reality emerges, in which the promise of success, health, salvation, equality, or prosperity—and the higher expectations that ensue—bring about a deeper sense of loss, failure, and disappointment when it is unfulfilled, thereby triggering acts of desperation, oppression, or violence that are exceptionally extreme and unpredictable.

### **The Climate of Illusion**

Horne captures the tension between hopeful expectation and the mythologization of the city in his analysis of the *LA Times*' attempt to uncover the causes of the Watts Uprising. In addressing the state's passing of Proposition 14 in 1964—a measure “designed to overturn

fair-housing legislation” (7) that was “widely viewed as bolstering residential segregation” (37)—Horne cites The Reverend H.H. Brookins: “other cities are old and have lived with this problem longer...Where the most hope is built up, the awakening to reality hurts the most.” (37) Horne also shows how distorted notions of the region result in disbelief and an inability to perceive an accurate social reality for African Americans in Los Angeles. The misconception that they had a better life in “the land of sunshine and palm trees” (37)—partially because black neighborhoods in Los Angeles did not resemble “the high rise projects and apartment buildings in a cold-weather clime” that were associated with urban problems in eastern and Midwestern cities (50)—was clearly shattered after the violence erupted in South Los Angeles.

The climate and built environment of Los Angeles are key ingredients in the convolution of cause, misconception, and interpretation surrounding the Watts riots. Journalist reacted in disbelief that such a rebellion could occur in Los Angeles. Horne writes: “The prominent journalist Theodore White was curious as to why such a conflagration would hit ‘the green lawns, palm trees, flower beds, white frame houses...open spaces, airy school houses with huge playgrounds, large parks with swimming pools’ of LA.” (37) Yet, as Horne emphasizes, it was precisely Los Angeles’s peculiarities that created the conditions for an “insurrection with the depth of that of 1965 [to arise] there and not elsewhere.” (30) A constellation of circumstances, from complex race relations, to an incongruous blend of prosperity and discrimination, to the city’s geographic and historical orientation as the last frontier on the edge of a continent, created ideal conditions for reinvention and change that “...spawned innovation and difference,” (29) but on a tragic scale.

As Horne shows, it is also possible to exaggerate the influence of environmental factors on the riots, to the extent that they distract from a judicious investigation of the causes. Horne indicates the racist implications in reports that cite the heat wave that took place the same week as the riots as a precipitating factor, as well as the influence of the full moon of August 12<sup>th</sup>, the tides, and possibly even a meteor sighting. (54) Citing such meteorological factors obviously eclipses and detracts from the actual climate of racial tension and injustice that instigated the crisis and gives minimal credibility to sociological data and empirical evidence.

In a similar vein, McWilliams' chapter about religious cults in Los Angeles questions the role of climate as being the sole factor in explaining the ubiquity of evangelical movements, faith healers, quacks, and dietary faddists.<sup>10</sup> In An Island on the Land, McWilliams cites multiple accounts that attribute the staggering number to climate (249-250), but akin to West's observation about the proliferation of hate groups, McWilliams' demonstrates how aspects of migration and reinvention are integral as well: "Migration is the basic explanation for the growth of cults in Southern California...In the process of moving westward, the customs, practices, and religious habits of the people have undergone important changes. Old ties have been loosened; old allegiances weakened." (269)

Furthermore, Los Angeles's location as the last metropolitan area west of Chicago mimics the progression of cult movements, which, as McWilliams points out, historically travel from east to west (270). McWilliams highlights another significant facet of Los Angeles' geographic exceptionalism by noting that the city's eastward facing orientation

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, McWilliams adorns this section with a lengthy block passage from The Day of the Locust, in which Tod lists the dubious churches he attends to sketch worshippers: including "The Church of Christ, Physical;" "The Church Invisible;" "The Tabernacle of the Third Coming;" and "The Temple Modern." (266-267)

explains why “every existing religion in the world is represented by branches in Los Angeles.” (270) McWilliams himself seems torn between various theories and schools of thought; for instance, although he calls the folk-belief that “new religious movements always arise in desert areas naïve,” he summarizes his acquiescence to such “circumstantial evidence” when he declares, “there is something about Los Angeles—its proximity to the desert, its geographic position, its history of rapid social change through migration—that leads me to believe that some new religious movement is brewing here.” (270-271)

Indeed, McWilliams dismisses climate as being the sole cause of the high number of cults, but in an earlier section, he shows the degree to which climate contributed to the manufacturing of a myth that was closely connected to healing, only on a corporeal level instead of a spiritual one. McWilliams’ aptly titled chapter, “The Folklore of Climatology,” in which he chronicles propagandist myths of the healing powers of the sun and southern California climate that spurred massive influxes of invalids to the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, exposes the extent of the hyperbole. (98-99) When sickly migrants arrived and remained ill despite the abundant sunlight, the lack of skilled doctors, coupled with the booming population of invalids, generated a demand that was met by unqualified medical and spiritual opportunists who posed as healers. (100) As McWilliams also illustrates, the high incidence of mortality contributed to a blasé attitude about death and mourning. (100)

According to McWilliams, it is not exactly weather that created the ideal breeding ground for cults and evangelical movements, but a deeper, psychological need to resettle, reinvent, or start over, combined with the importation of a heterogeneous array of values, ideas, and tradition. The tension between a reluctance to discard past tradition and the desire for reinvention, as Fine and Ulin point out when they attempt to define a regional literature,

contribute to an unprecedented blend of promise and predicament in the cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Climate was merely the lure, and was exploited and branded to attract a populace; desert sun, pacific air, and diverse vegetation are merely the backdrop in the complex interplay between geography, migration, and infrastructure in the unfulfilled westward quest for equality, reinvention, health, glamour, and fortune.

In the abovementioned excerpts from Didion's "Los Angeles Notebook," the madness, chaos, and ill-tempered dispositions that coincide with the combustible Santa Ana wind emphasizes the connection between rash acts of destruction and the elements. Yet her approach to linking identity and environment is phenomenological rather than causal; Didion's writing bridges the gap between the metaphorical and the historical, as well as the fictive and the meteorological. She is not investigating the fact of "Los Angeles burning," but the "image" of "Los Angeles burning," which is a metaphorical composite of meteorological, historical, and fictional events. The Santa Ana winds—a meteorological occurrence—and the Watts riots—a historical event—strike the "imagination" and unlock deep-seated premonitions about the fiery characteristics of Los Angeles's catastrophic collapse. Rather than build a cause and effect relationship between climate and behavior, Didion describes how the "violent and unpredictable" elements reflect and "accentuate impermanence and unreliability:" they are not necessarily the origin of discontent and instability, but an interpretative barometer of their presence and endurance in the Los Angeles experience and imagination.

### **Part 3: Mike Davis' Literary Destruction of Los Angeles**

#### **Accounting for the End**

In contrast to Didion's subjective accounts of Santa Ana winds and fires in Malibu, or Weschler or Waldie's meditative categorizations of light, there is also a tendency in writing about Los Angeles to take a statistical or numerative approach to examining Los Angeles's environmental idiosyncrasies and their impact on cultural experience and the literary imagination. Textual explorations such as these share a predilection for compiling disaster statistics, whether real or fictional, social, or individual. The chapter entitled "The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles" in Mike Davis' 1998 Ecology of Fear includes lists detailing the number of times per decade "the city and its suburbs have been destroyed from 1909 to 1996" (Davis, 276), "nine major story types of Los Angeles disaster fiction and their principal periods of popularity," and thirteen different "means of destruction and their frequency" in novels and films set in Los Angeles throughout the twentieth century. Topping the list in the latter are "Nukes, Earthquakes, Hordes (invasion), Monsters, Pollution, Gangs/Terrorism, Floods, and Plagues." (280-281). In 1936, Blaise Cendrars ponders Los Angeles's bewilderingly high suicide rate in his Hollywood travelogue, Hollywood: Mecca of the Movies. Resonant with Davis' calamity index, Cendrars designs a chart, a classification of suicidal statistics by method, gender and frequency.

The fictional disaster scenarios on Davis' list merge actual sociological and environmental phenomena with the absurd, improbable, and the outlandish; according to Davis, embellishments of the region's volatile landscape, ecological paradoxes and extremes,

high incidence of fundamentalism and cultism, and immigration inspire firestorms, earthquakes, droughts, monsters and alien invasions. Cendrars' victims concoct methods of self-annihilation independent of the external environment—gas, poison, firearms or rope are accessible in other cities—and he questions the explanation posited by the police in Los Angeles, which suggests that Los Angeles's most glaring ecological feature—the abundance of sunlight—is to blame for the staggering statistics. (104-105). Cendrars proposes that an "artificial sun," the illusory, cinematic spectacle, "troubles the brain" and intensifies the disquieting contrast between delusion and daylight:

...But isn't it rather a matter of that artificial sun tapped by the Hollywood studios, which flares up every night in movie theaters around the world, and whose animated beam, loud, luminous, but charged with a strange light, indeed troubles the brain, causing the tragic shadow of the Star to sweep invisible over Hollywood in broad daylight, and eclipse or shock on return, to strike at the heart of the disillusioned and the stars? (106)

Hence cinema's influence on the dynamics of hope and disillusionment extend to the phenomenological. Cinema simulates reality by appropriating its constituents and projecting them onto an unreachable, two-dimensional realm. Such a recontextualization of the real elicits a discord that perpetuates the cycle of self-dissolution and escapism. The evasion of reality through film, the pursuit of transcendence through cinema, is at once a reflection and an inversion of reality. Inviting another paradox of the landscape: darkness elucidates the narrative because the projection is invisible in daylight.

To explore other manifestations of cinema's influence, as Fine explains in the previous section, market forces fueled by desire and supply and demand attract an eager



workforce of screenwriters who contribute to a literary regionalism; as West portrays in The Day of the Locust, Hollywood's hopeful aspirants like Faye Greener or the bored masses subvert their identity to land a part or catch a glimpse of a celebrity; and as Weschler and McWilliams both articulate, artists and filmmakers are drawn to the region for the uniqueness of the light and the diverse, expansive terrain. Such a range of examples and approaches, including Cendrars' whimsical hypothesis, provide glimpses into the industrial, environmental, cultural, and psychological forces at play in phenomenological aspects of cinema.

In other words, cinema—as an industry and a medium—is closely linked to spatiality and interiority in Los Angeles fiction, and its presence as a narrative element in a literary or cinematic work propels themes of hope and disillusionment and the interplay between space and self-dissolution. Self-reflexivity—or the portrayal of cinema in fictional form—in West's The Day of the Locust may be primarily satiric and represented through a novel instead of a film, but the conclusion to the protagonist's Hollywood experience is ultimately one of psychological fragmentation and disorientation as a result of the movie industry and its influence on the cultural and physical landscape.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequent chapters will provide an in-depth investigation into the relationship between Los Angeles's cinematic landscape and the dissolution of identity in works such as David Lynch's films Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire, and Joan Didion's novel Play It As It Lays. In these novels and films, the dream factory is an agent of creativity and transcendence, as well as fragmentation, escapism, and even death. In either case, Hollywood

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<sup>11</sup> Due to the ubiquitous presence of the movie industry in Los Angeles, I am using the term “self-referential” to designate novels and film set in Los Angeles that are about its predominant industry, cinema. John Schlesinger's 1975 cinematic adaptation of The Day of the Locust provides an opportunity for a more direct investigation into cinematic self-referentiality, although sonic and visual elements play up the grotesque and the “truly monstrous” to such an extent, they subdue the aspects of the narrative that are applicable to my focus.

as subject, set, and backdrop adversely impacts each work's respective protagonist/s on a psychological level. The destruction is personal, internalized, and insinuated.

### **The Omnipresence of the Disaster Narrative**

Whereas cinema—as an industry, a medium, a metaphor, or a landscape—is closely linked to psychological volatility in multiple representations of Los Angeles, Davis' claim in “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” that a striking proportion of film and novels set in Los Angeles concern the destruction of Los Angeles itself, especially after 1970, is resonant with the cinematic novel or self-reflexive film, except that plots about urban annihilation concern the collective, the hypothetical, the futuristic and the exterior cityscape; many of the examples Davis gives are in the science fiction *genre*, and place and narrative are not filtered through subjective states of mind or psychological episodes. Nevertheless, his analysis shows the extent to which catastrophe occurs in popular representations of Los Angeles, and sheds light on the cultural forces and social ills that contribute to this tendency.

Davis performs a comprehensive bibliographic examination of the content of “Los Angeles based” novels and films by consulting *An Annotated Bibliography of California Fiction, 1664-1970*, by Newton Baird and Robert Greenwood. His research uncovers the following:

Out of 2,711 separate entries, I found 785 novels that obviously qualified as ‘Los Angeles based.’ Nearly two-thirds of this vast output was, unsurprisingly, devoted to either murder (255 crime and detective novels) or Hollywood (224 novels), with considerable overlap between the two categories. There were also 50 novels with specific disaster themes, 6 percent of the total... (279)

The three other subjects are cult fiction (39 titles), citrus fiction (30 titles), and historical novels (66 titles). Although 6 percent does not appear to be a large figure, Davis argues that like Chandlerian noir, which comprises only about 40 novels yet “continues to define Los Angeles in the eyes of most critics,” disaster fiction’s low numbers do not reflect the extent of its popularity or influence. In addition, this accounting, based on a date range that ends in 1970, does not reflect a surge of disaster fiction after 1970. Davis’ own bibliographic research up to 1996 shows the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as having the greatest number of incidents of fictional destruction in the twentieth century, even with the incomplete 1990s. (276) According to Davis, as the region’s social and environmental problems deteriorate and approach the *fin de siècle*,

...there is a dramatic trend over time toward the merging of all Los Angeles fiction with the disaster or survivalist narrative... Since 1980, in fact, a quorum of the region’s best writers... have routinely sited their fiction in the golden ruins of Los Angeles’s future. It is also true in the broader sense that disaster, as allusion, metaphor, or ambience, saturates almost everything now written about Southern California.” (280)

Davis goes on to give multiple examples of end-of-the-world scenarios, nuclear detonations, and alien colonizations set in Los Angeles, but his statement also applies to literary works that are not science fiction. For instance, when David Fine expounds on the relationship between violence and apocalypse in Imagining Los Angeles, he concludes that the dynamics of hope and disillusionment hold up regardless of whether “disaster” is personal or collective: “From the 1920s to the present the dominant theme in Los Angeles fiction had been the betrayal of hope and the collapse of dreams... The end, when it doesn’t

come from earthquake, nuclear bomb, or fiery conflagration, comes most often...as fatal automobile accident, murder, or suicide.” (236-237)

A looser interpretation of “disaster” gives Davis’ claim more credence, especially as the term applies to personal catastrophes and instances of self-dissolution, self-destructive acts of addiction or prostitution, or causal disruption—instances of being in the wrong place at the wrong time—in Los-Angeles-based contemporary literature. Examples include the protagonist’s Hollywood-ignited psychological breakdown in Joan Didion’s 1971 Play It As It Lays; descents into date rape, heroin addiction, and prostitution by depraved, wealthy teenagers in Bret Easton Ellis’ 1985 Less Than Zero; the double automobile accident tragedy that strikes a family in Carolyn See’s 1991 Making History; and extending beyond the 1996 endpoint of Davis’ study and into the twenty-first century, Bruce Wagner’s Los Angeles trilogy, comprised of I’m Losing You (1996), I’ll Let you Go (2002), and Still Holding (2003). Though drastically different in style, each work by Wagner weaves violence, loss of identity, drug-addled psychotic episodes, phobias, and misguided new age conversions into cultural settings and milieus that are distinctly Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup>

From Davis’ late 1990’s perspective, disaster fiction and its expanding sense of connotations gains momentum as millennial anxiety intensifies, and its omnipresence is a fictional analogue to a profound cultural dysfunction and a failure to sustain the enviable California lifestyle beyond the 1970s:

The dazzling growth of suburban Southern California was, after all, the incontestable symbol of national prosperity in the decades between Lend-Lease and Watergate. A well-paid job in an aerospace plant and a ranch-style home in a sunny subdivision,

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<sup>12</sup> David Fine includes Didion’s Play It As It Lays and See’s Making History in his own list; the other examples are my own selections.

only minutes away from the beaches and Disneyland, was a lifestyle against which other Americans measured the modernity of their towns and regions...

Now the tables have turned and metropolitan Los Angeles—with its estimated 500 gated subdivisions, 2,000 street gangs, 4,000 minimalls, 20,000 sweatshops, and 100,000 homeless residents—is a dystopian symbol of Dickensian inequalities and intractable racial contradictions. (354)

Again, statistics accentuate and illuminate the breadth and extent of the exceptionality of Los Angeles' self-destructive tendencies. Such disenchantment, coupled with Los Angeles' specific social ills, perhaps explains why, as Davis emphasizes throughout the chapter, the destruction of Los Angeles is a pleasure to behold: "The City of Angels is unique, not simply in the frequency of its fictional destruction, but in the pleasure that such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences." (277) Although in the above passage, Davis provides a sociological and historical parallel to the predominant mode of Los Angeles fiction—the dynamic of hope and disillusionment—Davis also detects a concurrent gratification in the eyes of the detached beholder. He suggests that Los Angeles, a city that many theorists have deemed to be a crystal ball into the future of urban existence, is actually a premonition of and a "scapegoat for the collapse of the American century." (355)

### **Alienations**

Whereas writers and critics such as Didion, Ulin, and Fine frequently emphasize the influence of the volatile Los Angeles landscape on the city's literary output, earlier in his chapter, Davis diminishes the extent of the environment's impact on the prevalence of disaster fiction: "...environmental exceptionalism only takes us part of the way towards an

explanation of why Los Angeles is the city we love to destroy.” (278) Again, Davis takes advantage of an opportunity to refer to the pleasures of urban annihilation.

Davis postulates "that the abiding hysteria of Los Angeles disaster fiction—the urge to strike out and destroy, to wipe out an entire city and untold thousands of its inhabitants—is rooted in racial anxiety." (281) He goes on to trace the origins of urban disaster fiction in 19<sup>th</sup> century representations of London, New York, and Philadelphia, illustrating how xenophobia manifests as fantastic alien invasion plots—replete with images of demolished architectural icons. In many of these examples, heroic white men mobilize to battle “green aliens,” “red martians” or “yellow hordes.” Davis goes on to cite numerous early twentieth-century novels about Chinese or Japanese invasions of southern California, as well as survivalist narratives in which catastrophe functions as a cleansing ritual for the unsavory members (the lower classes and darker races) of humanity.

Throughout his analysis of the urban disaster narrative, Davis hints at the dynamics of fear and pleasure, or how they serve as cathartic purification rituals for individuals who felt threatened by influxes of immigrants from across the Pacific, the southern border, or even south central or east LA. Elements of white solidarity and the possibility of weeding out the undesirable propel this unsettling, pleasurable dimension of the disaster narrative. Davis also gives examples that reflect intolerance towards practitioners of the region’s kooky, new age spiritualists.

From the earliest nineteenth-century examples of literary destruction of London and New York to the latest survivalist fantasies about Los Angeles, white fear of the dark races lies at the heart of such visions (with the sardonic critique of cults and fringe culture coming in a distant second). And it is this obsession, far more than anxieties

about earthquakes or nuclear weapons, that leads us back to the real Los Angeles as well as the deepest animating fears of our culture. It is this constellation of fears—and their attendant pleasures—that makes the taxonomy of disaster fiction something more than a purely academic (and perhaps amusing) exercise. (281-282)

In his accounting of the evolution of disaster fiction, Davis' tone oscillates back and forth between gravity and whimsy. Like McWilliams' account of the paradoxical climate of southern California, the language of Davis' analysis absorbs the ambivalence of the city's self-destruction, and mines the outlandish terrain of the topic for examples that are surreal and extreme. To take pleasure in Los Angeles' fictional destruction is an act that is laden with paradox as well: social inequality, environmental irresponsibility, and class intolerance provide a reason to cheer for the demolition of such a flawed place, whereas the culprit of destruction, according to Davis' interpretation of many of the examples he gives, is a manifestation of "white fear of the dark races," a retaliation against the menace of immigration.

### **Premonitions of the End**

Carey McWilliams, David Fine, David Ulin, and Gerald White, regardless of whether they are accounting for the prevalence of evangelism, investigating the causes of the Watts riots, or defining a literary regionalism, all agree that the steady influx of immigrants over the last two centuries is a vital component of Los Angeles' distinctiveness and exceptionalism. The region's high rate of immigration paves the way towards a break with tradition as it maintains a connection to a past that—as Fine emphasizes in his introduction—is always an "elsewhere." Moreover, it is this "elsewhere" that grounds the cultural theorizing of Los Angeles in models that are unavoidably geographic, inspiring an irresistible measurement

between a “here” and a “there.” Fine’s assertion also poses a breakdown of temporal and spatial boundaries that resonates with the futuristic dystopias and “fantastic geographies” of the 1980s that Davis investigates in Ecology of Fear: “To borrow a term from science, new wave Los Angeles fiction is fundamentally *ergodic*: it substitutes space for time, phantasmagoric topographies for linear narrative.” (Davis 347) To follow with a proof: if “the past is an elsewhere,” then post-structural practitioners of theoretical Los Angeles would agree that the future is technically “here” in Los Angeles. Jean Baudrillard writes in America:

There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night...Only Hieronymus Bosch’s hell can match this inferno effect...This [city] condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity. Mulholland Drive by night is an extraterrestrial’s vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller’s vantage point on the Galactic metropolis. (Baudrillard 51-52)

Opening with a reference to the city’s inimitability, Baudrillard’s observation encapsulates many of the forces at play in literary imaginings and theoretical constructions of Los Angeles. The reference to Bosch’s hell—eerily evocative of Tod’s “Burning of Los Angeles,”—invites a mapping of the city that juxtaposes the archaic with the futuristic, the elemental “inferno” with the geometric, “luminous” networks at night. An aerial counterpoint to McWilliams’ descriptions of the southern California landscape, Baudrillard reports atmospheric and terrestrial conditions that are resonantly artificial, otherworldly, and paradoxical: “condensed” and “infinite,” “geometric” and “infernal,” and “extraterrestrial” and “earth-dwelling.” From his detached, airborne perspective, Baudrillard crafts a



composite image of an urban microcosm of infinite time and space that evokes the complexity of the “phantasmagoric topographies” and futuristic narratives that Davis chronicles.

In primarily focusing on science fiction, Davis presents a convincing parallel between racism and disaster fiction, but as Fine, Ulin, Horne, and McWilliams have illustrated, landscape and mythology are inextricably connected to the immigration issues that simultaneously inspired and ignited Los Angeles’ social conflicts and corresponding literary idiosyncrasies. As Fine reiterates in the conclusion to Imagining Los Angeles, whether the destruction is personal or collective, the geographic orientation of the city—on the edge of the continent—has a profound influence on literature, and along with the social factors that Davis emphasizes in Ecology of Fear, are prominent and integral to the definition of a literary regionalism. Yet in direct response to Davis’ chapter, Fine states that racism is not the sole explanation for the prevalence of apocalyptic fiction in Los Angeles. In the following excerpt, Fine succinctly encapsulates the predominant forces behind the recurrent theme of destruction in Los Angeles fiction: “...although doomsday literature was not invented in Los Angeles but migrated west...it established itself in a city that was positioned literally at the edge of a continent, a place where an unstable physical geography collided with an unstable human geography of displaced migrants and inflated expectations.” (234)

That Fine extends his analysis of disaster fiction beyond the overtly futuristic, doomsday, or post-apocalyptic plot line in his literary study of Los Angeles ultimately fortifies Davis assertions that disaster, in one form or another, “saturates almost everything now written about Los Angeles.” The merging of the cinematic and the mythological landscape with a distinctive environmental and social volatility intimates an unconscious

premonition of the end, which, as Davis and Fine would agree, is a defining characteristic of Los Angeles literature.

## Chapter Two: Landscape and Spatiality

*The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape had found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles... (Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, 139)*

### Part 4: The Politics and Poetics of Decentralization in Los Angeles

#### Centers of Power

Using Carey McWilliams' assertion that Los Angeles—culturally, geographically, and politically—is essentially an exceptional, paradoxical space as a point of departure, this section explores the phenomenon of decentralization in Los Angeles and its influence on the interplay between literary and cinematic genres and the mapping and remapping of urban space. In City of Quartz, Davis' analysis of the shifting dynamics between centers of power provides a cultural-historical basis for Los Angeles' status as a decentralized space; he frequently cites the perennial competition between the Westside and Downtown to serve as Los Angeles' physical, economic, and political center: "By the end of World War Two, however, it became impossible to speak of a single, hegemonic power structure, as Los Angeles was increasingly polarized between Downtown and Westside "growth coalitions" with competing economic, political and cultural pretensions." (Davis 105)

Davis then locates additional power centers that weaken the strict dichotomy between Downtown and the Westside during the postwar period. His "Power Lines" chapter illustrates the complex interplay between the clusters of power, differentiated by industry, political

affiliation, and ethnic identity, that are spread out across the basin—including the “Hollywood” that in actuality, is based in movie studios in Culver City, Burbank, and North Hollywood. To further distinguish Los Angeles from other global cities, he also notes the widespread foreign investment in the movie industry and in the development of a downtown business district, particularly in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Thus throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the polarized, Downtown-Westside dichotomy evolves into a sprawling mass of power that even extends beyond the borders of the city, the region, and the country.

Davis’ chapter is instrumental in charting the diversity, complexity, and exceptionality of the city’s power structures, in terms of where they are situated throughout the city, and how they evolve over time. The ebb and flow of investment, migration, and geography (human and geological) have a profound influence not only on the image that is projected of Los Angeles, but its representation in literature and film. Norman Klein’s The History of Forgetting demonstrates how the inverse is also true: projections and fictional representations of Los Angeles in turn influence public policy, development and demolition, and spatial transformations of the city. Klein’s book, which draws on Davis’ study to examine the relationship between a mythologized Los Angeles and prevailing attitudes that contribute to the dismantling of entire neighborhoods, underscores the interplay between fiction, memory, and public policy.

What makes the city of Los Angeles susceptible to the mythmaking that redraws its physical contours, and that simultaneously projects its image as an epicenter of image making? Whereas the previous chapter explores environmental and social phenomena that contribute to self-invention and the emergence of a regional literature—the prevalence of

disaster fiction being a primary characteristic—this chapter will take into consideration how literary and cinematic representations influence and transform the built environment of the city. Klein’s work in particular draws from post-structuralist thought to construct a history that is fraught with mythology, forgetting, and disappearance, and is invested in unconventional approaches to defining mutable social and urban space. Decentralization—as both geographic attribute and post-structuralist concept—is connected to the emergence of new genres and the infinite malleability and primacy of the city as image. Furthermore, the celluloid or fictional representation of a complex, decentralized space such as Los Angeles approximates a form of space mapping.

### **Novel Modes of Recollecting Space**

Thom Andersen’s 2003 documentary film essay, Los Angeles Plays Itself, uses clips from films set in Los Angeles to assemble an epic spatial classification of Los Angeles. Andersen organizes clusters of clips by theme to meticulously illustrate tendencies in how Los Angeles has exported its image throughout the twentieth century, and simultaneously reinforces and dismantles preconceived notions of the city. On one hand, he selects clips to vindicate specific neighborhoods (such as Downtown and Bunker Hill) and modernist architectural styles that are frequently associated with crime, while enforcing Los Angeles’ status as the preeminent laboratory of the kinetic image. The film’s first person narration argues that “Hollywood, a metonym for the motion picture industry,” has betrayed, disparaged, and misrepresented Los Angeles throughout the twentieth century. Critical of the ubiquitous practice of using “Hollywood” to signify both the movie industry and the district of Los Angeles<sup>13</sup>, the documentary traces the mutability of its landscape and landmarks,

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<sup>13</sup> As Mike Davis explains, few studios are located in Hollywood proper. Andersen also points out that the first movie studios were originally located in Edendale, “another suburb with an idyllic name,” that no longer exists.

detailing absurd examples of geographic inaccuracy, inconsistency and anachronism to suggest “Hollywood’s” fervent disregard for Los Angeles. Andersen also invites the possibility that fiction can shed light on reality, inverting the roles of fiction and documentary: “If we can appreciate documentaries for their dramatic qualities, perhaps we can appreciate fiction films for their documentary revelations,” but ultimately, Los Angeles is a place where “the relation between reality and representation gets muddled.” The impact of Andersen’s nearly three hour long visual immersion in the language of Los Angeles’ most iconic attribute is such that it invents a self-reflexive mode of mapping Los Angeles.

Revisiting Patricia Yaeger’s concept of *metropoetics*, or “poetics of infrastructure” that I discussed in the introduction, Andersen’s film is vital in its depiction of how cinema shows the instability of a complex global city such as Los Angeles; Andersen’s clips demonstrate the rapid transformation of neighborhoods, particularly of downtown and Bunker Hill, and his visual archive provides an antidote to the act of forgetting, or the constant revision of meaning that must be practiced in order to retain a sense of place, no matter how fleeting and mutable the physical condition of a site. The celluloid image fills the gap of an absence or disappearance—of neighborhoods and minority groups that have been supplanted and pushed out by urban renewal—even though the documentary is itself a transitory projection.

For Klein and Andersen, the challenge of assembling a coherent narrative of downtown is a juggling act between fiction, memory, archive, and artifact, and especially in Klein’s case, oral testimony. Klein’s project is deeply indebted to an array of post-structuralist and postmodern constructs of absence and presence, memory and forgetting, and

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Dividing the Silver Lake and Echo Park neighborhoods, Glendale Boulevard now runs through where Edendale used to be, though the area Post Office and Public Library, both named Edendale, are residues of its former existence.

amalgamations of diverse narrative modes: in his introduction, he describes the practice of taking his students on “anti-tours of locations where buildings no longer existed;” (Klein 3) he invents a narrative form called the “docufable, a brief essay in a fictive voice that captures, through distraction, the instant when a memory is being erased;” (16) he revises the Lacanian concept of the social imaginary “as a collective memory of an event or a place that never occurred, but is built anyway;” (10) and he challenges the transparency of the psychological construct of the *imago*:

If we concentrate, the imago seems to be waiting for us intact: a photo, a document, a table of statistics, an interview. It remains where we put it, but the details around it get lost, as if they were haunted, somewhat contaminated, but empty... They are the rumor that seems haunted with memory, so satisfying that it keeps us from looking beyond it. (4)

For Klein, iconic or representative, extracted images are ultimately deceptive and “make poor evidence.” Using the Rodney King video as an example, Klein argues that “the shock value obscures entire stages in the political history of collective memory. And the traces from one reception to the next are too faint in themselves to build a case.” (4) Since the substance of the imago is thus transferred to the perceiving audience or bystander, it becomes devoid of meaning in itself and too faded to pinpoint. Klein then concludes that perception and imagination are key factors in the reconstruction of memory and place; therefore, an empty lot or foundation functions as a more accurate “imago” or “phantom-limb” (he uses the two terms interchangeably) because the residue of such a space invites the perceiver to use his or her imagination to complete the story. Here, Klein’s concept resonates with Roland Barthes’ essay on photography, Camera Lucida. The interplay between an

image's direct connection to the viewer, the "punctum," and its broader, collective or cultural interpretation, the "studium," correspond to the personal and social processes involved in reconstructing spatial memory and meaning, especially in the midst of an absence, when a photograph is all that remains.

In that a considerable interaction exists between the spectator and spectrum, Klein's text incorporates a performative dimension to transform an absence into a meaningful presence, and plays with inventing a heterogeneous medley of genres and approaches to reflect an equally unfixed and unstable complex of history, memory, and place. To mirror the deceptive and murky aspects of Los Angeles' exceptional imagery and history, Klein's work promotes the intermingling of fiction and nonfiction, along with their blend of intention, execution, and evidence, to coexist on an equal plane of significance and signification. Hence, the act of reassembling a forgotten space, whether it be in a textual or cinematic medium, is a performance, and is subject to the incidental, aleatory influences of the present moment and the imagination.

Meanwhile, wary of abstract concepts of space—he ungenerously dismisses Joan Didion's writings about driving the freeway as "mystical blatherings,"—but ultimately a postmodern exercise, Anderson's documentary reappropriates and recontextualizes preexisting visual citations to drive a thesis, delivered in voice-over narration. On the aural level, the narrator, Encke King, interprets the clips, while the visual, akin to a text made up entirely of quotations from other sources, is comprised of recycled cinematic sources, arranged to promote an idea or theory. Many of the clips contradict the narrator's interpretation of social, cultural, and historical reality in Los Angeles, effectively underscoring Hollywood's propensity for myth; staggering numbers of films set in Los



Angeles indulge in fantasy or stereotype to represent the city in a light that captivates audiences and strengthens misconceptions. The narrator dispels such fantasies throughout the film, yet manages to illustrate how illusion is itself a vital component of cinematic history; the opposition between text and image paradoxically enforces the point the director is trying to make.

Both Klein and Anderson are deeply engaged with the tension between image, history, and fiction as it pertains to disproving false perceptions of Los Angeles, yet rely on fictive elements, mainly of characterization, to expand their respective projects. The title of Anderson's film, Los Angeles Plays Itself, as well as the second section of the film, "The City as Character," clearly enforce the concept of Los Angeles as character by citing films—mainly of the noir/crime variety—that have been formative in establishing an elusive urban identity and sense of place, while Klein's "docufables" and other forays into fiction create characters and situations based on interviews and historical research.

The other two sections of Anderson's film, "The City as Background" and "The City as Subject" buffer the central "City as Character" section, demonstrating the vast range of the city's cinematic portrayal: "City as Background" focuses on the visual and geographic malleability of Los Angeles, citing examples in which key landmarks stand in for distant settings—such as the Bradbury Building for the Hotel Royale in Mandalay, Burma in China Girl—while the last section, "The City as Subject," focuses on films—such as Chinatown and L.A. Confidential—that attempt to represent the city's complex, corrupt, and checkered history. In complete accordance with Norman Klein's epigram, that Los Angeles is "The Most Photographed and the Least Remembered City in the World," Andersen's visual essay exemplifies the paradoxical relationships between visual representation and historical

accuracy, as well as fiction and documentary. Klein and Andersen share the task of recontextualizing fiction to impart a document of historical sites and cultural markers that no longer exist or have been reconfigured, but are nonetheless intrinsic to the preservation of collective memory and the popular imagination. For example, both Klein and Andersen remark that Roman Polanski and Robert Towne's 1974 film Chinatown<sup>14</sup>, although atmospherically accurate in its portrayal of "civic negligence" (Andersen), anachronistically transposes scandals surrounding William Mulholland's building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct from 1906-1913 to character Hollis Mulwray's opposition to a fictional Alto Vallejo Dam in 1937, a time period that is more fitting for the noirish subplots of murder, incest, and adultery: as Klein succinctly explains, "The actual date of the water scandal had to be shuffled to make the story more Chandleresque." (Klein 248)<sup>15</sup>

Andersen attributes a shift in Los Angeles cinema in the early 1970's to a newfound "self-consciousness" triggered by the harsh social realities of the Watts riots. According to Andersen, films of this period tend to debunk Los Angeles's sunny image and are nostalgic for "what might have been." Chinatown may be unprecedented in that it treats Los Angeles as a subject, but noir mythology is intrinsic to the film that "obscures as much as it clarifies." (Klein 247) Chinatown does not only revise a mythologized history of water in the region, but it revises the noir aesthetic, to the extent that "a hot desert light" replaces the dark, rainy films of the 1940's crime film.<sup>16</sup> (Klein 61) The film inaugurates a significant shift in temporal, spatial, and generic aspects of Los Angeles' identity and the fictional representation of its past, present, and future. Andersen writes: "Chinatown set a pattern.

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<sup>14</sup> The brilliance and depth of Robert Towne's screenplay often grants Towne equal authorship.

<sup>15</sup> A discussion of Chinatown continues in chapter four.

<sup>16</sup> In 1973, Robert Altman's film The Long Goodbye revises, modernizes, and reimagines Raymond Chandler's 1953 novel by the same name, as well as its legendary protagonist, Philip Marlowe, in a bright, sunny, southern Californian setting.

Films about Los Angeles would be period films, set in the past or in the future. They would replace a public history with a secret history.” Chinatown’s play on genre and revision of noir ultimately corresponds to a destabilization of history, and a mutability—and ambiguity—of time and space. Hence when Polanski remarks, “there’s no more beautiful city in the world, provided it’s seen by night and from a distance,” he is referring to temporal distance as well as spatial.

### **Decentralized and Deconstructed**

In Los Angeles Plays Itself and The History of Forgetting, the collection of testimonies, images, and archives that comprise “Los Angeles” dissolves the boundary between subject and object; for a city so deeply rooted in the image and its reception, it is unsurprising that Los Angeles factors into its forgotten and obscured history as both subject and object. This wavering between subject and object relates to post-structuralist models of decentralized urban space and conforms to the notions of absence and presence that populate Klein’s work. Los Angeles’ status as an exceptional, decentralized space paves the way for Klein’s experimentation and generic innovation and resonates with concepts from Derrida’s Writing and Difference. The first essay in the volume, “Force and Signification,” uses a metaphor of an uninhabited city to explain formal totality in literature:

...the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is

perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself in pure language. (6)

The “city” that Derrida describes is a haunting evocation of the ecologically disaster-prone and fictionally self-destructive city that Davis portrays in Ecology of Fear. It is also eerily evocative of the demolished Bunker Hill neighborhood that Klein, Davis, and Anderson all excavate. The erasure of the so-called downtown center is indicative of an absent history that Klein attempts to restore through memory and imagination, even if they are indeed “haunted;” furthermore, the detritus of the demolished site—reinstated through Klein’s “anti-tours”—transforms an “absence” of markers of social meaning into a residual “presence” of narrative potential. By situating palimpsests of Los Angeles in the betwixt and between of being, Klein’s innovative historical process adds an additional layer of ambivalence to Los Angeles’s reception in critical thought.

Also in Writing and Difference, when Derrida explores the epistemological ramifications of de-centralization in light of formal totality in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” he sets up a metaphysical, indeterminate space that encourages the innovation of genre. A lack of center allows for an indeterminacy of meaning, a continuous play of signifiers. The interpretation of interpretation, meaning, or signification—the act of “freeplay”—operates outside of any laws of linear history, and encourages a constant reinterpretation of a center that is technically empty, and simultaneously absent and present. A fleeting sense of paradox, unbounded by spatial or temporal limitations, is thus the primary mode of an epistemology in constant flux.

The concept of de-centralization further situates Los Angeles in post-structuralist models of space. Barthes, who in Empire of Signs remarks that Los Angeles’ lack of a city

center produces a “profound uneasiness,” discerns one facet of the myriad destabilizing attributes of the city. For Barthes, cities such as Los Angeles “offend our synesthetic sentiment of the City, which requires that any urban space have a center to go to, return to, return from, a complete site to dream of and in relation to which to advance or retreat; in a word, to invent oneself.” (30) His estimation is sensorial, aesthetic, and grounded in a traditional concept of the city, yet its placement in the midst of a work as unconventional as Empire of Signs—a highly subjective travel narrative of Japan that is immersed in questions of visual uncertainty, the breakdown of meaning between sign and signifier, emptiness, mobility, and the city as text—suggests that the destabilizing forces of place offer a form of refuge for Barthes, especially as they are enshrouded in text and unreliable signs. Barthes’ reference to Los Angeles’ lack of a center occurs in the context of his evaluation of Tokyo’s center, a comparably empty space that houses the Emperor’s Palace, a symbolic site of vacant power that is silent and disregarded, yet stable and immutable.

In the same manner that Barthes’ observations of Japan are less about Japan than a playful, philosophical ego-centrism, his statement, that self-invention is grounded in the concept of an urban center, does not apply to Los Angeles. Klein counters Barthes’ reading of Los Angeles as being devoid of a center: “But in fact, downtown was not a blank cipher at all, far from it. It was more the scene of the crime, a crisis to ignore, the un-touristed non-image. (50) In a footnote to this passage, Klein describes how Barthes eventually “debunks those urbo-centric assumptions” later in the work, suggesting an openness that is in closer accord to Barthes’ project, despite his statement about classical “urbo-centrism” or the necessity of a municipal space “to invent oneself.” Apart from his occasional contradictions, for Barthes, self-invention is ultimately grounded in language and representation. An

“empty” downtown or city center does not stifle the invention of self; it may generate an identity without a referent—or more precisely, one that only exists in the realm of fiction or fantasy.

### **Downtown Mythologies**

The relationship between identity and fantasy factors heavily in Klein’s analysis of the transformation of space in Los Angeles. His research demonstrates how shady development deals, mythologies fueled by Hollywood-lore and noir fantasy, and the marginalization of immigrants and ethnic minorities influenced the razing, neglect, and isolation of numerous neighborhoods either downtown or bordering downtown—such as Bunker Hill, Echo Park, and Temple-Beaudry. The opening sentence of Klein’s work is a stark reminder of the staggering effects of displacement cloaked as urban renewal: “Just west of downtown Los Angeles, over fifty thousand housing units were torn down in the period 1933-1980, leaving an empty zone as noticeable as a meteor’s impact.” (1) Klein also stresses the impact urban renewal projects had on ethnic communities, as “virtually no ethnic community was allowed to keep its original location: Chinatown, the Mexican Sonora, Little Italy.” Throughout the twentieth century, downtown Los Angeles underwent extreme ebbs and flows of population growth and decline, and fictional representations of downtown neighborhoods were not always flattering or realistic. References to downtown’s emptiness or irrelevance by critics such as Barthes in Empire of Signs (1966) and Reyner Banham<sup>17</sup> in the Architecture of Four Ecologies (1971) are quick to forget the bustling, multi-cultural atmosphere that existed until the early sixties, while in the 1940’s, “Chandler’s version of Bunker Hill is peopled with the hopeless and the criminal.” (Klein 51)

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<sup>17</sup> Banham begins the section titled “A Note on Downtown...” with “...because that is all downtown deserves.” (183)

Klein attributes the policies that resulted in the dismantling of Bunker Hill and surrounding downtown neighborhoods to a series of myths that reinforce the research and observations of Mike Davis and Carey McWilliams. The boosterism of the late-nineteenth century to encourage tourism and real estate speculation created massive influxes of migrants to a city that lacked the infrastructure to house and employ them. The promotional characteristics of the initial booster phenomenon in Los Angeles evolves into sequential myths that fit the changing needs of time periods:

...each myth becomes dated when it no longer fits the market. Then it mutates erratically into other schemes: the myth of climate (1880s to 1930s); the myth of the freeway metropolis (1936-49); the myths of downtown renewal (1936-49); the myth of the pacific Byzantium (1980s, with the impact of massive immigration, and the internationalization of urban and suburban space)... (29)

And on the flipside, "...there is *anti*-tourism, the collective "myths" of sleazy Los Angeles created by crime writers, screenwriters, filmmakers, mostly in reaction to the city that these consumerist policies deliver." (29)

Klein's purpose in uncovering each of these myths is to demonstrate their influence on policies that ultimately triggered the very problems they sought to mitigate: hence efforts to prevent urban blight paradoxically contributed to it—in the sense that they displaced communities and eliminated housing. Furthermore, the romanticization of downtown through fiction in Los Angeles also contributed to the erasure of communities: "The 'noir image' has glamorized, quite unintentionally, the need to destroy downtown neighborhoods." (55)

Klein's investigation uncovers additional layers of paradox in cultural studies of Los Angeles, as well as the interplay between imagination and reality: in the same manner that

landscape has a profound influence on identity in Los Angeles fiction, the inverse is also true; fictional space and identity have a profound influence on the landscape, and therefore the identity, of Los Angeles.

The overarching result of many of the myths Klein traces is that of decentralization: whether the business and inhabitants of a formerly dense downtown disperse to Hollywood, the San Fernando Valley, or west along Wilshire boulevard; the freeway monopolies split up neighborhoods and suburbanize the city; or a shift towards the privatization of landscape supplants the public park for the private backyard (84), the ambivalent messages transmitted by the city's promotional mechanism triggers currents of fragmentation and dispersal.

As Klein notes, there are two discrete sides to the myth: the booster propaganda that furthers the notion of an Anglo-Protestant Eden of opportunity, of Los Angeles as "the land of sunshine and oranges," and the apocalyptic noir export that contributes to the idea of a seedy, run-down, and hedonistic underbelly to the city: "...the grand booster campaign built two social imaginaries, not only the Protestant Jerusalem, but also the sinful tourist Babylon." (29) Klein also shows the codependence between these seemingly contradictory messages: failed ventures and attempts at wealth lead to shady business deals and influxes of swindlers and gamblers, while the recruitment of cheap labor from Mexico, Japan, and the Midwest to support booming industries contribute to a class and race intolerance and a distorted perception of place. (29)

Klein's analysis intimates a possible explanation for why crime fiction thrives in the land of sunshine and oranges, and is linked to the interplay between migration, hope, and disillusionment that I discussed in the previous chapter. The relationship between fiction, myth, and landscape is again subject to a fluid causality, particularly in how booster



propaganda (the illusion of prosperity) and the illusion of a criminal element (that a neglected, working class and ethnic neighborhood such as Bunker Hill would emit) interact to form a feedback mechanism that reflects the instability of sign and signifier, continually magnifying the fiction and minimizing the memory. Hence noir perennially blooms in the city that made it famous, while an infamous history is further obscured through the elusive workings of memory and representation. As Klein demonstrates in his multi-disciplinary study, it is only through an innovation of form that an absence can authentically be captured, yet omissions are inevitable in attempts to document or recollect a place that no longer exists, or that is in the process of fading or disappearing.

## **Part 5: Visual Emblems of Decentralized Time and Space**

### **Absence and The Exiles**

According to Klein, The Exiles, Kent Mackenzie's 1961 film, is one of the last visual documents of the Bunker Hill neighborhood.<sup>18</sup> Produced a few months before the neighborhood was demolished, the film follows a group of young Native Americans in and around Bunker Hill for one night. (248) Although Klein categorizes the film under the genre of documentary fiction—a label that would also extend to Klein's textual "docufable"<sup>19</sup>—he notes a key paradox in the film's attempt to capture a realistic portrait of a marginalized group of individuals who have left the reservation to pursue an alternate life for themselves. In order to represent the isolation of the young men and women who drive inebriated through downtown streets, drink and fight in bars, ghost dance in Chavez Ravine, gamble in ramshackle rooming houses, window shop along commercial strips, or wander and ascend the narrow alleys and staircases, the film omits details that are intrinsic to a comprehensive portrayal of the neighborhood's frailty and diversity:

To enhance the portrait of isolation, the film ignore the Mexicans and Chinese who were indeed on the same teeming downtown streets late into the night. It even ignores the demolition of Bunker Hill that could be seen a hundred yards from where the film was shot. That was very much the discipline of the film. It heightened the isolation of

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<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, <http://www.exilesfilm.com> also reports that Thom Andersen's citation of this film in Los Angeles Plays Itself "kicked off its rediscovery."

<sup>19</sup> According to the film's website, <http://www.exilesfilm.com>, the actors are Native Americans the director befriended, and eventually recruited, to play themselves in reenacted scenes from their lives. Mackenzie's technique resonates with Klein's "docufable," in which Klein reconstructs interviews with members of the Vietnamese community in Los Angeles into first-person, fictional accounts of their experiences.

Native Americans downtown by removing distractions. It left in shadow other cases of isolation down the street. (248-249)

Absence and omission are vital elements in the process of constructing a portrait of Bunker Hill, and are essential to transmitting a relatable and compelling subjectivity. The isolation of the characters is unspoken but tangible, and absence only suggests other potential spaces and portraits of marginalization. Klein investigates Mackenzie's film to demonstrate the ambivalent effect of the visual, whether it be a feature film that recontextualizes a historical scandal—such as Chinatown, a photograph of absence and demolition as signified by a pile of rubble or an empty lot, or Mackenzie's cinematic ethnography, and his ultimate point is that film inevitably omits key details that the spectator may complete in his or her imagination. Hence the medium itself becomes a metaphor for the very processes of memory and omission—whether subjective or collective—that Klein attempts to delineate and replicate.

The merging of cultural signifiers in The Exiles manifests as sites of paradoxical space in the film. Towards the end of the film, and the end of the nighttime ritual of bar hopping and cruising, the characters ascend the Chavez Ravine to an overlook. Amidst parked cars and in various states of inebriation, they begin to ghost dance. The ritual dance, fueled by the modern conveniences of cars and alcohol and a lingering connection to tradition, is simultaneously cleansing and toxic: when the sun rises the morning after, a tracking shot reveals a litter-strewn landscape. The imagery suggests a degradation of the sacred—as if the cultural ambivalence is contributing to a toxic ecology and lifestyle—while still providing a vital outlet for tradition and transcendence of the encroaching demolition, displacement, and marginalization in the valley below.

The Exiles frames the lives of a marginalized group through the backdrop of Bunker Hill: the vertical lines of urban architecture emphasize their detachment and separation amidst the urban space they inhabit. Characters do not blend into the now defunct downtown landscape: high-contrast black and white imagery magnifies the division between self and space. Furthermore, the contextual gaps between inner monologue and imagery serve to convey an ineffable sense of uncertainty. A woman ruminates about her unborn child while browsing brightly lit display windows along a block of storefronts; economic uncertainty is unspoken but hangs heavily in the atmosphere of the film. The tension between the visual and the aural impart an evocative message about Native American identity and isolation in Bunker Hill—on the eve of destruction. Mackenzie’s film is significant to Los Angeles studies because it is unprecedented; The Exiles is a portrait of a nearly extinct cultural identity situated in a demolished neighborhood—two subjects that are rarely explored in cinema except confined to strict generic codes that are derogatory and damning. In film noir, Bunker Hill is a site of crime and iniquity, while in the western, the Indian is a threat and a villain. What is even more chilling is that both culture and community were systematically eradicated by varying yet corresponding degrees of a mythologized west that is rooted in cultural expansion, propaganda, and racism.

### **Ancient L.A.**

In reexamining predominant theories of spatiality, Michael Jacob Rochlin proposes in Ancient L.A. that Los Angeles’s linear, decentralized layout is not merely a byproduct of the flurry of post World War II freeway construction:

Although associated with the new freeways, the linear organization is actually the older of the two. The placement of settlements and system of roads throughout the

county was based on the original network of indigenous villages and trails. To exploit labor, Missions and Pueblo were located in proximity to these villages. After villages had been depopulated, ranchos were located on these choice and desolate sites. Subsequently, small cities and boom towns were built on top of those. Trails connecting the villages and other significant sites became roads, then highways, then freeways. (19-20)

Whereas the concept of decentralization is primarily associated with postmodern and post-structuralist theories of space, Rochlin's suggestion—that decentralization in fact is rooted in native American settlements throughout the Los Angeles basin that are thousands of years old—dispels many misconceptions about Los Angeles' spatial and temporal orientation as being chaotic, random, or "lacking in history." Rochlin describes the settlement patterns of the Gabrielino Indians as more dispersed throughout the area than neighboring groups, with a tendency to settle in areas "near the intersection of two or more environmental zones (coastal, prairie, foothill)." (55) In order to sustain a varied food source, trade between settlements made travel and migration vital to survival, and the maps that Rochlin includes in his essay emphasize the similarities between these routes that span millennia and major freeways, streets, and boulevards that exist today. Juxtaposing maps of indigenous and Anglo-Spanish settlements and transportation corridors, Rochlin reveals how the contemporary layout of the city—that many view as a continually expanding sprawl that emanated from a small pueblo (14)—is in fact rooted in an indigenous relationship to and knowledge of the region's ecology and landscape.

In Architecture of Four Ecologies, Reyner Banham supplies similar diagrams to document the "transportation palimpsest," though his maps only consist of overlays as far

back as 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Mission settlements and 19<sup>th</sup> century railroads. Like Klein, who cites Banham's dismissal of downtown to demonstrate another example of its neglect, Rochlin also challenges Banham's "disregard for the center," as well as his "focus on huge subdivisions interconnected by lines of mass transit" as the prevailing model for understanding Los Angeles' spatial composition. In addition, Rochlin contextualizes Banham's study by emphasizing that it "was published immediately after the razing of Bunker Hill and prior to the investment of billions downtown." (87)

Indigenous settlements around the Los Angeles basin were originally spread out, but beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Anglo-Spanish domination of the region triggered a major shift that led to the development of an urban center:

Although Spanish, Mexican and American societies mimicked the existing indigenous settlement pattern, they also obviously made massive change. The most significant structural change was the initial demographic shift—the sucking of population from outlying regions in the form of forced labor and the centralization of population and power inland. This resulted in the dominant role of the Pueblo (downtown) that lasted until the middle of the twentieth-century. (72)

Anglo-Spanish influence transforms the dispersed settlements into an urban pattern that is more in keeping with European tradition, but it is ultimately in the name of "development," "progress" and "urban renewal" that the region reverts to a linear, decentralized layout—only now, the contemporary, high-density version of dispersed population settlements is out of synch with the ecology of the area.<sup>20</sup> Population charts show the dramatic growth of population density in the downtown area from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>20</sup> See Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear* for an in-depth explanation of how the region's scarce water supply and geological composition can hardly support the population of a megalopolis such as Greater Los Angeles.

until the mid twentieth century, but the combination of the razing of Bunker Hill—the predominant residential neighborhood downtown—and the construction of freeways in the mid-twentieth century contributes to a staggering urban sprawl and transforms the downtown “center” into a space that many critics refer to as empty and insignificant.

Rochlin’s study is unique in that time plays such an essential factor in understanding a city that he refers to as “a puzzle that has become not only difficult to grasp but difficult to comprehend as well.” (85) He stresses the multiple patterns and systems that have influenced the region’s exceptional, “explosive” development, from the indigenous relationship to ecology, to the Spanish shift to a centralized power center, to the American fervor for capitalism and technology that results in an amalgamation of every historical phase of layout and architecture. Close up, the complexity magnifies, but seen from a distance, a simpler pattern emerges:

...when we look at the duration of pattern settlement, whether over distant space or distant time, we find a less complex relationship. The organizations of grids and lines fade, and we see that our city, despite its technological prowess, cannot escape the power of nature...our city is part of a cycle. Inescapably, it will soon be ruins, buried, and we, just as were the peoples before us, forgotten. (86)

Although an inversion of Baudrillard’s futuristic, extraterrestrial perspective of flying into Los Angeles at night in America (51-52), Rochlin’s prehistoric vantage point—dependent on subterranean, archeological excavation, similarly provides sufficient temporal and spatial distance to absorb the expansive picture. Distinct from other literary and critical expressions of Los Angeles’ imminent destruction—from Davis, to West, to Didion, to Fine—that are supported by a relatively recent, Anglo-Spanish history of colonialism,

racism, migration, and disillusionment, Rochlin's evidence for an apocalyptic endpoint is reinforced by a broader time line and a more distant past, stable for a period of thousands of years, and then suddenly interrupted by the relatively recent decimation of America's indigenous civilization. Despite the array of vantage points, all of the above critics and writers would agree that the confluence of the region's ecological volatility and advanced technological development, along with exceptional, unprecedented patterns of migration and settlement, would be undeniable catalysts for any future cataclysm.

### **Text and Image**

Rochlin's essay includes a potent visual dimension that simultaneously advances and opposes his argument. Visual footnotes comprised of photographs from the Los Angeles Public Library are scattered throughout the book, and the overall effect contributes to a sense of loss and forgetting that resonates with Klein's interdisciplinary approach to memory and absence. Adjacent photos represent "before and after" shots of sites that have been abandoned, neglected, or developed, while diptychs and triptychs of congested, multilane freeways and close-up architectural details of razed buildings illustrate the sacrifice of the past—environment and history—for the sake of the future—progress. Akin to how Mackenzie correlates text and image in The Exiles to express uncertainty and isolation, the space between the visual and the textual in Rochlin's work evokes a sense of nostalgia and a profound distance between intention and execution: the reader feels a foreboding sense of spatial mismanagement and its inevitable repercussions. Depicting a transformation of space that further distances people from human and ecological interaction, the photographs suggest a fleetingness of place and a transitory aura that foreshadow environmental and social



collapse. In Rochlin's book, images of ruins or absence beget further cases of abandonment and extinction.

In Los Angeles Plays Itself, the visual representation of place over time also veers towards the degeneration of space and society. Andersen uses an assortment of film clips to trace the transformation of Bunker Hill and downtown Los Angeles from the 1940's to the present:

Bunker Hill was the most photographed district in Los Angeles, so the movies unwittingly documented its destruction and depopulation. In the late forties, it could represent a solid working-class neighborhood, a place where a guy could take his girl home to meet his mother...it was film noir territory, but it was a refuge from the meaner streets of the city... By the mid-fifties, it had become a neighborhood of rooming houses where a man who knows too much might hole up or hide out.

Hollywood had come to accept Raymond Chandler's vision of Bunker Hill...

The voice-over above corresponds to a series of film images from the 1940's and 1950's depicting quotidian exchanges and interactions: an Italian family greeting each other in a large Victorian home in 1949's Shockproof; a newspaper vendor advertising above the defunct funicular Angel's Flight in 1947's The Unfaithful; and private investigator Mike Hammer exchanging hardboiled dialogue with a rooming house landlady in 1955's Kiss Me Deadly.

Andersen then segues to The Exiles, hailing it as the best depiction of Bunker Hill before its destruction, and also commending Mackenzie for pioneering a neorealist movement in Los Angeles cinema. An independent feature made outside of the Hollywood studio system, the movie employs amateur actors to recreate a night in the lives of an

invisible immigrant working class.<sup>21</sup> “It reveals the city as a place where reality is opaque, where different social orders coexist in the same space without touching each other. Better than any other movie, it proves that there once was a city here, before they tore it down and built a simulacrum.”

The “simulacrum” that Andersen is referring to is the cluster of postmodern skyscrapers, such as the Bonaventura Hotel, that the city eventually constructs at the former site of Bunker Hill, but it also designates the jarring dichotomy between the bustling downtown crowded with street life depicted in The Exiles, and the empty, abandoned one that follows in the ten years it takes to completely raze Bunker Hill. The next examples Andersen give are the 1971 urban survivalist film The Omega Man, in which downtown now functions as an empty backdrop to a post-apocalyptic landscape, and the 1984 film Night of the Comet, in which a resonant plot involving the sole survivors of a disaster precipitated by comet-dust similarly depicts downtown Los Angeles as the epicenter of cataclysm, although now skyscrapers populate the skyline of the “simulated” city.

Andersen discovers other tendencies in cinema’s representation of downtown Los Angeles. Early in the documentary, he situates the medium of film as intrinsically “vertical,” while the city of Los Angeles as inherently “horizontal:” “Movies are vertical. At least when they’re projected on a screen. The city is horizontal, except for what we call downtown. Maybe that’s why the movies love downtown more than we do. If it isn’t the site of the

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<sup>21</sup> According to Andersen, The Exiles is the precursor to the Neorealistic tendencies of the following films and filmmakers: Haile Gerima’s Bush Mama, Charles Burnett’s Killer of Sheep, and Billy Woodberry’s Bless Their Little Hearts. In fact, Andersen’s allegiance to neorealism is enforced by his ending the film with a clip from Woodberry’s film: “Billy Woodberry’s Bless Their Little Hearts takes a drive by a reverse landmark, one of the closed industrial plants that had once provided jobs for the black working class of Los Angeles.” With a potent dose of irony and self-referentiality, the film’s final sentence begins with the standard fairy-tale introduction: “Once upon a time, visitors could take a guided tour and see how tires were made just as today they can take a studio tour and see how movies are made.”

action, they try to stick its high-rise towers in the back of the shot.” His argument, that the downtown skyline is gratuitously inserted as a backdrop regardless of geographic accuracy, is another example of Hollywood’s blatant disregard for Los Angeles and its failure to provide an accurate portrayal of the place. A downtown skyline, though iconic in other cities, is not representative of Los Angeles; in fact, according to Andersen, Davis, Rochlin, and Klein, it is an emblem of dystopian development at the expense of a once thriving immigrant, working class community, and all four provide visual evidence to document its transformation from a populated neighborhood of tenements and Victorians to a depopulated zone comprised of corporate towers and post-modern skyscrapers. Rochlin describes the former site of Bunker Hill:

Now the buildings...rise as high as their vacancy rates, each shouting for attention. “I’m an elegant dark tower,” and “I’m a triangular pure form,” and “I’m a post-modern masterpiece,” and “I’m neo-classic,” and “I’m deconstructivist.” There are benches, but they are on private property. There are grand glass lobbies but entrance is selective. Public art and semi-private space are put out on display like consolation prizes at the county fair. (144-145)

The four pages that follow the above passage contain exterior photographs of the downtown financial districts; the corporate “parks” comprised of concrete geometric shapes, manicured landscaping, and benches are devoid of people. Reversing the historic progression of downtown development, another photographic series appears, this time depicting the eclectic residential architecture that previously existed in the same area. Images of large Victorians and Craftsmen homes denote the people who once resided in them before they were torn down. Rochlin’s tongue-in-cheek first-person depiction of the skyscrapers is an

ironic anthropomorphization of the towers—a bittersweet attempt to compensate for the lack of human presence at the former site of Bunker Hill.

Seen at a distance as a backdrop in the movies, the lit-up, downtown skyline (constructed in the skyscraper boom of the 1970's and 1980's) evokes an architected, futuristic vision at a safe distance, but viewed close up in the documentary photographs in Davis' City of Quartz and Rochlin's Ancient L.A., the skyline denotes a dissolution of public space, an absence of history, a proliferation of surveillance equipment, and the further marginalization of the immigrant and homeless communities that dwell nearby. A photograph with a caption reading "Fortress L.A., Bunker Hill" in City of Quartz depicts a surveillance camera attached to a wall, with two skyscrapers looming in the background. The tilted angle of the composition bequeaths the camera with a menacing, animistic authority. In this chapter, also titled "Fortress L.A.," Davis explains that developers decided to locate the downtown financial district above Bunker Hill instead of Broadway—where art deco buildings and theaters already exist, because it was farther away from public transportation and neighboring Black and Mexican communities. (Davis 230) Rather than "integrate the new with the old," developers sought to exclude and fortify. Davis writes: "photographs of the old Downtown in its prime show mixed crowds of Anglo, Black and Latino pedestrians of different ages and classes. The contemporary Downtown "renaissance" is designed to make such heterogeneity virtually impossible." (231)

Photographic and cinematic evidence is essential to establishing the transformation of downtown, yet as Klein demonstrates in The History of Forgetting, their fictional elements are intrinsic to magnifying the myths that led to its demise. The incorporation of documentary modes to depict downtown's transformation further blurs the line between

representation and reality, to the extent that critiques of such practices border on self-referential. Rochlin, Andersen, Davis, and Klein all incorporate photography and rhetoric to critique and convey a collective sense of loss, while Mackenzie's fictional ethnography relies on a similar tension between text and image to emphasize a subjectivity that struggles to reconcile self with place.

The appropriation of emblematic sites, such as the downtown skyline, in fictional cinema recontextualizes space in a manner that obscures a coherent experience of place and memory. The looming sense that meaning, history, and evidence exist outside the frame further complicates attempts to situate the past in a coherent narrative. Finally, in keeping with Andersen's assertion in the beginning of his documentary, that like fictional films, documentaries depend on fictional, dramatic qualities, it is time to delve more deeply into fictional narratives "for their documentary revelations."

## **Part 6: Fictional Rumbblings and Trembling Landscapes**

### **Ask The Dust's Bunker Hill**

John Fante's 1939 Ask The Dust is one of the most detailed literary representations of depression-era Bunker Hill—while it was still a bustling, densely populated neighborhood. Fante's obsessive, mercurial, and ambitious protagonist, Arturo Bandini, rents a room in a hotel in Bunker Hill, trying to make a living as a writer. Sporadic and meager checks from his mother, living in Arturo's hometown of Boulder, Colorado, and his literary agent, Mr. Hackmuth, barely keep him solvent, and for the first half of the novel, he subsists on "miserable oranges" and grayish cups of coffee that taste like "boiled rags." Fante's Bunker Hill is a multi-ethnic, working class melting pot comprised of Mexicans, Midwesterners, drunks, prostitutes, grocers, retirees, and landladies. Physical descriptions of the neighborhood and the environment, oscillating between extremes of hope and decrepitude, ultimately reflect Arturo's state of mind, which is vulnerable to the continuous ebbs and flows of desire and opportunity. He lusts after Camilla, a woman with whom he has a tempestuous, relationship, and aspires to fame and fortune as a great writer.

Many of the descriptions in Ask the Dust are aligned with the image of Bunker Hill as a run-down, filthy, crime-ridden neighborhood, perhaps contributing to the negative reputation that justified the area's demolition. Yet Fante's depiction of Bunker Hill also reflects an urban density and atmosphere on par with other major U.S. cities during the same time period. Furthermore, Fante's Bunker Hill, comprised of working class migrants living in close quarters, within walking distance to housing, commerce, leisure, and mass transit,

also reflects an ideal of twentieth century urban planning models.<sup>22</sup> In Imagining Los Angeles, David Fine describes Fante's portrayal of Bunker Hill:

For Fante, newly arrived in the early thirties, the neighborhood was not an index of the city's physical or moral decay but the site of both a vital community and frustrated dreams of a migrant population that crowded into the city in the twenties and thirties...His Bunker Hill, as he offers it in Ask the Dust, is a region of both hope and despair, the California promise and its betrayal. (186)

As Fine emphasizes in his chapter on Bunker Hill, Ask the Dust's spatial orientation concerns the inner city and not the "dreamscape of Hollywood," or the "fantasy architecture" that serves as a "principal metaphor for the pervasive role-playing and masquerading of the city's inhabitants," (188) particularly in West's The Day of the Locust. Still, the built environment features prominently in Fante's novel. Beyond the elevated orientation of Bunker Hill, Arturo's continuous ascents and descents up and down the hill correspond to dramatic extremes that pervade the narrative: his wavering catholic faith—oscillating back and forth between guilt and transgression, the vicissitudes of his material and professional situation, and the architectural idiosyncrasies of the neighborhood, or in Fine's words, "the odd, improvisational character of the built landscape." Fante writes: "The hotel was called the Alta Loma. It was built on a hillside in reverse, there on the crest of Bunker Hill, built against the decline of the hill, so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels." (15)

"Up and down" in Bunker Hill denotes an additional layer of paradox in regards to the built environment in downtown Los Angeles, as well as Arturo's characterization. The

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Jane Jacob's The Death and Life of Great American Cities, published in 1961, argues against policies that led to "urban renewal" and the modernization of inner city neighborhoods.

inverse vertical layout of Arturo's rooming house parallels his own tendency to say the opposite of what he means, particularly in his interactions with Camilla, and to act against his best interests, especially in his reckless spending habits and the sexual encounters that leave him existentially tormented. Arturo absorbs the contradictions of his environment, which in turn magnify his own extreme vicissitudes and emotions.

Early in the novel, while he is verging on destitution and desperately awaiting a letter and check from Mr. Hackmuth, Arturo walks "down the hill on Olive Street, past the horrible frame houses reeking with murder stories." (12) A few chapters later, Arturo climbs "the dusty stairs of Bunker Hill, past the soot-covered frame buildings along that dark street, sand and oil and grease choking the futile palm trees standing like dying prisoners, chained to a little plot of ground with black pavement hiding their feet." (45) The polluted environment stifles the architectural and the natural, particularly the palm tree; the novel contains many references to the iconic tree in various states of asphyxiation and subordination as a result of the poor air quality. When Arturo moves into his hotel room, the palm tree outside his window triggers associations that are historical and religious, transcending his present surroundings:

Through that window I saw my first palm tree, not six feet away, and sure enough I thought of Palm Sunday and Egypt and Cleopatra, but the palm was blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street Tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts. (16)

Despite Arturo's expansive range of references, the potent emblem of Los Angeles' dream landscape is contaminated by human and environmental byproducts, thus bringing him



back down to earth; the sand from the nearby desert and the carbon emissions from industry and transportation sully the purity of his associations. Regardless of the soot, heat, and pollution, Arturo aspires to an ideal of Los Angeles that is both beyond his reach and ignited by his imagination. Following one of his many daydreams in which he envisions himself a famous, well-heeled author, smoker of expensive pipes, admired by ladies wearing “silver fox fur,” he yearns for access and influence: “Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town.” (13) Here, Arturo’s “sad and pretty” Los Angeles is laden with ambivalence, beauty, and disappointment.

### **The Land of Sunshine and Oranges, a Reprise**

During a particularly impoverished period, Arturo juxtaposes the flawless weather with the bounty of the only food he can afford, oranges: “The lean days, blue skies with never a cloud, a sea of blue day after day, the sun floating through it. The days of plenty— plenty of worries, plenty of oranges. Eat them in bed, eat them for lunch, push them down for dinner. Oranges, five cents a dozen. Sunshine in the sky, sun juice in my stomach.” (27) Hence plenitude ultimately leads to deprivation. In the next paragraph, the excess of fruit, the only food he can afford, begins to sicken him: “My teeth tore them to the pulp, the juices skewering down there in my stomach. There was so much weeping, and little gloomy clouds of gas pinched my heart.” (27) The imagery darkens, and “clouds, gloom, and gas” replace the bright sun and clarity of the preceding paragraph. Arturo’s only recourse is to write himself out of poverty: “My plight drove me to the typewriter.” (27)

Resonant with the “desperate types” in Nathanael West’s The Day of the Locust, who are disillusioned after the appeal of sunshine, oranges, and movie theaters fades, Fante’s

characters suffer from a similar vacillation between banality—in which a sought after object becomes commonplace or repulsive, and seductive exceptionalism—in which Los Angeles’ alluring climate and cultural economy deviate from tradition. Many of West’s “desperate types” are cast into the role of spectator, further dividing the haves from the have-nots, while the vicissitudes of Arturo’s career and finances, as well as his compulsive behavior, impose abrupt shifts in his situation. Within a matter of days, Arturo can blow an entire advance from his agent on suits, booze, and women, then retreat to a catholic church for confession and to his local Japanese grocer for more oranges. Yet Arturo then narrates his experiences and all the accompanying moral dilemmas in an impassioned letter to his agent, who in turn offers to publish the letter and pays him an advance, thus repeating the cycle.

Akin to West’s Tod, who transcends his disdain for Hollywood and his unrequited passion for Faye by painting—and imagining himself painting—his “Burning of Los Angeles” canvas, Arturo also finds solace and escape through his art and his imaginings of his own success: he eventually lands a book deal, using his experiences with Vera Rivken and Camilla Lopez, two relationships that are fraught with conflict and pathos, as vital source material. Yet in terms of spectatorship, West’s characters—including the mobs who show up for movie premieres and Tod, whose cynical perspective on Hollywood characters and milieus saturates the narrative—embody a typical spectator/spectacle role that is ultimately exteriorized and guided by the novel’s immersion in the movie industry. Arturo, struggling to succeed as an author, approaches a form of spectatorship that is interior and influenced by his literary strivings. His observations of the climate and weather are almost always filtered through his moods and his relationships with Camilla and Vera; his fantasies of himself as a “great writer,” in which he envisions himself the object of swooning women, replete with

details of fur coats and fancy pipes, are vivid, emotionally charged interior monologues, occurring only in his mind.

David Fine analyzes a passage from Ask the Dust that bears a striking resemblance to Tod's observation of the disillusioned "who have come to Los Angeles to die," yet Fine notes a marked difference between the two approaches: "...while West's voice is detached and derisive, Fante's reveals a genuine sympathy for the inhabitants of the city, tinged more with sorrow than irony; he is one of them." (187) Fante writes:

The old folk from Indiana and Iowa and Illinois...they came here by train and by automobile to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun, with just enough money to live until the sun killed them, tore themselves out by the roots in their last days...And when they got here they found that other and greater thieves had already taken possession, that even the sun belonged to others; Smith and Jones and Parker...doomed to die in the sun, a few dollars in the bank...enough to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little papier-mâché homes were castles. The uprooted ones, the empty sad folks, the old and the young folks, the folks from back home. These were my countrymen, these were the new Californians. With their bright polo shirts and sunglasses, they were in paradise, they belonged. (45)

In the Day of the Locust, Tod observes the "savage and bitter, made so by boredom and disappointment," who arrived in California, but once there, "discover that the sunshine isn't enough." (177) He continues: "The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates...They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing." (176)

In The History of Forgetting, Norman Klein also compares variations of the two above passages side by side, stating that the citations “are among the most famous literary descriptions of the downtown myth,” (54) serving as the template for crime films of the forties and fifties, in which “the image of failing to make a go in Hollywood... became synonymous with the Depression fantasies of urban blight...” (54) He goes on to suggest that they are the progenitors of a structural paradigm of “the downtown fable,” in which the new migrants advertise false messages about opportunity and prospects, luring more hopefuls who add “local color” to the surroundings, but are ultimately “transient souls without redemption.” It is in this context that Klein concludes that “the ‘noir image’ has glamorized, quite unintentionally, the need to destroy downtown communities,” (55) in effect displacing the very immigrant and working class neighborhoods that Fante and others portray.

Like West, Fante observes the transplants who have come to California to die, who seek sunshine but experience disillusionment, who dress conspicuously and live in houses made of “plaster, lath and paper.” (West 61). West’s “masqueraders” experience reality through the omnipresence of cinema: their clothing is costume and their architecture is fantastic, more closely resembling a set than a domicile. Fante’s “Smith and Jones and Parker” conform to the values they brought with them from back east; Arturo is able to sympathize with them, and even identify with them, but they represent a privileged, protestant entitlement that his Italian-American background excludes him from.

In the next paragraph, Arturo adopts a sardonic tone, pantomiming the absurdity of the booster mentality that not only lures the migrants to Los Angeles, but keeps them there. Those who are less fortunate need only to get themselves “a polo shirt, a pair of sunglasses, and white shoes,” and “after big doses of the *Times* and the *Examiner*”—two papers

notorious for their booster propaganda, he tells them, “you too will whoop it up for the sunny south.” Arturo continues in stark detail:

You’ll eat hamburgers year after year and live in dusty, vermin-infested apartments and hotels, but every morning you’ll see the mighty sun, the eternal blue of the sky, and the streets will be full of sleek women you never will possess, and the hot semitropical nights will reek of romance you’ll never have, but you’ll still be in paradise, boys, in the land of sunshine. (46)

Arturo’s monologue occurs after a disheartening and distressing interaction with Camilla—his pursuit of her is proving to be futile and painful. His perception of the dynamics of disillusionment in Los Angeles is obviously skewed by his own inability to find romantic fulfillment without emotional trauma, as well as the cultural gaps that separate him from her, and everyone around him for that matter. Yet Arturo is ultimately an ambivalent figure amidst his milieu, subject to rapid mood swings in his estimation of his environment and himself. An encapsulation of the Los Angeles myth and its counterpart, the imagery in the above passage, of “the mighty sun,” “the eternal blue of the sky,” “the hot semitropical nights,”—the light and the air—only generate more unrealized longings and desires in “the land of sunshine.”

### **Ethnic Identities**

Fante’s Bunker Hill, though diverse and multifaceted, is far from idyllic, and as an Italian-American, Arturo himself is victim to and agent of the racism that exists in the working-class neighborhood. In order to prove to his landlady, Mrs. Hargraves, that he is neither Mexican nor Jewish—two ethnicities she refuses to rent to, he must concede that his hometown of Boulder, Colorado is in fact located in Nebraska, (49) suggesting the absurdity

and ignorance behind her policies. Although Arturo falls head over heels for Camilla, a Mexican-American, many of their heated exchanges are comprised of racial slurs and insults, despite acknowledging his own victimization as an Italian American as the source of his own racism. Shortly before the passage mentioned above, he ends a disastrous visit to the restaurant Camilla works at by cruelly and graphically insulting her heritage: “Those huaraches—do you have to wear them Camilla? Do you have to emphasize the fact that you always were and always will be a filthy little Greaser?” (44)

Lying on his hotel bed after the episode, Arturo experiences a moment of self-awareness and remorse regarding his scathing words: “Ah Camilla! When I was a kid back home in Colorado it was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me Wop and Dago and Greaser, and their children hurt me, just as I hurt you tonight.” (46) As his soliloquy continues, he begins to transpose the faces of his aggressors on to the uprooted transplants—as a reflection of his agitated state, “Smith and Parker and Jones” become “Smith and Jones and Parker”—with sufficient means to support themselves, retire, and pay for “polo shirts and sunglasses.” Here, he casts himself as an outsider when he outlines the roles of the haves and have-nots. Despite his participation in their culture, the roots of racism run deep, but he sees himself as “young and full of hope,” while they are “dying in the sun and in the hot dust of the road.” He concludes his impassioned monologue: “...and when I say Greaser to you it is not my heart that speaks, but the quivering of an old wound, and I am ashamed of the terrible things I have done.” (47)

For Arturo, identity, desire, and self-expression are inextricably linked, and reflect his own precariousness within the melting pot of Bunker Hill. His inconsistent attitude about racism, particularly his propensity for acting out his inner struggle with it, emphasizes the

complex ethnic dynamics of the neighborhood. The two women he has sexual relations with in the novel are in fact Jewish and Mexican—the two ethnicities his landlady explicitly bans from his hotel. Arturo’s transgression in allowing both women into his hotel room indicates his identification as an outsider as well as his desire to transcend the established social norms, even though his own racism is rooted in insecurity about his identity and social standing. His volatile exchanges with Camilla are projections of his own ethnic ambivalence, and despite the many racist slurs, he frequently waxes poetic about her propinquity with the Californian landscape, referring to her as a “Mayan princess” of the land, “belonging to the rolling hills, the wide deserts, the high mountains.” (142)

### **Landscape and Desire**

As their relationship evolves, Arturo begins to connect Camilla to an idyllic, natural world that is unattainable, overpowering and sublime. She ascends to a metaphorical dimension in Arturo’s mind, becoming a personification of a romantic idealism in which nature and lust are indistinguishable. Camilla is another manifestation of an elemental, regional beauty that is alluring and enticing, but off-limits to him; behind the insults, he sees himself as unworthy: “She made me a stranger unto myself, she was all of those stars, that land and sky, that fog outside, and I had come there with no purpose save to be a mere writer, to get money, to make a name for myself and all that was a piffle.” (123) Arturo, who alternates between declarations of fervent admiration and disparaging criticism for Los Angeles, treats Camilla with the same ambivalence. In transposing cultural, environmental, and architectural paradoxes onto the characterization of Arturo Bandini, Fante deepens the interplay between landscape, desire, and disillusionment in Los Angeles fiction.

Throughout the novel, Fante links landscape to the sexual and the existential. By the end of the novel, Arturo has earned enough money to buy a car and drives around the city and up and down the coast of southern California. Reflecting on his newfound freedom, he refers to his own ignorance and isolation in the midst of his surroundings:

I prowled the city with my Ford: I found mysterious alleys, lonely trees, rotting old houses out of a vanished past... This was the life for a man, to wander and stop and then go on, ever following the white line along the rambling coast, a time to relax at the wheel, light another cigaret, and grope stupidly for the meanings in that perplexing desert sky. (152)

In the next paragraph, Arturo reminisces about his first intimate encounter with Camilla on the beach in Santa Monica. Returning to the site, he stares out into the sea: “I stopped and watched the foamy breakers and the mysterious mist. I remember the girl running through the foaming thunder, reveling in the wild freedom of that night.” (152) The adjacent paragraphs, juxtaposing the desert and the ocean, both emphasize his bewilderment before the “perplexing desert sky,” the “mysterious alleys and mist,” and the “vanished past.” Memory attempts to fill in the gap of an absence, in this case, that of Camilla’s, who has recently been institutionalized for having a mental breakdown.

Soon after, Arturo begins to receive telegrams requesting money from a “Rita Gomez,” who is obviously Camilla, on the run after escaping from her hospital. When she finally returns to Los Angeles, Arturo attempts to set up a stable life with her at Laguna Beach, buying her a dog, renting a house, but soon after, she disappears to the desert to be with Sammy. He is the man she truly loves, but as evidence of her own self-destruction, he is cruel and abusive towards her. Arturo receives a telegram from Sammy, urging him to take



Camilla away: *“That Mexican girl is here, and you know how I feel about having women around. If she’s your girl you better come and get her because I won’t have her hanging around here.”* (162)

By the time Arturo reaches the desert, she is gone, having disappeared over a ridge. Arturo sets off to search for her “across the desolation,” but it is a futile endeavor:

It was no use. How could I search for her? Why should I search for her? What could I bring her but a return to the brutal wilderness that had broken her? I walked back in the dawn, sadly in the dawn. The hills had her now. Let these hills hide her! Let her go back to the loneliness of the intimate hills. Let her live with stones and sky, with the wind blowing her hair to the end...(164)

For Arturo the situation is hopeless: Camilla is both defeated by the urban environment and absorbed by the desert wasteland. Yet he is finally able to let go of her in her “element,” ceremonially extricating himself with the ritualistic offering of his signed manuscript. In the novel’s final paragraph, he dedicates his recently published book to her, then tosses it into the desert, “out in the direction she had gone.” (165) With this gesture, Arturo reconciles the discord between literature and experience, and landscape and desire; the book he bequeaths to the desert is the story of Vera Rivken, the sad, enigmatic, disfigured woman he has a fling with in the middle of the novel. Soon after a sexual encounter with Vera in Long Beach, Arturo catches a glimpse of apocalypse: the 1933 earthquake strikes, and he interprets it as an act of god, a punishment for his sexual transgressions.

### **The Earthquake**

In Arturo’s encounter with Vera, the collision between desire and the elements reaches a crescendo. Distracted by his lust for Camilla, Vera and Arturo engage in role-

playing to transcend the fact that he is not attracted to her. Vera invites Arturo to pretend that she is Camilla, and he complies:

All of this land and this sea belongs to you. All of California. There is no California, no Los Angeles, no dusty streets, no cheap hotels, no stinking newspapers, no broken, uprooted people from the East, no fancy boulevards. This is your beautiful land with the desert and the mountains and the sea. You're a princess, and you reign over it all.

(94)

With Vera, Arturo is able to express himself openly, revealing another facet of his idealization of Camilla, who represents a form of escape from his immediate surroundings. Again, Arturo connects Camilla to the natural world, thereby painting a stark contrast to the material reality of his Bunker Hill neighborhood. As Vera mirrors his exclamations and plays the part of Camilla, they consummate their passions, even if they are rooted in fiction and dissemblance.

Afterwards, while Arturo is wandering the Long Beach boardwalk alone, the earthquake strikes:

I looked beyond the Long Beach skyline; the tall buildings were swaying...It was an earthquake...Now there were screams. Then dust. Then crumbling and roaring. I turned round and round in a circle. I had done this I had done this. I stood with my mouth open, paralyzed, looking about me...You did it Arturo. This is the wrath of God. You did it...The rumbling continued. Like a carpet over oil, the sea and the land heaved. Dust rose. Somewhere I heard a booming of debris. I heard screams, and then a siren. People running out of doors. Great clouds of dust...You did it, Arturo. Up in that room on that bed you did it. (98)

The scene of the earthquake, although a potential addendum to Mike Davis' index of Los Angeles' literary destruction in Ecology of Fear, is actually based on the historical event. Even though Arturo interprets the earthquake as a punishment for his sexual transgressions, he still acknowledges Los Angeles' apocalyptic inevitability, fearful of the threat that surrounds him after he returns to Los Angeles: "I walked up Bunker Hill to my hotel. I considered every building. The frame buildings could stand a quake...But look out for the brick places...Los Angeles was doomed. It was a city with a curse upon it. This particular earthquake had not destroyed it, but any day now another would raze it to the ground." (102)

Even though Arturo is overcome with fatalistic images of doom and destruction—a pervasive theme in Los Angeles fiction—his feelings are short-lived and rooted in catholic guilt. Fine argues in Imagining Los Angeles that Fante's vision of Los Angeles differs from that of his contemporaries, who view the city in a much darker light:

The city he [Fante] offered in his 1930s work is less the graveyard of California dreams...than a place alive with hope and possibility, desire and allure. His unglamorous, un-Hollywood central city neighborhood is a diverse, multi-ethnic enclave represented without sentimentality, derision, or a sense of impending doom. The young Bandini may envision the earthquake as apocalypse, but Fante makes it clear that the envisioning is that of an impressionistic, guilt-haunted Bandini, not the author's own apocalyptic haunting. (189)

As Fine also implies, Fante's separation from the Hollywood milieu further distances him from the grimmer musings of the industry, as well as the depths of illusion, disillusionment, and despair evident in portrayals such as West's Day of the Locust. Nevertheless, Ask the Dust is fully cognizant of dynamics of seduction and disappointment.

Arturo, vacillating between extremes of fear, desire, awe, and contempt, is an apposite messenger of a time and place that is similarly mired in contradiction.

Akin to the absence that occurs outside the frame of a film such as The Exiles, Fante's novel provides a highly subjective account of Bunker Hill, and contributes to the broader project of recollecting, or piecing together, place through documentary, artifact, and fiction. The result, subject to the unstable attributes of subjectivity and memory, is as malleable as its legacy, from vibrant street life, to vacant lot, to skyscraper garden. Arturo's prognostication, that Los Angeles would be "razed to the ground," isn't entirely accurate—yet, but is prophetic within the perimeter of his neighborhood.

## Chapter Three: Movement and Temporality

*The days passed, the winter rains began. Late October, and the proofs of my book arrived. I bought a car, a 1929 Ford. It had no top, but it sped like the wind, and with the coming dry days I took long rides along the blue coastline, up to Ventura, up to Santa Barbara, down to San Clemente, down to San Diego, following the white line of the pavement, under the staring stars, my feet on the dashboard, my head full of plans for another book, one night and then another, all of them together spelling the dream days I had never known, serene days I feared to question... (John Fante, Ask the Dust, 152)*

### Part 7: The Freeway Flâneur: Play It As It Lays and Tropic of Orange

#### Autodynamics

A number of fictional and non-fictional works about Los Angeles share an ambivalent relationship to Los Angeles' massive expanse of space and the paradoxical feelings of isolation and freedom that follow. The traveling subject has the ability to engage and disengage at will, and spends an excessive amount of time in the indeterminate space between a departure and a destination, as if—to use Walter Benjamin's description of the flâneur—"on the threshold of the city." The image of the flâneur represents a profound ambivalence of place, and to encase the roaming subject in an automobile further complicates the relationship between identity and environment. Aimless highway expeditions—for the pursuit of leisure or as a means of self-dissolution—are emblematic in Los Angeles narratives, and this section treats the driving subject as a postmodern freeway flâneur. Theodor Adorno's collection of essays and aphorisms in Minima Moralia and his study of the Los Angeles Times astrology column in The Stars Down to Earth coalesce with Benjamin's

concept to create an *autodynamics*, or the interaction between self and freeway in the Los Angeles narrative.

### **Beginning with Benjamin**

The poetics of cities are laden with ambiguities. When Benjamin traces the presence of Paris in the poetry of Baudelaire, he associates place, specifically the Parisian arcades, with ambiguity:

Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a *dream image*. Such an image is presented by the commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one. (Reflections, 157)

Benjamin's concept of "the dream image" is an encapsulation of oppositions. Describing the arcades as both "house and stars" indicates the complexity and ambivalence of the Parisian structures. They are both internal and external, familiar and distant, accessible and unattainable. Structurally, they provide access to and shelter from the elements, and metaphorically, they stimulate a concurrent thirst and satiety for material objects.

In combining the promise of progress with the fulfillment of desire, the modern city projects utopian aspirations onto its dweller, yet the attainment of sexual, material, or even political gratification is transitory and misleading. Ambiguity does not only stem from the dual nature of the commodity, which the arcades and the prostitute both epitomize, but also from a simultaneous engagement in and estrangement from the urban environment. The modern, poetic observer of urban life, the exiled critic who interprets culture from the

perspective of an outsider, and the literary subject who uses the automobile as a vehicle for liberation and escape all occupy a similarly ambivalent space.

### **Adorno Down to Earth**

Adorno composed Minima Moralia and The Stars Down to Earth in Los Angeles: Minima Moralia during his exile from Nazi Germany in the 1940s and The Stars Down to Earth on a return trip in the 1950s. Both works highlight crucial resonances between the phenomenon of alternative spiritual practices in Los Angeles and the dynamics of desire and disillusionment through consumerism, the movies, and belief in irrational systems.

Adorno finds menacing connections between the Hollywood movie industry—heavily dependent on the "star" system—and astrology: such ostensibly harmless diversions, or “lesser panaceas,” undermine rational thought and self-knowledge. He compares occultism to Fascism in “Theses Against Occultism,” (published in The Stars Down to Earth):

The power of occultism, as of Fascism... lies in the fact that in the lesser panaceas, as in superimposed pictures, consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge diligently denied to it by official progress in all its forms. It is the knowledge that society, by virtually excluding the possibility of spontaneous change, is gravitating towards total catastrophe. (130)

He continues, uncovering the mechanism behind the power of occultism and identification with alien, remote systems such as astrology:

The real absurdity is reproduced in the astrological hocus-pocus, which adduces the impenetrable connections of alienated elements – nothing more alien than the stars – as knowledge about the subject. The menace deciphered in the constellations resembles the historical threat that propagates itself precisely through

unconsciousness, absence of subjects. That all are prospective victims of a whole made up solely of themselves, they can make bearable by transferring that whole to something similar but external. (130)

For Adorno, the zodiac is an external, manufactured indeterminacy that echoes the interior mystification of the unconscious, yet it does not prefigure destiny; like the “superimposed pictures,” of the movies, it masks the knowledge that society is veering towards “total catastrophe.” Obsessive fascination with the stars of screen and sky induces a distorted perception of reality; fear of the unknown, the dread of isolation, and a desire for the unattainable inspire a false sense of communion with irrational and remote systems, including astrology and the movies. Akin to cinema, astrology distorts and dissolves the division between fact and fiction through a hyperrealistic projection and appropriation of reality.

In The Stars Down to Earth, Adorno draws a direct parallel between astrology and the Hollywood cultural industry:

...the term “dream factory” applied to the movies also applies to astrology. It is precisely this predigested character of astrology which produces its appearance of being normal and socially accepted and tends to obliterate the borderline between the rational and the irrational that is generally so marked with regard to dream and waking. Much like cultural industry, astrology tends to do away with the distinction between fact and fiction: its content is often overrealistic while suggesting attitudes which are based on an entirely irrational source... (49-50)

Adorno delineates the exploitation of the rational by the irrational to suggest the potential danger of ostensibly innocuous divination cloaked as sound advice. The irrational



becomes more seductive and persuasive as it refers to the familiar and everyday to manipulate its audience. Hollywood and astrological "dream images" and "stars" represent unattainable commodities that wield a remarkable power over the masses, and contribute to a sinister alienation of self for the susceptible believer. Adorno's ideas shed light on the mechanics behind a phenomenon that is quintessentially Los Angeles: merging the manipulative workings of occult practices, the allure of the Hollywood star system, and the belief that society is heading towards collapse. Los Angeles embodies the epicenter of all three: where else would one go seeking fame and fortune, a new age awakening, or the fulfillment of a doomsday fantasy?

### **Towards a Destination**

Referring to an additional iconic attribute of Los Angeles, Adorno uncovers a striking dissonance between road and landscape in the United States in Minima Moralia:

The shortcoming of the American landscape is not so much, as romantic illusion would have it, the absence of historical memories, as that it bears no traces of the human hand. This applies not only to the lack of arable land...but above all to the roads. These are always inserted directly in the landscape, and the more impressively smooth and broad they are, the more unrelated and violent their gleaming track appears against its wild, overgrown surroundings. They are expressionless...It is as if no-one had ever passed their hand over the landscape's hair. It is uncomfortable and comfortless. And it is perceived in a corresponding way. For what the hurrying eye has seen merely from the car it cannot retain, and the vanishing landscape leaves no more traces upon it than it bears upon itself. (48)

American highways sacrifice harmonization with the terrain for efficiency; they do not conform to the contours of the surrounding topography. In America, Jean Baudrillard arrives at a different conclusion concerning the lack of integration between road and landscape:

There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles... Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move. (53)

For Adorno, the urgency of arriving at a destination eclipses the possibility of attaining pleasure through process, whereas for Baudrillard, topographic dissonance facilitates pleasure through process, or "keeping on the move." Yet the contrast between road and landscape inevitably transforms interconnection into disconnection; speed triggers sensations of remoteness and amnesia. Baudrillard's reflections ultimately resound with Adorno's:

Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire. Speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule it to leave no trace behind. Triumph of forgetting over memory, an uncultivated, amnesic intoxication. (Baudrillard, 6-7)

Speed accelerates the process of forgetting, just as Adorno's "vanishing landscape leaves no trace upon the eye:" the American road is a shortcut to dissociation and amnesia. Driving serves as an impetus for a seismic transformation of identity in multiple films and

novels set in Los Angeles, often resulting in either a dramatic case of amnesia or a miraculous recovery of identity.

### **Driving Under the Influence**

The relationship between psychological states and the cultural and physical landscape of Los Angeles is pronounced in Joan Didion's novel, Play It As It Lays (1970). Maria (Mar-eye-a), the protagonist, finds solace in aimless high speed freeway expeditions, natural disaster reports on the evening news, and projections of an unrecognizable self on a movie screen. Her particular form of self-dissolution resonates with the volatility of the landscape and manmade infrastructures that are illustrative of Los Angeles, specifically the film industry and the freeway system.

Maria drives to forget—her daughter Kate's institutionalization; an abortion; the disintegration of her marriage to Carter, affairs, and friendships; the demise of her career; the death of her mother; and the demolition of her hometown. Her daily ritual of perfecting a high-speed lane-shift on the Los Angeles freeway is a form of disappearance and erasure:

Sometimes at night the dread would overtake her, bathe her in sweat, flood her mind with sharp flash images of Les Goodwin in New York and Carter out there on the desert with BZ and Helene and the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway. (18)

Maria's estrangement from her friends and husband also severs her ties to the movie industry—she is an actress, BZ is a producer, and her ex-husband, Carter, is a director—as her highway expeditions simultaneously intensify and obscure her disconnection from community and career. The freeway transmits a sequence of images in quick succession; the montage of disjointed highway elements— "the great pilings, the Cyclone fencing, the

deadly oleander, the luminous signs..." (17)—represents a fragmented, hostile and synthetic external environment that reflects her inward disintegration. Driving places her behind the viewfinder and inverts her cinematic orientation from object to subject, thus stirring a temporary sense of empowerment through speed, evasion, and the illusion of control.

### **Fahrvergnügen**

Edward Dimendberg draws a parallel between highways and cinema in his essay, "The Will To Motorization:" "The highway provides a controlled visual experience analogous to the montage and multiplicity of perspectives afforded by cinema." (107). Also an exploration of the concept of centrifugal space and its pertinence to the city, the highway, and cinema, the essay addresses the aesthetic relationship between road and landscape.<sup>23</sup>

When Baudrillard connects the freeway to the cinema in America, he discerns a nonlinear relationship between highway and cinema:

The city was here before the freeway system...but it now looks as though the metropolis has actually been built around this arterial network. It is the same with American reality. It was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind, that it is the refraction of a giant screen. (55)

Reality and the city are subordinate to cinema and the freeway despite having predated both systems. In redirecting reality and movement through space, the final product supersedes the raw material: pleasure and the suspension of memory are the aim and end result of this temporal inversion and relinquishment of sequential order and control.

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<sup>23</sup> Dimendberg's account of the construction of the German highway contrasts with Adorno's observations of the dissonance between the American road and landscape: "harmonious integration of the Autobahn into the surrounding landscape remained a key concern to its builders." (106)

Driving may elicit pleasure, but the manipulation of reality or nature by an absent authority—a film director, astrologer, or landscape architect—confines the spectator to a prescribed perspective and distorts the fragile, unique relationship between an individual's interiority and external surroundings. In The Stars Down to Earth, Adorno's analysis of the "biphasic approach" of astrology demonstrates how the socially correct sanctioning of leisure serves as a reward for productivity:

...A.M., comprising the bulk of the work day, is frequently treated as representative of reality and the ego principle: people are advised to be particularly reasonable during the morning...Conversely, P.M., which generally includes at least a certain amount of leisure time, is handled as though it were representative of the instinctual urges of the pleasure principle: people are often admonished to seek pleasure...the gratifications offered by other mass media during the afternoon or evening. (68)

Likewise, the time-element to Maria's driving ritual is critical: it is essential that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock (A.M.): "To pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril...If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum." (15) The reward for streamlined efficiency and obsessive repetition is exhilaration and dreamless sleep, or pleasure in self-dissolution:

Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly. (16)

Her carefully calibrated movement along the freeway, synchronized with the externally imposed rhythm of the radio and spacing of the interchanges, propels her from past, present, and self. Furthermore, speed contributes to the process of self-dissolution; resonant with Maria's mode of diversion, Baudrillard strengthens the link between speed and disappearance in America: "Driving like this produces a kind of invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out. It is a sort of slow-motion suicide, death by the extenuation of forms – the delectable form of their disappearance." (7) The pleasures afforded by speed obliterate the exterior landscape as well as the dread-induced "sharp flash images" in her mind, and Maria's high-speed maneuvers produce a corresponding suspension of identity and semblance of empowerment and control. For Maria, driving provides a synthetic escape from temporality and "the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway." (18)

The incoherence of disparate signs on Maria's freeway excursions—another dissonance between road and landscape—nevertheless affords her a momentary respite from an unbearable reality. The fleeting pleasure she experiences in her pursuit of oblivion through the chaotic, disorganized freeway landscape liberates her from an authoritarian, externally-imposed structuring of her surroundings and her identity. Like the highway, Maria decentralizes as she traverses space, journeying far from herself in centrifugal motion.

### **Rapture-of-the-Freeway**

Maria's actions mirror the power relationships that are triggering her breakdown. She internalizes the dynamics of authority and subjection: the temporal and circumstantial prerequisites of her daily freeway ritual and nightly sleeping arrangements are obsessive and neurotic. Her dreamless sleep that results from the intricate freeway maneuver takes place

"...not in the house but out by the pool, on a faded rattan chaise left by a former tenant." (15)

To sleep outside is an act of freedom, but it is also a self-imposed exile from home, to concurrently echo and erase the external circumstances that have estranged her from the domestic and the familiar. Furthermore, it is only when she abandons herself to a vast, impersonal freeway system that she can relinquish the burden of the unconscious mind. Like her freeway ritual, Maria's self-induced banishment from her domicile is both a reenactment of her estrangement and an attempt to escape it.

Having lulled her interior dislocation through the rapid pulse of external surroundings, Maria reaches a threshold that allows her to engage and disengage at will, to shift from spectacle to spectator in her personal melodrama. In this liminal space she approaches Benjamin's flâneur, also "on the threshold," occupying an ambivalent space. The flâneur assumes an indeterminate orientation in the city, vacillating between absorption and separation, familiarity and estrangement, and ultimately "seeks refuge in the crowd...In it the city is now a landscape, now a room." (Reflections, 156) The depersonalizing pulse of the crowd transforms the city into a secure, interior space—a room—within an exterior space—a landscape. For Maria, the highway functions as the depersonalizing pulse, inducing a false sense of security and a tenuous sense of control.

The freeway is an apposite image to correspond to Maria's mental state; it affords an illusory sense of liberation at the expense of adherence to a strict set of rules. The driver technically controls speed and destination, yet must obey all signs and regulations or else face a wreck, a wrong turn, or a fatal accident. In The Architecture of Four Ecologies (1971), Reynar Banham captures this duality of the freeway: freeway driving provides the semblance

of freedom and convenience, yet "a willing acquiescence to an incredibly demanding man / machine system" (199) lies at the root of its efficiency and efficacy. Furthermore,

The private car and the public freeway together provide an ideal...version of democratic urban transportation: door-to-door movement on demand at high average speeds over a very large area...Yet what seems to be hardly noticed or commented on is that the price of door-to-door transport on demand is the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey. (199)

Banham's playful, deferential, and unconventional architectural study acknowledges the primacy and significance of the freeway by including it among his four designated "ecologies" of Los Angeles—*Surfurbia*, *Foothills*, *the Plains of Id* and *Autopia*. His ruminations on the aesthetic beauty, vastness, and complexity of the freeway go so far as to indicate the existence of a spiritual dimension to driving: "If motorway driving anywhere calls for a high level of attentiveness, the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical." (197) In an essay entitled "Bureaucrats," Didion cites the above quotation from Banham to emphasize the "mystical" state that freeway driving induces in the driver, as well as its association with danger: "Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over. A distortion of time occurs, the same distortion that characterizes the instant before an accident." (*The White Album*, 83) In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria is unfazed by the threat of danger; in cutting across four lanes of traffic without slowing down once, she performs a ritualistic acrobatics of time and space that induces exhilaration, amnesia, and dreamless detachment from self.



## Layers of Loss and Desire

Banham contextualizes the freeway by situating it within a "transportation palimpsest," defining its relationship to the historical layers of previous routes and railroads constructed at various stages of Spanish and Anglo settlement.<sup>24</sup> Preexisting transportation patterns provided a foundation for the freeway system; hence its construction put less strain on Los Angeles than similar projects in other cities. According to Banham, the city's wealth of open space greatly contributed to this lack of major imposition on the overall character and layout of the city.

In Karen Tei Yamashita's novel Tropic of Orange (1997), Manzanar Murakami, a former surgeon who is now homeless, has an "uncanny" ability to perceive all the complex layers and maps of the city simultaneously, to the extent that he conducts the freeway above an overpass, transforming traffic patterns and random accidents into a musical structure that only he hears. He discerns a coherent interconnection between the geological, historical, sociological, and infrastructural layers of the city:

As far as Manzanar was concerned, it was all there. A great theory of maps, musical maps, spread in visible and audible layers—each selected sometimes purposefully, sometimes at whim, to create the great mind of music. To the outside observer, it was a lonely business; it would seem that he was at once orchestra and audience. Or was he indeed? Unknown to anyone, a man walking across the overpass at that very hour innocently hummed the recurrent melody of the adagio. (57)

Maria and Manzanar have both abandoned home and stability to master a system that is as vast and intricate as the complex web of desire and loss that compels them to the

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<sup>24</sup> Though Michael Jacob Rochlin's Ancient L.A. illustrates how the transportation palimpsest predates Spanish and Anglo settlement and is in fact derived from indigenous migration routes.

freeway in the first place. Whereas Maria's freeway journey induces a visual montage of images, Manzanar's arrangement of shifting traffic patterns and highway collisions is auditory. Furthermore, he is not an active participant on the freeway, but his outsider status and delusional mental state afford him a privileged orientation and perspective. Like Maria, he reaches a similar threshold as spectator and spectacle, but in enacting both audience and orchestra, a collective is implicit. Manzanar is an embodiment of the freeway's paradox of private and public that both Banham and Baudrillard observed: individual freedom as a result of communal observance. Akin to Adorno's ruminations on astrology and cinema, the freeway enables the isolated individual to participate in an external totality, and the consequence is further alienation: the sense of "togetherness" is fleeting and illusory, and only heightens the isolation of driving—or conducting—in silence.

### **Autonomy**

In describing the collective qualities of the freeway in America, Baudrillard's word choice evokes performance: "Gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day. By virtue of the sheer size of the layout and the kind of complicity that binds this network of thoroughfares together, traffic rises here to the level of a dramatic attraction..." (53)

The freeway is a "spectacle" "staged" by the population that rises to a "dramatic attraction." Manzanar's orchestration of this overwhelming choreography of high-speed, high-density movement is a masterful balancing act between self and place; his interior disorientation—as a former victim of Japanese-American internment who became a skilled surgeon but inexplicably abandoned the "knife for the baton"—corresponds to the exterior complexity of the highway. From his freeway overpass, Manzanar is physically and socio-

economically detached from the crowd below, yet he is able to absorb, perform and perceive infrastructure as a work of art. His homeless status situates him outside the social norm and allows him to assume an omniscient role. While Manzanar's ability to arrange the sounds of the freeway into a musical score provides refuge from his status as an outsider, his extreme, simultaneous engagement in and disengagement from society suppress memories of his past and identity. The freeway is a conduit for forgetting and provides the semblance of freedom and control just as it does for Maria.

As in Maria's freeway ritual, time is also a crucial facet of Manzanar's work as a conductor:

Manzanar Murakami sensed the time of day through his feet, through the vibration rumbling through the cement and steel, and by the intervals of vehicles passing beneath him. At that moment, cars swooped at steady intervals, trucks trundled but trundled quickly...Such a traffic window was essential for the third movement. (34)

Time has a profound influence on the sound of Manzanar's symphonies. Seasonal and biphasic fluctuations in traffic patterns resound in his imagination and take the form of a broad range of musical styles. Manzanar dissolves the boundaries between leisure and labor, showing up at his post everyday to contribute to a work of art that at once transcends and encapsulates him. Paradoxically, his devotion to the totality of the freeway intensifies his separation from society, until it takes a catastrophic event for him to gain recognition and restore his identity.

### **Community**

Disaster on the freeway ultimately triggers Manzanar's awakening, and serves as a major catalyst for the convergence of the seven characters and subplots that comprise the

novel. On the downtown interchange, the driver of a convertible triggers a cataclysmic chain of events: he bites into a poisonous orange, passes out, and collides into a propane-filled truck. Manzanar is of course conducting this moment: "In both directions of the freeway, spread across ten lanes, hundreds of cars piled one onto the other in an endless jam of shrieking notes...Manzanar had fearlessly recorded everything—every horrible, terrifying thing—in music." (55) The catastrophe backs traffic up so severely that drivers abandon their vehicles. The propane then erupts, igniting the freeway canyon and displacing the large homeless population (including Manzanar) residing underneath the freeway. Consequently, the newly displaced homeless take up residence in the abandoned vehicles, forming a makeshift community on the freeway. Disaster has transformed the freeway into a dwelling-place, inverting social hierarchies and spatial designations: "The vans and camp trailers went first; then the gas guzzlers—oversized Cadillacs with their spacious pink and red vinyl interiors, and blue Buicks...Porches, Corvettes, Jaguars, and Miatas were suddenly relegated to the status of sitting or powder rooms or even telephone booths." (121)

Manzanar's obscure artistic endeavors and communion with the freeway compensate for home and family, but the catastrophic event instigates a reversal: Emi, a television news producer on location at the disaster site, is wounded by a stray bullet. Buzzworm, who is a liaison between the street and press, discovers their kinship—Emi is Manzanar's granddaughter—and carries her wounded body to him. The moment they are reunited, "all the airbags in L.A. ruptured forth," but he is deaf to the sonic coincidence: "Manzanar heard nothing." (256) He loses the ability to hear the freeway symphony and abandons conducting on the overpass to regain identity and family.

That the freeway transmogrifies into a site of home and homecoming in Tropic of Orange is perhaps the ultimate spatial indeterminacy. The image of a communal, makeshift home on the freeway is an extreme post-modernization of the ambivalent and oppositional qualities of Benjamin's flâneur. The automobile has become a room, the freeway a shelter, and the dispossessed a community, a family, and an individual, but only as a result of an epic catastrophe triggered by an orange, a fire, and the freeway—a triad that is quintessentially L.A.

## Part 8: Automatic Devices: Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles

### Impossible Cities

In American Diary, 1959-1960, Italo Calvino describes his first visit Los Angeles. He begins with a preconceived notion of how it will be: warnings by friends that it is a horrible place convince him that he will love it. On first sight, he is enthusiastic about its vastness, beauty, and diversity of terrain—qualities that factor into Calvino's designation of Los Angeles as the "impossible American city;" yet within a couple of days the flattering connotation of "impossibility" degenerates into a logical nightmare for Calvino: the vast distances between neighborhoods necessitate a boredom and isolation-inducing dependence on the automobile. Calvino's initial idealization of Los Angeles—for the sake of contrariness—very quickly mutates into an antithetical feeling: displeasure.

In his novel Invisible Cities (1972), Los Angeles is among the few “real” cities the narrator names; only Los Angeles is a metonym for when “*the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, cities without shape.*” (139)<sup>25</sup> The language of this passage sustains the element of paradox indicative of Los Angeles: the “end” has a “beginning,” and shapelessness is indeed a shape, yet it is in the form of Los Angeles.

In his journal, Calvino's rapid reevaluation of the city exemplifies the extreme dualities, ambiguities, and paradoxes that are omnipresent in narrative experiences of Los

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<sup>25</sup> Like Roland Barthes in Empire of Signs, who briefly mentions Los Angeles in relation to Tokyo, Calvino links Los Angeles to another Japanese city, “...cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without shape,” (139) perhaps indicating an attention to “otherness” and exceptionality from a European perspective.

Angeles. Within a matter of days, the very feature that initially elicited excitement for the writer, "impossibility," becomes a barrier to pleasure, and the necessity of the automobile is the impetus behind Calvino's deep disenchantment with the place.

In stark contrast to Calvino's attitude, Reyner Banham deepened his appreciation for the Los Angeles freeway by starring in a BBC documentary about Los Angeles in 1972, shortly after the publication of The Architecture of Four Ecologies. In Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, Banham regards Los Angeles as one of the world's most important cultural centers: "a truly great city offers a mechanism for imposing an artist's own style and vision on the rest of the world," and for Banham, the wide-reaching influence of everything from Hollywood film, to pop art, to surfboard design exemplifies his tenet. Banham drives around the city for most of the film, stopping at both obvious and obscure sites he deems essential to an understanding of the city, but the process of driving is itself the ultimate destination. As Banham writes in The Architecture of Four Ecologies, freeway driving is more than just a means to an end: it is a language in itself:

...the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree...So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original. (5)

In the film, Banham's car is outfitted with a "Baede-kar<sup>26</sup>" tour guide, a fictional travel mechanism that attaches to the car stereo and directs the driver in the voice of a female *automaton*. Baede-kar is attuned to Banham's freeway musings and predilection for off-the-

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<sup>26</sup> A play-on-words reference to Karl Baedeker, the German publisher of nineteenth-century authoritative travel guides.

beaten path sites: the tour includes the point at which the Santa Monica and San Diego freeways merge, which Baede-kar informs us is considered "the most elegant in the world," and begins with a visit to Simon Rodea's Watts Towers. Baede-kar makes a reference to the 1965 Watts race riots, prefacing the visit with a declarative assumption that glosses over the complexity of the neighborhood and conflict: "the discriminating traveler would like to see what the city of the future is doing to cure the evils of the past;" she then describes the monument as "a do it yourself monument to man's craving for beauty."

Baede-kar is a catalyst for a tension that allows Banham to emphasize his fervent mid-century nostalgia for the city, disdain for corporate homogeneity, and sensitivity to the struggles between public and private space, and much to Banham's dismay, Baede-kar often assumes the tone of a spokesperson for a real estate development firm or a corporation. When Baede-kar points out the Mattel toy factory from the freeway, Banham sarcastically quips that the driver who breaks concentration to "catch a glimpse of Barbie" could easily collide with a "sweet old lady from Pasadena" and cause a highway catastrophe. His tone is ironically cavalier and upbeat on the subject of the hypothetical car crash; simultaneously elated by the possibility of danger and offended by Baede-kar's pro-corporate propaganda, Banham is delighted by the insinuation of volatility and defiance.

### **Out of Bounds**

The frequency at which Banham resists and criticizes his robotic tour guide intensifies as the film progresses. Banham scoffs at Baede-kar's descriptions of civic and residential development projects along historical piers jutting into the Pacific Coast—noting how corporate greed eagerly obliterates the past. Baede-kar's mentioning of a development in Marina del Rey compels Banham to comment, "another executive ghetto, plastic people in



plastic boats." Banham is also frustrated by his inability to gain access to a gated community in Palos Verdes, and is unimpressed by a bus tour of celebrity mansions. Banham eschews such garish emblems of wealth for residences designed by Charles Eames and Richard Neutra, but alas, such aesthetic and architectural masterpieces are privately owned and equally inaccessible.<sup>27</sup> For a Los Angeles apologist, Banham is fully aware of the city's shortcomings—but such obstacles mobilize his quest for accessible public and private spaces and landmarks to capture the city's virtues—and he eventually locates neighborhoods, individuals, and architectural sites that demonstrate an unfettered, experimental, and pioneering self-expression.

Banham visits the Venice Beach studio of Vasa Mihich, a Yugoslavian sculptor, who characterizes Los Angeles as a place conducive to artistic freedom, where one "can do crazy things and get away with it." Banham continues to explore the quirky, countercultural beach scene by interviewing a folk musician who resides in a van in order to play music whenever he feels like it; a weightlifting health food enthusiast on Muscle Beach; and a devoted surfer living in Hermosa Beach.

Although Banham's film pays homage to Los Angeles and highlights the qualities that define what makes a city singular and creatively vital, he is perplexed by the problem of where the Los Angeles tourist should go. Edward Dimendberg, in his essay "The Kinetic Icon: Reyner Banham on Los Angeles as Mobile Icon," summarizes Banham's perspective on Los Angeles's dynamic and unconventional iconography: "Although Banham admits that Los Angeles does contain historic markers, in his judgment no single place, landmark, building or

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<sup>27</sup> In *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis documents Richard Neutra's involvement in efforts to secure affordable, government-sponsored public housing, as well as his "denouncement of extreme privatism." (72-73) Davis also notes the inconsistency between Neutra's support of public architecture and his reputation as an architect of exclusive, hillside private dwellings.

architectural style can effectively encapsulate the city. His is an architectural and urban history that privileges mobility over stasis and innovation over tradition..." (109)

Just as Banham learned to drive to speak the language of the city in his architectural study, he narrates from a moving vehicle for a significant portion of his documentary. For Banham, driving is such an iconographic aspect of the city that he even does interviews in cars. Towards the end of the film, Banham visits a drive-through cafeteria with editor Mike Salisbury and visual artist Ed Ruscha, who has meticulously documented Los Angeles buildings and signage in painting and photography. From the backseat, Banham asks Ruscha to recommend essential sites for a tourist to visit in Los Angeles, and Ruscha suggests gas stations, or "any kind of edifice that has to do with the car." Ruscha has himself paid homage to this structure in his Twenty-six Gasoline Stations, a photographic study of gas stations along the Route 66 highway. For Ruscha, such edifices are significant due to their streamlined qualities, both in the standardization of their construction and the resulting aesthetic. Furthermore, they take longer to destroy than to assemble, which in itself is an inversion of convention. Ruscha, Salisbury, and Banham also cite fantastic architectural structures as quintessential features on a Los Angeles itinerary: a hot-dog-shaped fast-food stand and a restaurant in the shape of a derby exemplify a facet of regional architecture that reflects the city's guiding principle that anything is possible. The three lament how fantasy architecture is a dying art in Los Angeles, perhaps a barometer of disenfranchisement and escalating real estate costs.

### **Screen Memory**

Dimendberg also notes in his essay that cinema is an apposite medium for Banham's exploration of a city defined by its mobility: he cites examples of early-twentieth century

modernist, motion picture studies of highways that transcend the capabilities of the still camera: the moving picture is a closer analog to the mobile metropolis. Yet the subject—Los Angeles—is also dependent on the form of its representation—the documentary film: cinema is just as iconographic to Los Angeles as the automobile, and therefore strengthens the aptness of Banham's cinematic medium.

Throughout the film, actual footage or tongue-in-cheek remakes of scenes from Hollywood movies are interspersed with shots of Banham in the original locations. Nostalgia blatantly fuels Banham's love affair with the city, which he enthusiastically acknowledges, "goes beyond the realm of reason." Early in the film, footage of his native Norwich, an English city with a central Cathedral and "handsome Georgian buildings" appears in stark contrast to the fantastic sprawl of Los Angeles, yet the purpose of this autobiographical interlude is to explain the mystery of Los Angeles' familiarity. Banham's brief tour of his hometown culminates in "the penny cinema of his youth," where he first laid eyes on familiar Los Angeles landmarks. Dimendberg writes: "Hollywood cinema supplies an instantly recognizable familiarity that substitutes for the recognition produced by the traditional urban icon." (114) In the space between projections of Hollywood cinema and an incredulous appreciation for a vast, kinetic city exists the root of Banham's devotion to Los Angeles: the dynamic between mobility, novelty, and memory fuels Banham's fondness for a place that resists encapsulation by traditional urban iconography.

Dimendberg concludes that Banham's designation of the freeway as an urban icon excludes facets and experiences of the city that are equally representative. Furthermore, Dimendberg notes that the freeway fails to perform two crucial functions of an urban icon:

If urban icons thwart forgetting and guarantee a common urban lexicon in visual

form, the Los Angeles freeway comes up short as a means of representing the city surrounding it...the freeway system ultimately fails as a means of promoting and remembering the city, two vital tasks accomplished by every urban icon. For memorable images of a metropolis cannot develop from sensations alone... (114)

It would be politically and environmentally problematic for Los Angeles to overtly promote its freeway as a kind of landmark, and driving does not elicit a sustained visual comprehension of an urban landscape: as Baudrillard and Didion have illustrated, high-speed movement encourages forgetting over recollection, temporal distortion over linearity, and fragmentation over coherence.

Dimendberg reconciles the shortcomings of Banham's strategy in two ways; first by acknowledging his grasp of the paradoxical qualities of the freeway he discussed in Architecture of Four Ecologies—"that driving can be both a freedom and a necessity, a pleasure and a burden;" and second, by suggesting that as the environmental impact of driving intensifies, population growth slows down the flow of traffic, and larger metropolitan areas eclipse Los Angeles's own highway infrastructure, the freeway, if rendered an archaic technology, will then achieve the status of urban icon; ecological crisis could transform the glory days of Southern California car culture into a nostalgic relic.

The interplay between memory, cinema, and mobility in Banham's exploration of Los Angeles is such that two of its most prominent institutional icons—the film industry and the freeway system—distort and disrupt continuity and temporality, yet paradoxically, their iconic status depends on their ability to interrupt the flow of everyday experience of place. Banham basks in this phenomenon throughout his film, whereas Dimendberg describes it as "unsettling":

Los Angeles disrupts the continuities of ordinary experience, the agendas, itineraries and projects through which one encounters any city, by encouraging reflection upon its role as the backdrop of Hollywood cinema, both onscreen and offscreen. Filmic references and citations (driving past a frequently filmed building or encountering a landmark that one previously knew only cinematically) unsettle the experiential sequence of life in Los Angeles...(115)

Dimendberg indicates how Banham is at once nostalgic "for past styles and buildings on the verge of disappearing" (122) and in awe of new trends, and concludes that Banham fails to make any effort to resolve this contradiction in his film: "the aspirations to celebrate trends and to venerate history ultimately prove incompatible and leave Banham vulnerable to the charge of wanting it both ways." (122). Yet Banham does resolve the contradiction when he accounts for the city's singularity in Architecture of Four Ecologies, and a tolerance for the coexistence of contradictory elements is essential in paving the way for his fervent appreciation of the city:

...no city has ever been produced by such an extraordinary mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics and culture; nor is it likely that an even remotely similar mixture will ever occur again. The interaction of these factors needs to be kept in constant historical view – and since it is manifestly dangerous to face backwards while at the steering wheel, the common metaphor of history as the rear-view mirror of civilization seems necessary, as well as apt, in any study of Los Angeles. (6)

Banham looks to the freeway again—and cites danger—in offering a solution to the problem of whether the past and future can coexist. The "rear-view mirror" metaphor is a

palpable figurative device for allaying the temporal complexities of Los Angeles, and allows Banham to reconcile tradition and history with fashion and innovation, while remaining in the driver's seat.

### **Subjective City**

As Dimendberg's 2006 essay illustrates, the dated ethos of Banham's values and point of view diminishes the film's impact today. From the perspective of 40 years after its filming, "new" and "old," or a mid-century hot dog stand and an early seventies automobile, aesthetically have more in common with each other now than they did in 1971, but at the very least Banham proposes a theoretical framework for reconciling past with present through his blending of cinematic formulas and freeway metaphors.

Dimendberg acknowledges the interplay between history and the present in the formulation of urban experience, yet emphasizes the anomalous, dual role cinema plays in Los Angeles's history:

Any city, of course, permits the informed observer to oscillate between present urban realities and his or her knowledge of its past. Yet no other metropolis has had its past as thoroughly documented by the motion picture industry and later destroyed by urban development, thus granting cinema a dual role as the interstitial historical memory of Los Angeles as well as a significant force in its development.

(Dimendberg, 115)

For Dimendberg, the cinematic medium provides a tenuous albeit apropos representation of place and history, and although he criticizes Banham for not conforming to documentary standards of objectivity (121), Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles blends factual elements with fictional devices—the *Baede-kar* tour guide and the remaking of

Hollywood scenes—to embellish a subjective, cinematic essay about Los Angeles.

Furthermore, Banham's film dissolves the boundaries between documentary and narrative cinema to represent the city's unique integration of history and fantasy through its cultural, economic, and architectural production; hence the interplay of contrasting elements makes for a more accurate subjective representation of place. Like Thom Andersen's Los Angeles Plays Itself, Banham is equally conscious of the interplay between documentary and fictional modes, especially since both films are comprised of imagery rooted in fantasy, myth, and technical innovation. The title of Banham's film, Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, promises nothing more than a highly subjective dedication to the city, and the film indeed delivers just that.

## **Part 9: Memory and Desire: Mulholland Drive**

### **Self-image**

Other connotations of Norman Klein's epigram from The History of Forgetting, that Los Angeles is "the most photographed and least remembered city in the world," intimate a profound volatility of self and space. Like Dimendberg, Klein has a heightened awareness of the complex role cinema plays in the formation of memory, history, and policy in Los Angeles, and also shares Banham's openness to the blending of fictional and documentary genres in the representation of place. Although Klein's point is to demonstrate how Hollywood contributed to the propagation of mythologies—the idea of a "seedy" downtown according to noir cinema and crime fiction—that instigated the razing of the Bunker Hill neighborhood and the "renewal" of downtown Los Angeles, his remark also intimates the idea that a city comprised of synthetic sets and roles, constantly reinventing itself, ultimately contributes to a fleeting and unstable sense of place and identity. In developing the "social imaginary" (the process by which he constructs first-person fictional narratives based on historical research and oral testimony), Klein himself has embraced the significance of fiction in the reconstruction of social history; an alleged contributor to historical obfuscation—fiction—also serves as an antidote to the very phenomenon it threatens to bring about—the erasure of memory.

Whereas fictional narrative can fill in the gaps in the reconstruction of place, community, and identity in Klein's project—which essentially strives toward a more accurate portrayal of social histories—in various works of film and literature—such as Kent



Mackenzie's film The Exiles—omission and absence can similarly enhance the representation of place and identity in Los Angeles. The act of filling in the pieces is both creative and depletive: it must sustain the sensation of loss at the same time it attempts to reconstruct reality.

Thanks to the far-reaching influence of Hollywood, the city may appear familiar to the neophyte Los Angeles visitor that Banham's film exemplifies; yet the illusory qualities of this cinema-induced familiarity comprise a key ingredient in the recipe for disaster and self-dissolution in the Los Angeles narrative. The subject must always come to terms with the realization that such a familiarity is a simulation, and therefore induces false and manufactured sensations of recollection and nostalgia. Moreover, in keeping with an ambivalence that is ubiquitous throughout the experiential mechanics of the city, the inverse is also true: Hollywood can obliterate or distort memory, or identity, as swiftly and effortlessly as it can manufacture it. This phenomenon also applies to the fictional subject who appears onscreen; in Play It As It Lays, cinema augments Maria's sense of disconnection from her identity when she watches her performance in one of her ex-husband's films: "Maria had seen it twice...and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself." (Didion, 19). A projected image of the self contributes to the protagonist's escapism, while her estrangement from her Hollywood milieu furthers her breakdown: Didion's novel suggests that cinema falls short of supplanting memory or a coherent version of identity and reality.

### **Loss Angeles**

David Lynch's film Mulholland Drive is a self-referential encapsulation of how Hollywood's most iconic attributes—its film industry, its automobile, and its geography—

disrupt the continuity of memory and identity. The title itself refers to the site of an event that opens the film and concurrently triggers an unraveling of identity, an experience of loss, and an exploration of the fantastic: cut shots between the interior of a limousine and two speeding cars full of rowdy kids, each coming from opposite directions on Mulholland Drive, build suspense until the vehicles collide head-on. In an instant before the collision, a man points a gun at a dark-haired woman in the limousine, but the car accident foils an ostensible plot to murder her. As she is the only survivor, the collision liberates the woman from the murder plot, but at the expense of her memory: her head injury has caused amnesia, and she wanders down the Hollywood Hills and onto Sunset Boulevard<sup>28</sup> without knowledge of her name or identity. Having found refuge behind a hedge in a residential neighborhood, she falls asleep.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that the woman in the limousine is entangled in a series of conspiracies having to do with the excesses of desire, power, and manipulation in Hollywood. Each character in the film is connected to the movie industry and possesses a varying range of power and influence, depending on their degree of cooperation and their position in an obscure hierarchy. Lynch portrays the gamut of desire as mediated through Hollywood, from escapist fantasy to destructive entity. Lives are made and destroyed by mob big-wigs who control casting decisions and freeze the credit of directors who defy their orders, as in the character of Adam Keshner, played by Justin Theroux, a young director who quickly learns that "complete creative control" is an illusion. The powerful Castigliani brothers wreak havoc on his life until he agrees to cast an unknown actress as a lead in his film—and he is advised to signal his acquiescence with the phrase "This is the Girl" during

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<sup>28</sup> Lynch is alluding to Billy Wilder's 1950 film, Sunset Boulevard, which chronicles the corruption and eccentricity of a relationship of convenience between an aging former star of silent film and a young, striving screenwriter, whose voice-over narration suggests that he finally achieves success, but only posthumously: he is murdered at the end of the film. The meeting between screenwriter and actress is also triggered by an automobile mishap: a flat tire near her Hollywood mansion.

her audition. The girl, Camilla Rhodes, is briefly portrayed in this part of the film by Melissa George.

Upon awaking, the dark-haired amnesic woman, played by Laura Haring, takes advantage of an opportunity to sneak into the apartment of an older woman who is in the process of departing for a trip. The next scene cuts to LAX, where Betty, the stereotypical *ingénue*, has just arrived in Los Angeles to pursue a career as an actress. After a series of exaggeratedly pleasant exchanges that affirm Betty's hopeful and enthusiastic attitude about "Hollywood," a taxi drops her off in front of her aunt's apartment, the same apartment that the amnesic woman has taken shelter in. Betty marvels at the lavishness and old-Hollywood charm of her aunt's home and community. She is the quintessential neophyte visitor, seduced by the illusory Hollywood ideal that has contributed to her high expectations.

During her tour of the apartment, Betty discovers the dark-haired woman crouching in the shower. In a self-referential gesture that calls attention to the intricacies of identity, memory, and illusion in cinema, Haring's character names herself "Rita" after glancing at a movie poster of *Gilda* (1946)—starring Rita Hayworth—that hangs on the bedroom wall.

Betty, played by Naomi Watts, is diametrically opposed to Rita, both physically and psychologically. Betty is blonde, ebullient, and eager for adventure, whereas Rita is tentative, frightened, and visibly haunted by her failure to recall her identity. Despite the fact that Betty quickly learns that Rita has no connection to her aunt and is a complete stranger, she sympathizes with her predicament and devotes herself to helping her solve the mystery of her identity.

Betty juggles the pursuit of her own acting career with her commitment to Rita, and in turn, Rita helps Betty prepare for an audition by going over a scene with her in the kitchen.

When Betty performs the scene again in the actual audition, she comes closer to attaining her stardom fantasy: Betty transcends her innocent demeanor by playing a sexually charged and assertive character in a scene opposite an archetypically sleazy "leading man," and has a remarkably successful audition. The repetition of the scene in drastically different environments—from the kitchen to the casting office—emphasizes the importance of context and perspective in Lynch's narrative. The film's abundance of structural doublings and repetitions emphasizes a deep preoccupation with the instability of reality, as well as the intrinsic value of fantasy in creating such a reality. In addition, highlighting the range of Betty's character—that she can effortlessly maneuver between innocent *ingénue* and erotic showstopper—corresponds to the limitless possibilities of identity and role-playing that permeate the film. Repetition as a compulsive action in Mulholland Drive directly relates to themes of desire and obsession that haunt the second section of the film.

After her audition, the casting agent takes Betty to the set of the film that Adam Kesher is directing—at the same moment that Camilla Rhodes is about to carry out her rigged audition. Betty and the director exchange an evocative look from afar, but Betty suddenly remembers that she has to meet Rita to investigate a potential clue, and abruptly flees from this intense, momentary connection.

In the next scene, Betty and Rita take a taxi to the apartment of a woman named Diane Selwyn. They initially have the wrong apartment number, but a third woman, who is a neighbor and has just exchanged apartments with Diane, leads them to the correct one. No one answers and the door is locked, but Betty, eager for a sense of purpose that parallels the cinematic, breaks into the house.

Betty's break-in leads to a horrific discovery of a decomposing corpse in the bedroom. Although Betty has entered a darker realm, her willingness to descend into Rita's underworld never dissipates. She has cast herself in Rita's melodrama, and is committed to following through with her role: Betty's Hollywood aspirations propel her forward into the shady circumstances surrounding Rita's identity.

Rita responds to the shocking discovery of her likely complicity by transforming her appearance: she begins to wear a blonde wig, and in another act of doubling that foreshadows the second half of the film, Betty and Rita begin to resemble each other more closely. That night, their relationship intensifies and they make love. Betty utters, "I'm in love with you," twice, and in an ensuing shot of the two asleep side-by-side, Rita eerily begins to chant "*Silencio*" with open eyes. When Rita fully awakens, she convinces Betty to attend a club by the same name, despite the late hour.

Huddling close together in their seats at *Club Silencio*, the two women become spectators of a bizarre series of vignettes: singers are lip-synching and an emcee suggests the falsehood and illusory nature of the performances by repeating multilingual declarations: "*no hay banda*," "*Il n'y a pas d'orchestre*," and "There is no band. It is all a recording." By inviting the viewer to question the veracity of what has transpired so far, the emcee foreshadows what is to come in the second half of the film. Betty and Rita, transfixed by Rebekah del Rio's lip synched performance of "Llorando" (Roy Orbison's "Crying" in Spanish), begin to weep uncontrollably, and in a gesture that triangulates the depths of desire and despondency that the women have plumbed, del Rio collapses on the floor before the tape of the song finishes.

Todd McGowan, in his essay "Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch's Panegyric to Hollywood," interprets Betty and Rita's reaction to del Rio's performance as a profound experience of loss: "The song moves Betty and Rita to tears because it communicates a sense of loss. Rebekah del Rio is 'crying' over a lost love object, over a lost sexual relationship, and this touches both Betty and Rita, who also feel the incipient loss of what they have experienced." (16)

McGowan points out that this experience of loss occurs at the moment the two women have reached the limits of the fantasy world. McGowan's analysis of the scene at *Club Silencio* also suggests that Betty and Rita connect to the performance because it emphasizes an impending absence: "Here, the fantasy indicates overtly its central concern—the object in its absence rather than in its presence. This scene suggests that Betty and Rita have reached the endpoint of the fantasy, the point at which it will break down." (16) Betty, miles from her optimistic introduction to Los Angeles, has crossed a threshold and entered a void.

### **Silencio**

While at *Club Silencio*, Betty discovers a blue box in her purse. When they return to the apartment, Rita retrieves a blue key from her own purse, inserts it into the box, and turns the key. The camera then travels into the interior of the box to signal the film's transition to a different dimension. In the next section, the narrative subverts and distorts many of the roles that the first section had established: recognizable subjects and objects are subtly altered and have switched referents. First, a shot of Betty's aunt moving around the apartment establishes that there is no trace of Betty and Rita, suggesting that perhaps they were never there. The next scene cuts back and forth between Selwyn's bed with the corpse lying on it and a woman

sleeping on the same bed. A cowboy who features in the first section—as an enigmatic advisor to Kesher—beckons the sleeping woman awake. Naomi Watts groggily emerges from the bed, but she is now playing Diane Selwyn instead of Betty.

Watts as Selwyn is drained of any vestige of Betty's effervescence: her surroundings are shabby, her demeanor is sullen, and her appearance is haggard. Diane is suffering over her desire for Camilla Rhodes, and paralleling Watts' transformation, Laura Harring is now playing Camilla instead of Rita.<sup>29</sup> The interchangeability of the two actresses suggests the mutability of identity within the physical and fantastical confines of Los Angeles: their referents shift according to the aleatory maneuverings of an enigmatic blue box—the literal object that stretches the constraints of the subject.

A sexual relationship exists between Camilla and Diane that is analogous to Betty and Rita's, but it is corrupted by jealousy, unrequited desire, and cruelty—and exacerbated by the backdrop of the movie industry. Various scenes depict Camilla intentionally leading her on or excluding her to torturous effect. Camilla intentionally makes Diane a spectator in Adam Kesher's<sup>30</sup> courtship of her on the set, which further upsets the boundary between reality and performance: it is a seduction disguised as a rehearsal for a romantic scene. Camilla obviously gains pleasure from forcing Diane to play spectator to displays of affection with Diane's competitors. Making matters worse, it becomes clear that Diane is struggling with her own acting career; like Betty, she has traveled from a small town to "make it," but her prospects are minimal in comparison to Betty's, and bit parts she does land occur only through Camilla's intervention.

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<sup>29</sup> A nod to Fante? In *Ask the Dust*, "Camilla" Lopez adopts the name "Rita" Gomez after she suffers her breakdown and escapes from the hospital.

<sup>30</sup> In a gesture that critiques the Hollywood obsession with celebrity starlets, all of the male characters, including Adam Kesher, are played by the same actors in each part, whereas the female roles are reassigned. McGowan's essay also explores the film's emphasis on female subjectivity over male subjectivity.

Furthermore, Camilla breaks up with Diane in the midst of a sexual encounter: in the same breath, Camilla tells Diane "you drive me wild" and "we shouldn't do this anymore." Diane's disaffection and rejection become so unbearable that she hires a hit man to murder Camilla. The presence of a key on her coffee table confirms that the murder has taken place—the same key that Rita retrieves from her purse in the first section—and Diane, unable to live with her deed and the voices and hallucinations that torment her, shoots herself. Finally, the film ends with a close-up shot of a blue woman seated in the balcony of *Club Silencio*. She whispers "*silencio*."

### **Power Steering**

Numerous details, characters, plots, and locations recur and reappear in the second half, but the fragmentary, nonlinear structure of the film alters and subverts their meaning, and the viewer can only experience glimmers of coherence in hindsight—as if from the rearview mirror. Diane's suicide has retroactively explained the presence of the corpse in part one, and many other details take on a deeper significance once they are echoed in the second narrative. In part two, a limousine on Mulholland Drive transports Diane to Camilla and Adam's engagement party. When it stops abruptly this time, it is so Camilla can lead Diane through a back entrance up a ravine and subject her to further pain and humiliation; the actress who plays "Camilla Rhodes" in part one is now an object of envy for Diane in part two: Camilla deliberately kisses this woman in front of Diane at the engagement party; the actress<sup>31</sup> who plays Adam's mother and chastises Diane for her tardiness at the party in part two is Coco in part one, the generous caretaker of Betty's aunt's apartment complex and benevolent representative of old-Hollywood charm.

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<sup>31</sup> Lynch casts a Hollywood veteran for this part, Ann Williams, thus playing with the idea of reinvention while maintaining old-Hollywood's vital presence in his film.



The stopping of the limousine on Mulholland Drive is a pivotal catalyst for the breakdown of identity in both sections of the film. It transports Diane to the party where she realizes that she has lost Camilla for good, thereby triggering acts of self-destruction towards herself and her object of desire, and it transports Rita to the site of the car accident and foiled murder plot, thereby triggering her loss of identity through amnesia.

There are numerous scenes depicting the two women traveling from point A to point B via limousine or taxi, but there does not exist a single shot of Betty/Diane or Rita/Camilla driving. The multiple shots of the female characters in transit as passengers emphasize their powerlessness before Hollywood: driving is an integral aspect of getting around the city and a quintessential feature of Los Angeles. The “drive” in Mulholland Drive is indicative of possibility, volition, and aspiration, and the road itself winds through the ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains, overlooking the Hollywood Hills, and from certain vistas, the entire city.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, Adam Kesher drives throughout the film, even though he is eventually stripped of both domestic and professional power. In the first part, he self-assuredly drives his convertible home after he vandalizes the car of the Castigliani brothers with a golf club, only to find his wife in bed with the pool man. He retaliates by pouring pink paint on his wife’s jewelry, and rather than express remorse at the deed, Kesher’s wife and the pool man chastise and attack Adam. He retreats to his convertible, this time with streaks of pink paint on his clothing, and soon learns that the Castigliani brothers have blocked his credit and bank accounts. His attempts to defend himself have resulted in humiliation. Camped out at a cheap downtown hotel with no change of clothes, his only recourse is to agree to the bizarre rendezvous with the “cowboy” at the “corral.” In his convertible, he maneuvers a windy

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<sup>32</sup> As the next chapter will explore, “Mulholland” denotes an ambivalent ecological legacy for Los Angeles.

canyon pass—that leads to Mulholland—and arrives at the mystifying corral. Large spotlights are turned on to emphasize that the city is as mutable and fantastic as a film set. The anachronistic “cowboy” makes a firm yet esoteric recommendation, and Kesher agrees to acquiesce to the demands of the media hegemony.

### **Fantasy and Desire**

McGowan’s interpretation of the two-part structure of Mulholland Drive is such that the first part of the film is an idealized or fantasy version of Diane's life, and the second part is an expression of her unattainable desires: “The first part of Mulholland Drive portrays the experience of fantasy, while the second part depicts the experience of desire...The second part...is structured around the incessant dissatisfaction of desire as Diane—and the spectator—are denied any experience of Camilla, Diane's love object.” (67)

In applying McGowan's reading to the first part of the film, Camilla/Rita, stripped of her identity, is powerless to cause Diane/Betty pain, and Rita's vulnerability makes the fulfillment of Diane's desire a sure thing. Diane's fantasy also undoes her deed: the murder plot in the limousine is foiled by a car crash, and as McGowan demonstrates, she portrays Adam, her competitor, as a pawn who is belittled by both the cowboy and the pool man.

McGowan also points out an intriguing irony in the relationship between the two sections:

In contrast with the second part of the film, the first part of Mulholland Drive seems more real, more in keeping with our expectations concerning reality. But, ironically, this sense of reality results from the film's fantasmatic dimension rather than from its realism. Whereas we usually contrast fantasy with reality, Mulholland Drive

underlines the link between the two, thereby depicting the role of fantasy in providing reality with structure. (68)

McGowan shows how Lynch's references to traditional Hollywood style—no matter how ironic—appear to be more familiar and realistic than the darker (thematically and chromatically), nonlinear scenes in the second half of the film. Betty's optimism and aspirations, Rita's mysterious identity, Adam's personal and professional conflicts, and the depiction of the mobsters—although Hollywood clichés, seem more real because their fantastic dimension imparts them with a sense of coherence. Mulholland Drive maintains that fantasy is escapism, but as McGowan emphasizes, the absence of fantasy, or the pure world of desire, is even more unsettling: "Lynch shows how mystery does not sustain desire but is itself a flight from desire, an attempt to escape the horrible deadlock that desire produces." (72) Although Rita's situation is a figment of Diane's imagination, she still feels compelled to solve the mystery—even if it leads to a devastating confrontation with "the deadlock of desire."

McGowan sees fantasy as intrinsic to narrative coherence in Mulholland Drive, and a vital mechanism for avoiding a kind of desire that is menacing and unbearable in its repetitive, obsessive structure: "...we do not employ fantasy to escape from the horrors of time but to construct time as a respite from the horrors of repetition..." (73) The first half of the film is clearly linear, but McGowan's close analysis shows how scenes in the second part of the film are organized around the status of Diane's desire rather than linear time. McGowan's interpretation resolves the discord between the temporal inconsistency of the two parts. "Not only does fantasy provide temporality, it also constantly works to fill in the gaps that populate the fragmentary experience of desire. Without fantasy, our experience would

lack a sense of coherence..." (73) To take McGowan's analysis a step further, attempting to integrate fantasy and desire creates a fragmentary experience that cannot be reconciled without the viewer looking backwards to decipher meaning retroactively, thereby producing another temporal shift.

An enigmatic scene that is only indirectly connected to the plot of the rest of the film intensifies the vital role fantasy plays in Lynch's version of Los Angeles. In an exchange between two men who are ostensibly unconnected to any other characters in the film, one recounts a nightmare to the other. The dream is set where they are currently seated, Winkie's—a quintessential mid-century Hollywood diner. The man describes a horrible being lurking behind the dumpster of the Winkie's, and is visibly perturbed. Later on, the camera informs us that this "man-creature" is indeed there: the camera slowly creeps to the edge of the dumpster, and the disturbing face—at once human and animal—flashes on the screen for a second. The subsequent shot establishes that this haunting being keeps the mysterious blue box in a brown paper bag in his dumpster-lair.

It is less important to determine the significance of this scene than to appreciate how it interlaces dream and reality. The film is edited in such a way that the telling of the dream occurs before the confirmation of its veracity. In the sequential logic of the film's narrative, the dream/nightmare has come true, and its horrible antagonist possesses the blue box that has the power to subvert meaning, thereby suggesting that fantasy is a valid agent in the manufacturing of reality and causality in Lynch's Los Angeles.

### **The Culture Industry**

The circumstances behind the making of Mulholland Drive into a feature-length film contributed to the convolution of the plot and the darkening of the themes. According to

David Lynch's website<sup>33</sup>, Lynch initially made Mulholland Drive as a two-hour television pilot for ABC, but the network rejected it due to violence, a close-up of dog feces, and other questionable images.<sup>34</sup> Lynch resolved to expand and adapt the pilot into a feature film, and in doing so, augmented the complexity of the plot and the thematic content.

In an expression of power and influence that parallels many of the subplots of the film, the media conglomerate's rejection of the initial pilot ultimately resulted in Lynch transforming a relatively linear albeit mysterious plot into a nonlinear parable of shifting identities and unstable, seemingly disconnected storylines. The intricacies of getting the film made do not only echo the content of Lynch's feature film, but they led to the development of a more enigmatic and monumental version of Mulholland Drive; the political maneuverings of the industry prompted a surge of creative expression in Lynch that inspired him to surpass his embryonic idea.

McGowan concludes his essay by referring to one of Adorno's critiques of the culture industry in Minima Moralia, and suggests that "Mulholland Drive functions as an implicit response to Adorno's criticism." (86) McGowan writes:

Most fantasies—and especially the mass-produced fantasies of Hollywood—fail to be fantasmatic enough because they refuse to follow their own logic to its endpoint.

Thus they never arrive at the experience of silence that concludes Mulholland Drive.

This is precisely the shortcoming that drives Theodor Adorno's critique of

Hollywood cinema. (86)

Adorno criticizes the embedded moral message in the Hollywood fantasy: the culture industry will not abstain from "conveying a message" (202) and thus permit a complete

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.lynchnet.com/mdrive/index.htm>

<sup>34</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulholland\\_Drive\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulholland_Drive_(film))

escape from reality. Furthering his criticism that Hollywood does not go far enough in the experience of fantasy by abandoning ideologies, Adorno laments, “the dreams have no dream.” (Adorno 202) He could easily have forecasted ABC's reaction to Lynch's original pilot, but it is doubtful that he could have predicted how Lynch transformed the constraint into a work that replicates the unknowable logic of dreams.<sup>35</sup>

McGowan concludes: “But Mulholland Drive calls us to fully immerse ourselves in fantasy, to abandon ourselves to its logic. Only in this way can we experience fantasy’s privileged path to the Real. (86)” Yet the film also invites the viewer to participate in the construction of narrative, and to question what is taken for granted as real. Lynch's film accomplishes its dream-like qualities by representing a layered collection of subjects and objects with constantly shifting referents. Doubling or dividing players into multiple roles allows multiple perspectives to emerge, not as individual subjectivities, but as a unified objectivity governed by an incomprehensible logic—one that no human consciousness can control, but that is primarily dictated by Hollywood, its memories, and its mythological dimensions.

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<sup>35</sup> Mulholland Drive was eventually funded and distributed by Studio Canal.

## Chapter Four: Submersion and Interiority

*I love Los Angeles. I know a lot of people go there and they see just a huge sprawl of sameness. But when you're there for a while, you realize that each section has its own mood. The golden age of cinema is still alive there, in the smell of jasmine at night and the beautiful weather. And the light is inspiring and energizing. Even with smog, there's something about that light that's not harsh, but bright and smooth. It fills me with the feeling that all possibilities are available. I don't know why. It's different from the light in other places...It was the light that brought everybody to L.A. to make films in the early days. It's still a beautiful place. (David Lynch, Catching the Big Fish, 31-32)*

### Part 10: Behind the Scene and the Unseen: Inland Empire

#### Behind-the-Scenes

Mulholland Drive probes the menacing power brokers who terrorize individuals involved in the film industry. For Lynch's female characters—embroiled in the machinations of the dream factory, victimized by the dynamics of desire and disillusionment—fantasy serves as a concurrent outlet of escape and entrapment, and his subsequent film, Inland Empire, is a further magnification of the self, or the actor, and her industry-induced fragmentation and dissolution.

Lynch's representation of Hollywood resonates with its complex political and sociological structure. In Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists, Gerald Horne traces the relationships between mobsters and moguls, even suggesting that the presence of gangsters in Hollywood influenced the subject of films in the forties, despite the secrecy of organized crime: "The gangster narrative has become a staple of Hollywood... This trend is more than a case of art imitating life—and vice

versa.” (23) Horne goes on to give examples of documented dealings between mobsters and moguls, and describes how they shared a common enemy: “Suffice it to say at this point that the mob often allied itself with certain moguls, particularly when their mutual antagonist on the left appeared to be rising.” (26) In his book, which documents the 1945 strike of the Conference of Studio Unions and its widespread implications, Horne details the massive labor demands of the movie studios, their vehement intolerance for activities associated with communism, and the intricacies of the unions that represented the talent guilds, production teams, and craft crews that were indispensable to moviemaking. Horne supplies detailed evidence to show the lengths movie studios would go to prevent labor unions from establishing any semblance of power or solidarity.

Although Lynch’s preoccupation with the film-within-the-film is a surreal and at times, incoherent exposé of the sinister dynamics of the industry, he devotes painstaking detail to the aspects of filmmaking that are often overlooked. In attempting to reveal what occurs outside the frame or behind-the-scenes, particularly through the *mise en abyme* structures of Inland Empire and Mulholland Drive, Lynch focuses on the labor demands of the movie industry that are conspicuously omitted from other cinematic narratives about cinema. Underneath the surface gleam of the star system, the auter system, and the studio conglomerates exist the vast reserves of labor that make the movies possible. Seemingly innocuous, tongue-in-cheek references to the production and the crew, particularly in Inland Empire, only emphasize the peripheral status of the individuals responsible for sets, sound, and lighting. In addition, the clandestine maneuverings of producers, bosses, and mobsters along the lines of the Castigliani brothers in Mulholland Drive assume a supernatural dimension in Inland Empire. For Lynch, the supernatural and the absurd are a form of



hyperbole, a narrative device to parallel the equally elusive and disembodied forces that control Hollywood. Lynch evokes a collective unconscious of the industry, replete with graphic, incomprehensible dreamlike imagery and ungraspable glimpses of meaning that instantly vanish upon awaking, or once the lights come up.

Lynch made a film about the making of a “haunted film,” and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, Inland Empire is laden with narrative dislocations that evoke the supernatural: time, space, and identity collapse in a manner that is unsettling, disjointed, and absurd (a conjunction of adjectives that define the term Lynchian) but also revelatory in depicting the inextricable link between self-dissolution and Hollywood spectacle. The dream factory is a repository of dream images manufactured by the workings of the unconscious mind; hence dreamlike spaces are the apposite mode to portray the cinematic process. The inverse is also true: by transcending the conventions of continuity and narrative, the cinematic medium can intimate the farthest reaches of subjectivity.

### **Doublings of Self, Space, and Story**

Inland Empire is Lynch’s third feature-length film in which the cultural and physical landscape of Los Angeles play a significant role, the first and second being Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive. Following Mulholland Drive’s trajectory, Inland Empire conflates, obscures, and deconstructs identity to form a synthetic unconsciousness not only of actors and their characters, but of real and imagined sites in and around Los Angeles—spanning iconic and mundane geographic locations and their indistinguishable set-designed replicas, as well as the sinister and enigmatic workings of the industry. All three films include performances by actresses who play at least two roles, in which an idealized self descends

into a downward spiral of sordidness and self-dissolution, and either transcends through performance, self-destructs, or both.

Lynch deconstructs the cinematic medium to delve into the psychological side effects of Hollywood, resulting in a visceral expression of the creative and destructive possibilities of an industry-induced psychosis that manifests in the space between desire and disillusionment. Whereas the splintering of identities in Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive coincide with a sudden rupture in the middle of both films, in Inland Empire, Laura Dern's vacillation between her characters is seamless and amorphous, and despite prolonged periods of narrative indeterminacy, is intrinsic to the plot; the presence of the film within the film accounts for the coexistence of Nikki and Susan.

On High and Blue Tomorrows, or the film within the film in Inland Empire, is "said to be cursed." During a rehearsal, Nikki and Devon (played by Laura Dern and Justin Theroux) get into character as Susan and Billy, the nested film's protagonists. As Susan tells Billy to "go into the other room," Freddy, the director's assistant (played by Harry Dean Stanton), interrupts because he sees a figure lurking in the back of the studio where the set is being built. Devon investigates, even peaking into the window of the prop house that the scene is set in, but finds nothing. His observation, "they disappeared where it's really hard to disappear," prompts Kingsley, the director (played by Jeremy Irons), to reveal that On High and Blue Tomorrows is a remake of Fierce Seben, a German film, based on a Polish gypsy folktale that was never finished. Kingsley explains, "They discovered something inside the film," and in the next breath, reveals that the two leads were murdered. Nikki and Devon are visibly disturbed by the revelation, but do not withdraw from the project, as ambition trumps

any hesitation about doing a cursed remake: in a previous scene, the director heralds it as a star maker for both of them.

Nikki and Devon's appearance on the Marilyn Levin Starlight Celebrity Show, "Where stars make dreams and dreams make stars," parodies the trashy talk show format and the sensationalist element of the Hollywood marketing machine worthy of an Adornian diatribe, while accentuating the vital interplay between rumor and reality. The host's insinuation of romance between the two stars is at once farfetched and prophetic, and underscores the impact that "story," or fiction, has on reality. The show may degrade Devon and Nikki's artistic integrity, but it will certainly generate a healthy degree of publicity.

The film establishes Devon's reputation as a seducer just after their appearance on the show: backstage, Devon's handlers warn him not to pursue the leading lady, stressing that her husband is an extremely powerful man. A few scenes later, Nikki's husband takes Devon aside, and with the hint of a smile on his face, warns that pursuing his wife will have "dark and inescapable consequences." A clear parallel emerges between the actors and the characters: as the plot of On High and Blue Tomorrows concerns an extramarital affair between Billy and Susan—who is also married to a powerful and threatening man—a concurrent affair begins between Nikki and Devon. To heighten the breakdown of the borders between fiction and reality, the first sign of Nikki's splintering identity occurs within the context of the affair and the film shoot: forgetting that she is in character, Nikki, in an agitated state, discusses the threat of her husband to Devon as the cameras are rolling: "Damn! This sounds like dialogue from our script."

When Nikki hears the director's voice and sees the camera, it becomes apparent that she has lost the ability to separate herself from her character. The elements of filmmaking

bring her back to reality and remind her that she is on a set, but the lapse in awareness is disconcerting. At first, the connection between reality and script elicits a momentary expression of nearly upbeat wonderment, but it quickly deteriorates into one of fear, disorientation, and bewilderment.

Stylistically, the scene begins and ends with shaky handheld camera movements that encroach upon the characters, suggesting the presence of an additional point of view, and transporting the viewer outside of the film within the film and inside Nikki's state of mind. Kingsley's close-up (shot reverse shot) camera work takes over temporarily, but the handheld technique resumes after the director calls "cut."

In the next scene, when Devon confronts the producer about the film's troubling history, the producer simultaneously plays up the film's lore while discounting it as rumor: "Stories are stories. Hollywood's full of them. Thank god. Stories which grew out of imagination. We're surrounded by these screwball stories every day." The producer connects the film's disturbing back-story to a creative process that is Hollywood's life-blood. For the producer, the "rumors" surrounding the remake have the potential to jeopardize Nikki's performance, but the volatility of her identity, catalyzed by the film's supernatural legacy, also accounts for the brilliance of her performance. Inland Empire insinuates an element of manipulation and coercion by both Hollywood and Eastern European big-wigs, and scenes from the original film depicting ambiguous—and occasionally violent—transactions between men and women on the Polish set—in stately homes and on snowy blocks, coupled with the regular appearance of a chorus of prostitutes in the second half of the film, establish a cogent parallel between the unstable subject/object relationship of performance and prostitution. Although Inland Empire's female characters appear subject to forces beyond their control—

the film industry, economics, the supernatural—moments of jubilant exhibitionism and creative self-expression are transcendent occasions, even if the results are as kitschy and surreal as the choreographed rendition of “Do The Locomotion” by the prostitutes later in the film.

### **Aesthetic Opposites**

Lynch reveals the vital and volatile interplay between the unconscious and the industry by framing psychological extremes within Hollywood backdrops, and Lynch’s interpretation plumbs the darkest depths of both worlds, to the extent that they exit through the other side of the looking glass: details such as the blinding, southern California light merging with the white studio exterior and juxtaposed against the pitch-black interior hallways of the set; or the comic relief of a helpless husband drenched in ketchup/fake blood at a backyard BBQ while Susan/Nikki’s identity unravels, are among countless scenes in which visual and narrative oppositions collide.

In another example, the mysterious, uninvited neighbor who drops in on Nikki at the beginning of the film recites a parable, in which a boy goes out to play and sees the world. When he casts a reflection, evil is born. The neighbor sets up a chilling dynamic between reality and cinematic representation. She then recites another parable, in which a little girl goes out to play and loses herself in the marketplace. The story’s moral, “The way to the palace is through the alleyway behind the marketplace,” contains an elusive message for Nikki, who has not yet won the starring role, and insinuates a controversial connection to the Hollywood movie industry/marketplace. Eventually, the neighbor displays a creepy consciousness of past, present, and script by uttering admonitions such as “actions do have consequences” (which is echoed later in the film) and alluding to a debt on an unpaid bill, a

“brutal-fucking murder,” and events that will occur “tomorrow.” The neighbor’s pejorative language, preconceptions, and prophecies destabilize the domestic order, ritual, and formality that introduce the scene. At first, the camera lingers on peripheral details and highlights the awkward pauses that lead to the surreal dialogue: the butler serving the women coffee; the women sipping from the delicate cups; the sunlight entering through the windows; the ornate upholstery and decor of Nikki’s massive hall and drawing room; her refined, put-together appearance; and her polite mannerisms only make the presence of this strange intruder more threatening. In pure Lynchian fashion, the most elegant, mundane setting frames the darkest, most esoteric insinuations. Visually and atmospherically, Inland Empire is replete with all manner of subtle variations between the starkest contrasts.

Inland Empire also contains multiple layers of spectacle and performance, as well as references to anachronistic audio/visual mediums and technologies. The opening sequence of the film is instructive in its disjointedness, alerting the viewer to the temporal and spatial dissonance that pervades the film, as well as disjunctions between sound, image, and mood. The first segment is in black and white and features a vinyl record spinning on a Victrola and the distressed, repetitive sound of the stylus gliding over dust and scratches. A voice becomes audible after the sound of applause to introduce “the longest running radio play / from the Baltic region.” In the next scene, a Polish man and woman walk down a hallway and enter a room. The subtitles reveal that a transaction between a prostitute and a client is taking place, although a blur effect distorts their heads; in the next scene the woman expresses fear and confusion about her location, though the context suggests that she is role-playing. The next scene shifts to color, and a woman with tears in her eyes watches static on a television set. The static cuts back and forth to imminent scenes in fast-forward mode, and then dissolves

into a drab soundstage apartment in which two human-sized rabbits sit on a couch and a third irons in the back of the room. They speak succinct lines that do not form a coherent narrative, triggering inappropriate laugh tracks despite their deadpan tone. To enhance the insular, Lynchian self-referentiality of the film, Naomi Watts and Laura Harring, the two female stars of Mulholland Drive, perform the voices of the female rabbits. The absurdity of the rabbits undercuts the triviality of one of the most conventional entertainment forms, the sitcom, and the effect is simultaneously comic and disconcerting.

By the fifth minute of Inland Empire, the film is overflowing with self-reflexive gestures and references to outmoded entertainment mediums, as well as multiple frames of representation and layers of staging. The film immediately conditions the viewer to let go of notions of plausibility and to focus not on whether events are occurring behind the scenes, in a character's imagination, or in a performance within the film, but in a liminal space that exists between reality and the realm of sets, stages, screens, actors, and their infinite range of signification. The ability to visually represent such a liminal space—as it pertains to the enigmatic history of a “cursed” story that spans time periods and continents—creates the ideal conditions for a haunting to take place.

### **Hauntology of a Film**

In Specters of Marx, Derrida explores the phenomenon of haunting as a concurrent absence and presence, and coins the term “hauntology” to invoke the homophonic “ontology.” Derrida traces references to specters and Shakespearean ghosts in the writings of Marx to assess the status and influence of Marxism in the late twentieth-century. For Derrida, the concept of haunting is a temporal, spatial, ontological, and even performative conundrum, as it is a repetition of “a first time” and “a last time,” or an origin and an end. The specter—

whether it signifies the revisitation of a political ideology or a temporal disjointedness—mimics the interplay between past, present, and future that makes interpretation unstable, and is further complicated as it is channeled through the public sphere by media outlets.

Sound theorists have adopted Derrida's term to refer to collisions between archaic and modern technologies in the digital sampling revolution, and appropriately, the term is in heavy rotation in the blogosphere; for example, the blogger k-punk cites occurrences of sonic "hauntology" in songs that blend samples of worn vinyl recordings with newer, digitally synthesized samples.<sup>36</sup> The hisses and scratches from an early or mid twentieth century sample are discernable, and even emphasized, and the overall effect is temporally disorienting, as if the past were "haunting" the recording.

Considering that Lynch mixes a distressed vinyl recording into the soundtrack in the very first scene of his inaugural foray into digital video, Inland Empire is "hauntological." In fact, the sound of the phonograph needle is audible in the mix in a number of the Polish scenes that apparently depict the original version of On High and Blue Tomorrows; the earlier version of the film is literally and figuratively haunting the newer one, as the "static" of the archaic technology situates the older story—which has a profound effect on the present one—as occurring in the past.

Lynch depicts antiquated technologies and stories—distorted and obscured by the passing of time—through the lens of a contemporary one: his use of digital video is a major departure from his previous work. Although the quality of the digital video appears to be a visual degradation, it creates multiple possibilities for the filmmaker. Street and set, past and

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<sup>36</sup> From "Phonograph Blues" by k-punk: <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/008535.html>; Blogger Steen also provides a definition: <http://www.newmappings.net/archives/papers/hauntologies>



present, and actor and character dissolve into a spectral digital glow that feels simultaneously fake and hyperreal—a result of the extreme contrast of light and dark that the format enhances. Furthermore, the flexibility and affordability of the digital medium enabled Lynch to make a film that is as sprawling and multivalent as Inland Empire; the medium influenced his technique, allowing him to shoot improvised scenes at home and abroad and to cut a final version with a longer, three hour runtime. The digital format represents Lynch’s “alleyway behind the marketplace,” and thus liberates him from the demands of studio-financed convention to create a work that mirrors his own vast Inland Empire.

### **A Vast Expanse**

Within the context of the film, the phrase “Inland Empire” corresponds to a transcontinental network, a geographic location, architectural environments, and interior states of mind: Inland Empire represents the boundless possibilities of space and identity, specifically the infinite possibilities of an elusive Poland / Baltic / Los Angeles axis, the multiple studios, stages and sets, and the staggering range of characters and emotional states Nikki embodies and splinters into: the self-composed actress; the elegant hostess; the southern flirt; the sassy adulterer; the passionate lover; the battered wife; the hard-up barfly; the panicked streetwalker; the enraged victim; the disassociated actress wandering the set in a fugue; and the murderer all coexist to comprise an inexhaustible repertoire of psychological registers.

Architectural spaces and locations function similarly; for example, lighting transforms the prop house, or “Smithy’s house,” throughout the film: it is lit with spotlights when Nikki/Susan first encounters the prostitutes, bathed in artificial sunlight when they “Do the Locomotion,” or cast in shadow when Nikki/Susan is being chased into the recesses of

the set by Devon—after Freddy interrupts the rehearsal. The lighting also cycles through the color spectrum, as it is dark blue during Nikki and Devon’s sexual encounter; yellowish-orange while the husband lurks or is sleeping; or red in reference to Nikki/Susan’s encounter with the menacing Baltic phantom who carries a red light bulb in his teeth.

Scenes depicting the making of On High and Blue Tomorrows pay a disproportionate amount of attention to tedious attempts to resolve lighting issues, yet these moments are deceptively significant. The connections between the distinctive, multifarious light of Los Angeles and its influence on the origins and endurance of the movie industry in the region extend to the actual mechanics of the cinematic process. Light—whether in terms of its transfer to celluloid, the technological evolution of its register to color film, or its effect on the mood of a scene—is essential to the moviemaking enterprise, and Inland Empire capitalizes on this fact by linking it to sex and death: it is while Nikki and Devon are waiting for the crew to work out lighting cues that their flirtation develops, and in the dramatic finale of the film within the film, Susan’s drawn out death scene on Hollywood Boulevard—specifically the Avenue of the Stars—concludes when the homeless woman extinguishes the lighter that has poignantly symbolized Susan’s “eternal flame.” Although an aesthetic and technological transaction among many, light is an ontological function of cinema, and in Susan’s case, her existence.

### **Layers of Identity and Place**

The location of her demise deepens the intricacies of place and identity. After Billy’s hypnotized wife stabs Susan with a screwdriver, Susan removes the instrument from her body. It falls on the star belonging to Dorothy Lamour, a screen actress from Hollywood’s golden age. Struggling to remain on her feet, Susan crosses the intersection of Hollywood

and Vine and collapses between a woman and a couple crouching and camped out on the pavement; all three react nonchalantly to the bleeding Susan. The African-American woman to her left eventually acknowledges her when she says, “you’re just dying, that’s all,” but quickly digresses to inquire about catching a bus to Pomona, a city in the Inland Empire. The reference to Pomona reminds the Japanese woman to Susan’s right about Niko, a friend she once stayed with in Pomona, and she proceeds to describe Niko’s misfortunes in graphic detail, including her addiction to drugs, her prostitution, her defecating pet monkey, and her gynecological abnormalities—which disconcert her boyfriend. The one hopeful quality in regards to Niko is how beautiful she looks when she wears her blonde wig, linking the unfortunate Niko to the tragic panoply of characters embodied by the blonde Laura Dern.

The reference points in this scene triangulate the sociological, geographic, and cultural scope of Los Angeles. The infinitude of Hollywood melodrama plays itself out on its quintessential, residential block, where the tragicomic scenarios of the homeless unfold above the factoid memory/ sound bite history of luminaries; where the blonde Susan, who has fallen from prosperity to poverty, coughs up blood on the stars—marginalized like the melting pot she is sandwiched between and doomed like the girl in Pomona; and where the city’s elusive bus schedule signifies a baffling triviality and an absurd immobility for the disenfranchised, finally grounding the outlying area of Los Angeles as a terminal point in the literal and figurative Inland Empire.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Internal migrations within Los Angeles echo the path of the intracontinental quest for reinvention that culminates on the West coast. The poetry of Wanda Coleman constantly refers to the city’s interior layout, in which progress is achieved by gravitating away from the central, less hospitable sections of the city and westward towards the ocean and wealthier neighborhoods. Her imagery depicts the plight of economic, racial, and gender inequality in Los Angeles, and graphically merges self and place by juxtaposing the female body with physical and iconic attributes of the city such as cars and pavement. Movement through the city becomes a metaphor for opportunity and freedom, but the realities of a sprawling layout and an inadequate public transportation system preclude the possibility of advancement for the struggling classes and exacerbates their outsider status.

After Susan dies, Kingsley breaks the spell by yelling, “cut.” The camera pulls back, slowly revealing that the scene was shot on a soundstage rendering of Hollywood Boulevard. Additional members of the crew and equipment come into view, and the three actors who surrounded Sue on the street stand up and exit. An iconic Hollywood location is merely a set, and the inverse is also true: geographic locations—the alleyway behind the studio, the Polish street scenes, the elegant homes, the shabby house belonging to the elusive “Smithy,” the neighborhood in the Inland Empire, are merely culled from states of mind, vague memories, and “screwball stories.” In two different scenes—ostensibly the Polish and American versions of On High and Blue Tomorrows, Susan and her Polish counterpart ask two women: “Look at me and tell me if you’ve known me before.” Both of these scenes are set in contrasting exteriors: the Polish one on a snowy street and the American one in a sunny yard. In both versions, the responses generate an unsettling degree of existential doubt for the questioner. The prostitutes also ask Susan/Nikki this question when she first encounters them, thus linking the slipperiness of identity and place to the blurred boundaries between prostitution and performance.

The aftermath of the death scene sustains the uncertainty of Nikki’s mental and physical state; she remains motionless for a disconcerting amount of time, until Kingsley initiates a round of applause for her performance. Nikki finally rises, and in a trancelike state, wanders along the set, through theaters, hallways, stages, and doorways. Layers of performance and narrative frames continue to accumulate, even after the shoot ends. Nikki appears to the crying woman who watches scenes unfold on television, then fades as if an apparition, just after they embrace. They come together briefly in the liminal spaces of

performance, but Nikki's immateriality solidifies as she attempts to exorcise the vestiges of Susan.

The intensity of the film's convolution of character, identity, location, and causality is staggering. Lynch's reticent synopsis of the film "it's about a woman in trouble," is a deceptively simple, tongue-in-cheek admission of its paradoxical nature: a trite Hollywood tagline erupts into a disjointed narrative of seismic proportions, as the definitions of "woman," "in" and "trouble" are as infinite and fleeting as Inland Empire's cinematic lexicon.

## **Part 11: Submersion of the Self into the Landscape: Play It As It Lays**

### **Chance Encounters**

Equally stark and evocative is the title of Joan Didion's novel. The phrase "Play It As It Lays" suggests a passive resignation to indeterminacy, contingency, and the forces beyond an individual's control, yet it also hints at a will to participate or to imagine, even if attempts to build a cause and effect relationship between events are futile. In addition, it denotes a wavering object, as the doubling of the pronoun "It" designates an array of roles, actions, and situations. Maria perceives an existential abyss around her, and refuses to question the meanings of things, but she will "stay in the game." By the conclusion of the novel, Maria's disassociation progresses into a resigned acceptance of her predicament that paradoxically allows her to plan a future—even if its radically quotidian itinerary suggests she will never attain it:

*I used to ask questions, and I got the answer: nothing. The answer is 'nothing.' Now that I have the answer, my plans for the future are these: (1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning. Damson plums, apricot preserves. Sweet India Relish and pickled peaches. Apple chutney. Summer squash succotash. There might even be a ready market for such canning: you will note that after everything I still remain Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter and Benny Austin's godchild. (210)*

Maria itemizes the assortment of fruit preserves in vivid detail, an attempt to ground herself amidst the reality of her deceased parents and her institutionalized daughter; the circumstances of her origins and progeny only intensify the precariousness of her past and

future. Her friend, BZ, commits suicide, her marriage with Carter fails, and she experiences life as devoid of meaning, yet Maria intends to extricate herself from her situation by immersion in the domestic. Moreover, it is her acceptance of the existential void that enables her to go on. Maria does not seek a flight from reality through fantasy; instead, she strives for it through a matter-of-fact enumeration of her domestic goals, ultimately seeking comfort in a future plan that will likely never occur.

As the passage continues, the gambling metaphor, pervasive throughout the novel, intensifies: “*you call it as you see it, and stay in the action;*” (210) Despite her best intentions, aleatory forces have the potential to negate Maria’s plans to “get Kate” or “do some canning.” On the last page of the novel, Maria expounds on “nothingness” amid an idle, detached existence:

*Carter called today, but I saw no point in talking to him. On the whole I talk to no one. I concentrate on the way light would strike filled Mason jars on a kitchen windowsill. I lie here in the sunlight, watch the hummingbird...One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what “nothing” means, and keep on playing. (214)*

“Nothing” is a fortification against a clinical or logical explanation for her circumstances, a defense mechanism to mitigate her lack of power or control: she will continue to “play” the hand she is dealt, but is unwilling to examine its meaning. Akin to Lynch’s female protagonists in Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire, Maria’s breakdown is similarly induced by her environment and milieu, yet whereas Susan’s characters blend seamlessly into one another and subsume her identity, and Rita/Camilla and Betty/Diane embody the polarity of desire and fantasy, Maria, also an actor, experiences a divergent but

equally disturbing alienation from herself on the screen when she is incapable of recognizing herself in one of her films (19). Fragmented beyond recognition, she is shut out of the possibility of fantasy as a mode of deliverance or transcendence. For Maria, the blatant reality of her obliterated hometown and disintegrated family encapsulate her identity and deepen its instability, and it is only in her confrontation with the landscape that the borders of her self dissolve into a fluid mode that transcends history, memory, and identity.

### **Hollywood Hedonism**

Didion's representation of Hollywood in the late sixties features the gamut of borderline, drug-dependent personalities and sordid, adulterous interactions, and Maria's associations are insular and insincere. Conveying a combination of mixed messages and assertive demands, agents, insiders, and friends are simultaneously cruel, abusive, and obsequious towards Maria, and any semblance of flattery or advice only occurs because of her husband's name. Midway through the novel, she skips Larry Kulik's party because she believes he is a gangster, but hears second-hand of his so-called high regard for her—even if it is backhanded and derogatory; BZ tells her, "...Larry Kulik's a great admirer of yours. You know what he said to Carter? He said, 'What I like about your wife, Carter, is she's not a cunt.'" (27)

Soon after, she encounters Larry at a party. He asks Maria about her husband once, ignoring her response to stare at a young girl. Further down the page, he inquires once again in the same breath that he reveals that he "researched" the young girl's sexual history: "I had her researched. Six.' He patted Maria's arm absently. 'How's it going, baby? How's Carter?'" (36) Maria endures multiple slights in this brief interaction, as she is secondary to Carter, Larry's object of sexual intrigue, and the quantification of the younger girl's sexual



worth. The verisimilitude of Didion's novel is potent in this scene, as it is also emblematic of the "gangster's" power and influence in Hollywood, as well as the industry's objectification of women and its rampant ageism. Despite her reservations about the man she had previously dismissed as a "gangster," she travels to Vegas with him, after she and Carter are divorced, after she has her abortion, and when she is in the later stages of her breakdown. The Las Vegas setting and her questionable company serve as a conduit for the unexpected; it is while she is at the casino with Larry that she has a chance encounter with her godfather, Benny Austin, providing her a brief, guilt-ridden confrontation with her past (she is too ashamed to let Benny see what kind of man she's with) and ends up fleeing the scene. (148-149) Her association with Larry, a representative of the darker, scandalous side of the Hollywood scene, is one of many manifestations of her self-destructive drive throughout the novel.

### **A Blank Canvas**

In Imagining Los Angeles, Fine links the structure of Didion's novel to Maria's fragmentary psychological state:

No character in Los Angeles fiction, though, had lost her bearings the way Maria Wyeth has in Didion's Play It As It Lays. Everything has come to nothing for her. Narrated essentially as a memory piece by Maria from a mental hospital in Nevada following her breakdown, the novel is a "white book" with more white space than print—87 chapters, some only a paragraph, in 218 pages—the typological equivalent to the fragmentation, the discontinuity, of her life. (Fine, 247)

Fine's interpretation of the "white space" clearly applies to the "discontinuity" of Maria's life, but she in fact narrates the novel from somewhere along the Pacific coast, not Nevada, and appropriately so. Didion establishes the setting early in the novel: "Those are

the facts. Now I lie in the sun and play solitaire and listen to the sea (the sea is down the cliff but I am not allowed to swim, only on Sundays when we are accompanied) and watch a hummingbird. I try not to think of dead things and plumbing.” (10) Maria, in the midst of a serious psychiatric episode, is suitably, precariously perched on a cliff on the edge of the continent. Didion is acutely aware of the symbolism of Maria’s setting, perhaps echoing her own sentiment about disillusionment and the continental endpoint; revisiting the resounding passage from her essay, “Notes from a Native Daughter” (1965), in which Didion encapsulates the influence of the spatial boundaries on the westward search for a better life: “California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent.” (Didion, Slouching Towards Bethlehem, 172) A suitable setting for Maria’s institutionalization, doom and optimism coexist on the border of the Pacific Ocean, the continental limit of anticipation and desire.

Fine’s analysis of Maria Wyeth occurs just after he refers to the symbolism of Oedipa Maas’s geographic orientation in the finale of Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49: “At the end of the novel Oedipa Maas, an urban detective, has come to the end of the line. The quest for answers leads her to the very edge of the ocean, where so many Los Angeles characters have come to the end.” (Fine, 246) Despite his inaccurate reading of Maria’s location, Fine is cognizant of the influence of landscape on Los Angeles literary figures such as Maria, even if he only expresses the connection implicitly in this section of his study.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pynchon’s protagonist experiences a resonant Californian disillusionment and dissolution of the borders between self and landscape that Didion echoes later in her novel. Pynchon writes of Oedipa on the coast: “As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land.” (Pynchon, 147) and Didion writes of Maria

Comprised of vignettes in the form of journal entries, third-person omniscient narrative, and first-person “testimonies” from her husband and friends—Didion’s novel reflects Maria’s deteriorating, fragmented psychological state: white space, blankness, the “nothingness” that she acquiesces to, dominate the page, contributing to the staccato pacing and the nonlinear sequence of events. Omission and absence drive the narrative, pushing the inexpressible process of psychological breakdown to the foreground, and inviting the reader to engage in her interiority and to reconstruct a coherent narrative and character out of the flashes of interactions, introspections, and descriptions. Functioning here as a device to sustain the experience of loss—resonant with Norman Klein’s relationship to memory and history—the “empty space” evokes the disappearance of Maria’s hometown, and also resonates with the task of documenting places that no longer exists—similar to the razing of Bunker Hill that occurs outside the frame in the Exiles.

The element of “play” as it pertains to performance is also pronounced in the novel’s thematic composition and elicits multiple layers of connotations. The actress “plays” a role or perfunctorily narrates her thoughts, but structurally, the “empty space,” as well as the shifts in voice, linearity, and tone, create a void that allows for a play of signifiers—an unstable subject—and an innovation of genre—a profusion of “white space.” Evocative of Derrida’s notion of “freeplay,” the novel’s existential void and staccato structure elicit ambiguity, while corresponding to Maria’s inability to connect to the outside world and her deepening sense of isolation. Role-playing denotes an insularity that is at once self-reflexive and self-destructive, furthering her resignation to forces beyond her control—such as chance, the movie industry, or the elements—and her estrangement from herself—the inability to

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in the desert: “By the end of the week, she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*.” (Didion, 170)

recognize herself on the screen. The notion of “play” is simultaneously confining and expansive, as the “It” in “Play It As It Lays” denotes a broad spectrum of possible objects or roles.

The novel is framed by Maria’s psychiatric episode, as the opening section suggests a writing exercise assigned by an absent authority or therapist: “They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none exist, but I told you, that is their business here...So they suggested that I set down the facts, and the facts are these: My name is Maria Wyeth.” (4) Later in the novel, the italicized sections of the novel also denote journal entries written during Maria’s institutionalization: “*Except when they let Carter or Helene in, I never minded Neuropsychiatric and I don’t mind here.*” (206) The actions and events that occur in the space between entries, as well as efforts to analyze or interpret them, add up to “nothing” for Maria, even if the act of writing itself represents a manner of therapy. The “they” that denotes the psychiatric establishment also implicates the reader, who will irresistibly attempt to fill in the gaps, and Maria does occasionally address the reader when she switches to the second person: “*One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you.*” (214) Nevertheless, the book invites a narrative investigation of the imagery of her words and fears, especially in terms of how they relate to her environment.

### **Hypocenter**

Whereas the previous chapter explored the imagery in Play It As It Lays as it relates to movement and time, the following will delve into the metaphorical dimensions of the domestic, the desert, and images associated with water. Like Inland Empire’s “Smithy’s House,” sense of place is fleeting and unstable in Play It As It Lays; the disappearance of

Maria's hometown in the novel—"There isn't any Silver Wells today...It's in the middle of a Missile Range." (6)—exacerbates her sense of dislocation and groundlessness. Silver Wells, transformed into a testing ground for nuclear weapons, is one of several peripheral places in the novel, as illusory and mutable as the nearby film sets that Maria's estranged friends and husband lure her to: likely succumbing to the region's fire prone conditions, one desert set that BZ and Carter are working on burns down and has to be rebuilt. (34-35)

On location in the desert at the novel's conclusion, Maria rises early to feel the blast of a nuclear device: "The heat stuck. The air shimmered. An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing." (204). The last vestige of a connection to her home exists in vibrations traveling beneath the earth's surface, triggered by civilization's most menacing agent of destruction. Her inability to perceive the blast intensifies the disconnection between self and place—yet self also reflects place: the defense industry, an external body with the authority to obliterate a landscape, transforms her hometown into a remote, poisonous site, while the movie industry obscures desert and identity by assigning them transient sets and roles. Maria's director/ex-husband insists on her presence in the desert as she exhibits signs that she is growing evermore distant and potentially dangerous to herself, and also because he is worried about the Hollywood gossip mill and the influence her mental state would have on his reputation. Identity is as fleeting and vulnerable to the influence of authority as Silver Wells, and cinema augments her sense of disconnection from self as well as environment.

Whereas the desert intensifies her sense of displacement and negation, images of water trigger the resurgence of emotions—even if they manifest as irrational fears. In her isolation, phobias surface unexpectedly and acutely:

In January there were poinsettias in front of all the bungalows between Melrose and Sunset, and the rain set in...For days during the rain she did not speak out loud or read a newspaper. She could not read newspapers because certain stories leapt at her from the page: the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, the rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday...Maria ate frozen enchiladas, looked at television for word of the world, thought of herself as under sedation and did not leave the apartment on Fountain Avenue. (99-100)

Other disasters assuage her; Maria contrasts personal with collective terror, or the general with the particular. Fear of the “general” absolves her from the culpability that the threat of the “particular” would insinuate; specific, personal disaster is “punitive,” whereas collective, widespread environmental disaster justifies the existence of her inexplicable, lingering dread and anxiety:

The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect (the rattlesnake in the playpen, that was different, that was particular, that was punitive), suggested an instant in which all anxieties would be gratified, and between the earthquake prophecy and the marijuana and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility. (Didion, 104).

Reports of lives dislocated by uncontrollable natural disasters diffuse her anxieties, while resignation to forces beyond her control, unpredictable, aleatory occurrences, allow her a momentary sense of “tranquility.” The house in the tributary on the television screen is a distorted reflection of her own self-imposed displacement; driven from her Beverly Hills

home by nightmares about the plumbing—dreams of drains stopped up with pieces of human flesh and water bubbling over in the sinks begin shortly after her abortion—she rents a furnished house on Fountain Avenue and anesthetizes her dread before the evening news. The unseen movement of water through pipes—the plumbing in her house—consumes and terrifies her, and coincides with the arrival of the winter rains.

A contrast emerges between the television reception and Maria's perception: channels of water exist within and outside the shelter, either as man-made conduits or unconquerable natural forces. On screen, the ecological disaster, the submersion of the woman's house, is actual, while Maria's imagination manufactures a far-fetched threat to her domicile; her fear is as synthetic a construct as the containment of water in metal pipes or the damming of rivers, yet it is more palpable to her than the lulling threat of natural disaster.

Again, fantasy as a mode of escape is unavailable to her, as her imagination only manufactures nightmare, paranoia, and anxiety. The phobias that surface as her breakdown progresses are deeply rooted in the elements of her physical and cultural surroundings, particularly, the distinctive, volatile geology of Los Angeles and its environs and the pressures of the movie industry. Pivotal moments in her psychological deterioration play out within physical sites that correspond to her mental state: she passively "assists" in BZ's suicide on the movie set in the desert (close to her obliterated hometown) (213); mudslides and rains coincide with her profound disassociation when she flees her home for fear of stopped drains; and finally, when her dissolution is complete and she can no longer distinguish the border between self and space, she retreats to the Hoover Dam, where desert and water collide at the quintessential edifice of the human manipulation of landscape.

## Desertions

Towards the end of the novel, Maria returns to the desert to reconstruct a boundary between her self and the space around her. She spends two weeks in Las Vegas, doing “nothing,” wandering in and out of casinos in a fugue state, forgetting her reason for being there:

By the end of the week, she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get. (170)

At the end of the lost two weeks, Maria begins to feel the lure of the Hoover Dam, just as the borders between the interior and the exterior, self and place, have irrevocably dissolved:

She began to feel the pressure of the Hoover Dam, there on the desert, began to feel the pressure and pull of the water. When the pressure got great enough she drove out there. All that day she felt the power surging through her own body. All day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where great power grids converged, throbbing lines plunged finally into the shallow canyon below the dam’s face, elevators like coffins dropped into the bowels of the earth itself. (171).

Out in the Nevada desert, in closer proximity to her birthplace, Maria’s connection with the landscape is profound and undeniable. The irresistible lure of the dam stems from a resonance with its subterranean orientation and a defenselessness before its massive accumulation of pressure and power. Its plunging descent invites dissolution and releases her from volition as she vertiginously traces the contours of the dam downward. Maria sees her



own submersion and sense of containment reflected in the structure. The dam, a product of the human manipulation of natural resources, is an intermediary between Maria and the land. The technological marvel simultaneously divides and connects her to the environment; it is at once seductive, familiar, and overpowering, a reorganization of the desert's elements to transform a barren, inhospitable terrain into livable land. The convergence of elements in this scene intensifies the convolution of Maria's psychological state, and coalesces into a potent metaphor to represent the relationship between identity and landscape in Play It As It Lays.

## **Part 12: Subterfuge of the Deluge**

### **Aquaculture**

Maria's communion with the Hoover Dam is an appropriate departure point for an investigation of another collision between the environment and technology in the region, the paving of the Los Angeles River. The issue of water in Southern California has been submerged in controversy and mythology throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the river, unpredictable, changeable, and subject to extremes of drought and overflow, also contributes to a vital metaphorical dimension to shed light on the idiosyncrasies and exceptionalities of self and place in the region.

Akin to his analysis of light, Carey McWilliams conveys resonant notions of paradox when he discusses the issue of water in An Island on the Land:

Throughout Southern California, there is not a single river, as people ordinarily understand the term, not a single natural lake, not a single creek with a year-round flow of water. Disastrous droughts have, in years past, spread desolation and ruin in the region. Yet, in this paradoxical land, flood waters have probably caused more damage and loss of life than droughts... Southern California is the land of the freak flood. In this semi-arid region, it can rain as nowhere else in America... (184)

McWilliams' chapter "Water! Water! Water" stresses the significance, the scandal, and the irrationality surrounding the situation of water in the region. He outlines the history of irrigation practices for the semi-arid climate, from the discovery of artesian wells, to the digging of deeper, subterranean reserves, to the Owens River Valley scandal that inspired the

plot of Polanski and Towne's Chinatown, to the controversial veneration of the engineer of the Los Angeles aqueduct, William Mulholland. McWilliams describes a series of shortsighted decisions, in some cases fueled by greed, but mostly a reflection of the arduous task of comprehending the idiosyncratic environment: "To manage such a freakishly paradoxical environment had always required real insight into the basic character of the region, an insight difficult to cultivate in a land made up of newcomers and migrants." (184)

In Ecology of Fear, Mike Davis refers to these "newcomers" as tourists, citing the disproportion between the brief period Anglo-Americans have had to observe the environment in the region to establish patterns, cycles, and paradigms, and the actual millennia of ecological and geological events. (35-36) Davis believes that public works and disaster preparation are staggeringly "shortsighted," only responding to a half-century of meteorological observation during an anomalous period of geologic tranquility: "the urbanization of the Los Angeles area has, it seems, taken place during one of the most unusual episodes of climatic and seismic benignity since the inception of the Holocene; or put another way, twentieth-century Los Angeles has been capitalized on sheer gambler's luck." (37-38)

Furthering his investigation into the extent of ecological abnormality, Davis describes how geomorphology in the region exemplifies trends in desert areas and in the Mediterranean, in which change occurs not gradually, but all at once, as a result of "high-intensity, low-frequency events ('disasters')." (18) In other words, "rainfall averages" or predictable seasons do not apply to southern California. (16) The element of surprise and change is particularly striking in the region:

The Southern California landscape epitomizes the principle of *nonlinearity* where small changes in driving variables or inputs—magnified by feedback—can produce disproportionate, or even discontinuous, outcomes. As a result, the landscape incorporates a decisive quotient of surprise: it packs an eco-punch seldom easy to predict simply by extrapolating from existing trends. (19)

The act of digging into the past—whether recent or distant—is futile in the face of such an aleatoric landscape. Just as modes of self-analysis or psychoanalysis seem pointless to Didion’s Maria, whose mantra-like “nothing” resounds with her resigned surrender to chance or “gambler’s luck,” the past cannot provide the tools to account for the present or to prepare for the future. Disruption and discontinuity form the semblance of an unintelligible pattern, like the abrupt shifts in voice and staccato style of Maria’s disjointed, affecting narrative. Similarly, the ecology and the elements of Los Angeles are unpredictable and enduring—with an elusive, nonlinear timeline, and to compound the degree of the city’s inherent volatility, human manipulation and exploitation of the landscape reinforce the trajectory towards cataclysm. In describing a “paradoxical desert that faces the ocean;” situated on a series of “strike slip,” “reverse,” and “blind thrust” fault lines; paved by industrialization; developed beyond the capacity of local and imported water supplies; subject to temporal and spatial anomalies; and prone to unpredictable cataclysms; McWilliams and Davis depict a region that is surely on the brink of disaster.

To further endanger the ecology of the region, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, planners have exploited Los Angeles’ volatility to gain voter support for projects that paradoxically deteriorated the stability of the region. Hence the clearing of brush to build hillside properties or the paving of the Los Angeles River make it impossible for the land to

absorb torrential downpours, thereby aggravating the potential for mudslides and forest fires. The paving of the river that began in the late 1930's may have prevented floods similar to the devastating deluge that occurred in 1938 and provided work relief after the Great Depression, but it also destabilized the already precarious balance between ecology and human inhabitation. As Davis points out, the city was presented with other, conservationist options: one proposal, by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Harlan Bartholomew, advocated a massive plan to accomplish flood control through the construction of a greenbelt and the creation of public space in the form of parks and nature reservations, but the city and the federal government chose instead, in Davis' words, to "armor" or pave the river to control storm runoff (69), thereby transforming the river into a distinctly inorganic entity: a cement public works project. The industrial and real estate development that has occurred along the paved bank of the river has destroyed ecosystems, prevented the construction of public space, channeled pollution and sewage into the Pacific Ocean, and eliminated a flood plain to absorb runoff and replenish subterranean water supplies.

### **The River as Cinematic Icon (and Freeway Extension)**

The image of the paved river has achieved iconic, and perhaps notorious, status in cinematic representations of Los Angeles. In Los Angeles Plays Itself, Thom Andersen includes the concrete channel of the Los Angeles River among the few landmarks that "always play themselves," along with City Hall, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Griffith Planetarium, the four-level freeway interchange, the Bonaventure Hotel, and Pink's Hot Dogs. A staggering number of films have incorporated the river into scenes involving car chases, races, and clandestine exchanges, to the extent that the paved river has become an

undeniable backdrop for violence, competition, crime, and danger: in other words, a concrete river bed of iniquity.

Some of the films that feature the Los Angeles River as a backdrop for corruption, transgression, or rebellion include The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension, Chinatown, Escape from L.A., Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Grease, Repo Man, Point Break, and To Live and Die in L.A. Many of these films present science fiction plots, specifically, instances of technology turning against humanity, such as in the case of the radioactive ants in Them!, or the cyborg assassins from the future in Terminator 2; crime plots, such as the subversive surfers/bank robbers in Point Break, or the acts of murder, incest, and corruption in Chinatown; or ecological disaster in the futuristic, post-apocalyptic Escape from L.A., in which a devastating earthquake separates Los Angeles from the rest of the United States, and the city is transformed into an island of prisoners and undesirables.

Even in the wholesome, teen musical Grease (1978), the river represents a space of transgression, a place where the rebellious rival gangs, the “T-Birds” and the “Scorpions,” can settle the score in a drag race, free of the constraints of speed limits, traffic laws, and high school principals. Good girl Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) watches from the top of the concrete bank, separate from the rest of the spectators. Below, the cars sail over the concrete river channel in carefree abandon, over minuscule puddles, immune to laws of nature and society. Just before the race, Leo (Dennis Stewart), the leader of the Scorpions tells Danny, (John Travolta), head of the T-Birds: “the rules are, they’re ain’t no rules,” and he follows his own illogical construct; Leo’s racer is customized with a circular saw, cutting into Danny’s car, but he still loses despite his sinister modification.

In Terminator 2 (1991), the assassin from the future, the T-1000 (Robert Patrick)—composed of a liquid metal alloy and capable of morphing into anything it touches—returns to the “present” to kill the future leader of the human resistance against the cyborgs, John Connor (Edward Furlong). The temporal conundrums and technological marvels reach an apex on the Los Angeles River. An excessively long and elaborate chase scene involving the pursuer, the T-1000, and the pursued, the cyborg protector of the young Connor, the “Terminator” (Arnold Schwarzenegger), covers a vast expanse of the concrete channel and paved tributaries. Even in an 18-wheeler, the T-1000 is still no match for the cool, deadpan, leather-clad, future governor of California on a motorcycle, who seems to be in complete command of the situation amid the perversions of nature and science. The combination of the relentless, alloy aggressor amid the river’s urban detritus of a capitalist car park—an overturned shopping cart, a burnt-out skeleton of a car, and a rubber tire, all floating in a couple inches of dirty river water—coalesce to form one of the most menacing representations of the Los Angeles River on film.

In numerous films, and especially in the Terminator 2, the river transmogrifies into a sprawling, otherworldly extension of the freeway, a grotesque hybrid of infinite pavement for the sake of unbridled and transgressive movement. Partly organic but mostly cement, the river is the ecological equivalent of the cyborg.

### **Origins of the Unnatural**

The river, although systematically contracted and stripped of its innate qualities in the twentieth century, is nevertheless a fundamental component of Los Angeles’ pre-and post-colonial history and eventual growth into a global city, as evidence by its original name: *El*

*Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles del Río de Porciúncula*.<sup>39</sup> There are multiple interpretations to account for the specific location of the “pueblo’s” founding in 1781 by Spanish missionaries, but the original settlement was located along the banks of el *Río Porciúncula*, the Los Angeles River. Whether the site was chosen for the quality of the soil, made fertile by its fluvial proximity, or the presence of indigenous labor (the Los Angeles pueblo was also the site of the Gabrielino village, *Yaanga*) (McCawley 57), the ecology of the landscape is a vital component of the city’s “colonial” origins.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the paving of the river is another attempt for the city to rewrite history or revise its origins; the effective “burying” of the river suggests a municipal act of self-destruction or self-effacement, another manifestation of the volatile relationship between identity (on a collective level) and place in the region.

The high occurrence of migration in the region also played an important role in determining the river’s fate. The paving of the river by the “tourists” or “migrants” who were relatively recent settlers in the region is a technical innovation much to the detriment of its ecology. Davis, McWilliams, and Klein all cite a misguided effort to impose a semblance of east coast familiarity and stability to a landscape in which discontinuity is the norm. Davis writes: “Immigrants from the humid states...brought with them deeply ingrained prejudices about climate and landscape shaped by their experiences in the environmental continuum of northwestern Europe and the eastern United States. (14)

Like the migrant writer, for whom, in David Fine’s words, “the past is an elsewhere,” the landscape architect or urban planner experiences a corresponding spatial and temporal

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<sup>39</sup> The Village of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels of the river of Porziuncola.

<sup>40</sup> As Michael Jacob Rochlin, Carey McWilliams, and William McCawley in *The First Angelinos: The Gabrielino Indians of Los Angeles* all note, indigenous settlements and their post-colonial palimpsests existed close to water sources and abundant vegetation.



dissonance. Regrettably, widespread efforts to develop land and to privatize space have upset the already precarious balance between technological progress and environmental impact.

Klein writes in The History of Forgetting:

...developers selling the “belle-vue” tend to overbuild flood plains and slide areas; while master planners during the thirties had the L.A. River cemented over. The sum effect has nearly eradicated what once were massive *underground* lakes, very abundant aquifers. Water tables continue to drop immensely. Innumerable species have disappeared. (83)

The element of water conjures regional mythologies that are comparable to other myths and legends, such as that of the “violent” Bunker Hill that contributed to the transformation of downtown, or that of the healing sunlight and boundless opportunity that lured, and disillusioned, hopeful generations of migrants. According to Davis, the idea that Los Angeles’ existence depends on feats of engineering and irrigation is misleading:

No belief is more deeply rooted in the Southern Californian mind than the self-serving conviction that Los Angeles would be Death Valley except for the three great aqueducts that transfer the stolen snowmelt of the Sierra and Rockies to its lawns and pools. The city is advertised as the triumph of superengineers like William Mulholland who built rivers in the desert. (10)

Davis cites documents by Spanish settlers that claim the fertile qualities of the soil and rivers and the discovery of subterranean water sources, and also stresses that the inconsistent patterns of precipitation worried the influxes from the east who feared aridity. The booster promotion of southern California as a Mediterranean climate appealed to the migrating masses, who nevertheless failed to appreciate that the Mediterranean also

experiences “cataclysmic cycles” and long spells of drought followed by floods. (11-13) Davis also describes a linguistic discord between the environment and the new arrivals, who did not possess a vocabulary to accurately describe their surroundings: “by no stretch of the imagination...is an arroyo merely a ‘glen’ or ‘hollow’...” (11); hence the amalgam of Spanish place-names—a language containing a compatible vocabulary to denote the Mediterranean landscape—and imprecise, Anglo-influenced place-names to evoke an imported and artificial New England charm.

Also misleading is the reputation of William Mulholland, who represents an ambivalent figure in the Los Angeles imagination. McWilliams ponders his legacy: “Just why the City of Los Angeles felt compelled to honor the engineer responsible for the Owens Valley fiasco, or even to mention Owens Valley, remains one of those curious examples of ambivalent civic ethics.” (191) He is revered for building the famous and controversial aqueduct that irrigated the San Fernando valley (which required the swindling of Owens Valley farmers to secure land rights and the creation of an artificial drought to sway voters, and, according to McWilliams, failed to solve the city’s water problems); he is immortalized by plaques, statues, and street names (McWilliams 191); yet he is responsible for one of the greatest disasters in the history of the region: the collapse of the St. Francis Dam in 1928, a tragedy that killed 385 people. (McWilliams 195)

### **Chinatown’s Revisionary Legacy**

As Andersen and Klein have both emphasized, Chinatown reconfigured the actual dates and details of the Owens Valley aqueduct project, and to reiterate Klein’s observation, “it obscures as much as it clarifies.” (247) In Chinatown’s dramatic retelling, William Mulholland is invoked by the semi-anagrammatic *Hollis Mulwray*, an engineer who in fact

opposes the building of a dam on the grounds that it is structurally unsound, even citing a fictional dam disaster involving “The Van Der Lip Dam” (evoking the St. Francis disaster) to further his cause. In depicting the Mulholland figure as a martyr—Mulwray is murdered for opposing the project and uncovering evidence implicating city officials in the creation of an artificial drought—Chinatown appears to absolve and honor Mulholland, a further convolution of his questionable legacy.

Andersen and Klein concur that Chinatown has supplanted the actual history of the Owens River Valley debacle—albeit for different reasons—and agree that the film is another example of myth posing as truth. As Klein writes, “It [Chinatown] does chronicle many of the fundamentals,” yet there are “powerful omissions.” (247) Andersen believes that the actual history is less scandalous and morbid than the film’s insinuations. Still, the mood and atmosphere of the film convey a resounding authenticity as regards the degree of public deception and misunderstandings involved in the history of water in the region.

As I discussed in chapter two, according to Klein, there is a significant shift in time period to make the story more “Chandleresque;” in addition, there are murders and other abject acts that deviate from history: the personal deception, subterfuge, and scandal that dominate the dramatic action of the cinematic version of the story function as narrative devices to engage the viewer. In the film, a significant parallel emerges between the manipulation of landscape and the violation of the individual, specifically Faye Dunaway’s character, Evelyn Mulwray, in a family melodrama. Nevertheless, the film’s finale is a major deviation from the Hollywood formula. The tragic, distinctly un-Hollywood ending insinuates a sinister commentary on the interplay between public and private space in Los Angeles, and springs from unrelated but equally disturbing historical events that add a layer

of meta-commentary to the movie. The fictional elements therefore provide the semblance of authenticity.

### **Fictional Doublings**

A direct parallel to the Owens Valley aqueduct project, both Jake Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, and Hollis Mulwray, played by Darrell Zwerling, discover that water is being pumped into a reservoir to create an artificial water shortage, in effect forcing farmers and landowners in the San Fernando Valley to sell their property devalued by drought, and swaying voters to support a public works project that would in turn provide water for the parched city. Mulwray's opposition and knowledge result in his murder, while Gittes, a private investigator, deepens his attachment to the case and to Evelyn Mulwray, the wife of Hollis and the daughter of Noah Cross (John Huston), the wealthy, powerful orchestrator of the scandal. Gittes' involvement begins as an adultery case, but quickly escalates into an investigation into the circumstances of Hollis Mulwray's murder and the corruption surrounding the city's water supply. Early in the film, a false Mrs. Mulwray, an actress named Ida Sessions (played by Diane Ladd<sup>41</sup>) hires Gittes to prove that Hollis is having an affair. After the media exposes the so-called affair with a photograph of Hollis boating on Echo Park Lake with a woman, the real Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) comes forward, and when her husband's body washes up in a reservoir, she officially hires Gittes to investigate. As the double usually portends death in literary and cinematic traditions, Ida, the false Mrs. Mulwray, is eventually murdered by the powerful agents behind the conspiracy.

Self-referential references to water permeate the film, contributing to a major motif that goes above and beyond the water scandal plot. One of Gittes' associates, after waiting

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<sup>41</sup> Adding to the pantheon of Lynchian referentiality in the treatment of Los Angeles as "subject," Ladd is Laura Dern's mother.

for Mulwray after an all-night surveillance effort, quips: “he’s got water on the brain”; when the associate spots Mulwray on Echo Park lake, in a paddle boat with the girl he is ostensibly having an affair with, he describes the location: “Echo Park, water again.” Mulwray is drowned in a salt water pond in his home, and his body is recovered in a reservoir. Furthermore, it is while Gittes is investigating Mulwray’s death at the coroner’s office that he comes across the corpse of a drunk who recently drowned in the Los Angeles River. Bewildered, Gittes remarks that the river is as “dry as a bone.” Gittes visits the river twice in the film, first to surveil Mulwray, and then to find evidence of illicit water dumping. Both times, the river appears to be “dry as a bone,” but a boy on horseback verifies that water is indeed being dumped into various sections of the river, and enough to drown a drunk man. Evocative of Carey McWilliams’ description of Los Angeles’ paradoxical river and relationship to water, the river’s status is oxymoronic in Chinatown; the “dry deluge” provides the fundamental clue to Gittes, and is a major turning point in his quest to uncover the truth and to expose the scandal. As a concurrent metaphor for obfuscation and revelation, water functions as an ambivalent image throughout the film.

The film’s finale is an intensely disturbing vision of power dynamics in Los Angeles. Noah Cross also hires Gittes to find “Katherine,” a woman Cross describes as Mulwray’s mistress. Eventually, Gittes discovers that Evelyn is hiding Katherine, and in a panicked exchange—in which Gittes slaps Evelyn repeatedly—forces her to reveal Katherine’s true identity: “She’s my daughter! She’s my sister! She’s my daughter! My sister, my daughter. She’s my sister and my daughter;” Noah Cross demands to have control over the girl who is both his daughter and his granddaughter, the product of his incestuous union with Evelyn.

The concept of progeny and inheritance in Chinatown is monumentally dysfunctional, and serves as an analogy for the unnatural and corrupt exploitation of landscape in the name of “public works”—Noah Cross essentially owns the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. To deepen the monstrosity of Cross’ character, he gets away with, to paraphrase Andersen in Los Angeles Plays Itself, both the “figurative rape of the land” and the “literal rape of his daughter.” In the film’s final confrontation, the police kill Evelyn after she attempts to drive away with her daughter, and Cross seizes Katherine, who is in hysterics. Gittes, who has pieced together the appalling violations of the personal and public, and is paralyzed by what he has witnessed, utters almost inaudibly, “as little as possible”—a reference to the terms of his police assignment before he became an independent investigator, which were “to do as little as possible in Chinatown.” His partner attempts to console him with the resounding line: “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown.”

### **Haunted By the Past**

The film’s conclusion reflects the invisibility of a marginalized, immigrant space, an apt place to bury personal and collective scandal and history.<sup>42</sup> The line has a haunting resonance, as an earlier exchange with Evelyn indicates that Jake has experienced loss before, during his previous assignment in Chinatown. First he is reluctant to talk about the past, but he eventually tells Evelyn, “I was trying to keep someone from being hurt. I ended up making sure that she was hurt.” Forced to bury his knowledge of the crime at the end of the film, he is doomed to obsessively repeat history.

In Los Angeles Plays Itself, Andersen is critical of the film’s conclusion: “Chinatown teaches that good intentions are futile. It’s better not to act, even better not to know.

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<sup>42</sup> In History of Forgetting, Klein documents the literal “relocation” of Chinatown for the sake of downtown’s urban renewal project.

Somehow this dark vision hasn't offended anybody." Yet Chinatown's vision of Los Angeles originates from a series of grim events and associations with the city's past—to the detriment of individuals as well as the region's ecology. The film is not imparting a message as much as it is projecting a mood and reinterpreting a conflated history and noir aesthetic; the revision of a political history and the revitalization of a cinematic aesthetic feed off one another, eliciting darker themes in a brighter film stock infused with sunlight. Chinatown simultaneously unearths a secret, public history—even if the film distorts details for the sake of drama and artistry—of water in the region, while depicting a climate of corruption and deceit that indeed corresponds to historical events. In the realm of the private, individuals—specifically, Evelyn and Jake—are forced to bury secrets to protect themselves or their families. To convey acts of submersion, the film must withhold evidence and expression, as in the case of Jake Gittes' withdrawal and resignation in the conclusion.

Futility is apt to express the sense of powerlessness in the midst of utter despair, uncertainty, or disintegration—and also applies to Maria in Play It As It Lays. Both works seek less to propose a solution than to represent a mood and a state of mind indicative of a specific time and place. Chinatown and Play It As It Lays share an approximate vantage point, that of the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, in which an atmosphere of violence and social unrest exists on local, national, and global levels. Andersen himself remarks that in the early seventies, films such as Chinatown reflect a shift to a newfound “self-consciousness” triggered by harsh social realities; hence its bleak message corresponds to a concurrent, contemporary mood.

The back-story of the film also sheds light on the film's verisimilitude, as regards the correspondence between its dark vision and a revisionary history of water from a seventies

perspective. Robert Towne had initially written the screenplay with a conventional happy ending, but Roman Polanski, the film's director, insisted on rewriting a tragic ending to the film. His fervent, unyielding vision for how this distinctively Los Angeles film should end corresponds to the circumstances that led to his departure from Los Angeles in 1969: the murder of his wife, actress Sharon Tate, who was eight months pregnant, by followers of Charles Manson. Accepting the offer to direct Chinatown triggered his first return to the city since the tragedy<sup>43</sup> (until another scandal, his alleged rape of a 13 year-old-girl, guilty plea of unlawful sex with a minor, and fear of ensuing incarceration sent him into exile in 1977).<sup>44</sup> Hence, an aura of crime, scandal, and tragedy permeates the film on multiple levels.

In the retrospective interviews with Robert Towne, Roman Polanski, and Robert Evans in the DVD special edition of Chinatown, the producer, Robert Evans, states that he wanted a "European vision" for the film, and therefore chose the Polish-born Polanski. The decision to hire a director with a "foreign" point of view to shoot a film about Los Angeles is fitting, as it corresponds to the role that migration plays in forming a distinctly local literary tradition. Hence the migration of artists and intellectuals to Hollywood from points east, as in the case of the many European exiles who arrived in Los Angeles during and before the second World War to escape Nazi persecution, or the waves of British and American migrants who ventured west in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seeking fame, health, prosperity, or a break from tradition, migration is an integral facet of the cultural history of

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<sup>43</sup> In the retrospective interviews with Robert Towne, Roman Polanski, and Robert Evans in the DVD special edition of Chinatown, Evans, the producer of the film, states that Polanski was reluctant to return to Los Angeles so soon after the tragedy, but was convinced by the quality of the story and accepted the offer to direct Chinatown.

<sup>44</sup> Even decades after the film's release, scandal still enshrouds the film's legacy as a result of Polanski's involvement. Considered a great work of art by cinephiles and critics, Chinatown is a testament to Polanski's artistic brilliance, and according to many of his supporters, legitimizes his special treatment in the legal proceedings of the rape case that is still active in 2009. The saga invites an investigation into the intermingling of roles by the director/antagonist/victim/aggressor, as well as the reverse trajectory of exile that haunts Polanski's experience.



Los Angeles. The “outsider” perspective, or the inherent sensation of an “elsewhere,” therefore adds a supplemental layer of accuracy in the depiction of a distinctly Los Angeles story.

The film that Thom Andersen regards as the first to treat Los Angeles as a subject, although deeply enmeshed in quintessentially native genres and themes—noir and water—deviates from classical Hollywood style in its tragic conclusion, bleak message, and scathing self-criticism. The producer, who sought a distinctly foreign vision to reinforce both history and myth, whether inadvertently or not, mimicked the mechanics of migration, exile, and otherness to tell Los Angeles’ archetypal story in its representative mode. Yet in opposition to Chinatown’s expansive vision, the plot embodies the excesses of insularity through themes of incest and opportunism, thus contributing to the city’s reputation as an epicenter for public and private scandal and ecological contradiction. Nevertheless, its oppositions sustain its status as a complex and enduring work of cinema.

The three predominant inquiries in this chapter comprise three variations on Los Angeles self-reflexivity. Chinatown, Play It As It Lays, and Inland Empire rely on distinct elemental oppositions that represent parallels between environmental volatility and personal disaster and push the boundaries of structural and stylistic extremes. In a mode evocative of Chinatown’s back-story, Inland Empire’s juxtaposed Polish set to mirror the Hollywood plot provides a vital counter to Lynch’s disturbing, elliptical Hollywood exposé, offering a contrasting “European vision” to enhance—and haunt—his own dark interpretation of an iconic aspect of Los Angeles, the movie industry. Finally, akin to the omnipresent setting (and ominous connotations) of the Los Angeles River in cinema, the realm of sets and stages—the backdrop of the movie industry—comprises a synthetic “ecology,” and thus

provides a liminal space to explore the unraveling of identity, the fragmentation of self, and the friction (and frisson) between fantasy and reality in the Los Angeles narrative.

## Epilogue

Joan Didion's essay "The White Album" begins, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." (11) The individual, the writer, contextualizes and interprets to derive meaning from the world, the narrative. Yet during the period of time between 1966-1972, she writes: "I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself." Events, coincidences, and incidental occurrences fail to add up for her, and she describes a series of mundane and momentous anecdotes involving scenes and scenarios that she is at once connected to and detached from: sitting in on a recording session with the Doors; planning menus for the many visitors who passed through her large, dilapidated Franklin Avenue home; interviewing Black Panther members Huey Long and Eldridge Cleaver; visiting San Francisco State University in the midst of student protest; going out to see theater and music on Melrose Avenue and USC; learning about the Manson murders in her sister-in-law's Beverly Hills pool on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969.

During this period, Didion undergoes a series of medical and psychiatric evaluations, and intersperses the results throughout the essay. A mysterious constellation of neurological symptoms yields an equally elusive diagnosis: "the name was multiple sclerosis, but the name had no meaning. This was, the neurologist said, an exclusionary diagnosis, and meant nothing. (47) For Didion, "the improbable had become the probable, the norm: things which happened only to other people could in fact happen to me." The diagnosis is a physical manifestation of a narrative condition: "the startling fact was this: my body was offering a

precise psychological equivalent of what has been going on in my mind...In other words it was another story without a narrative.” (47)

Earlier in the essay, “an attack of vertigo and nausea” compels her to undergo a psychological evaluation. The transcript of the psychiatric report—she incorporates it into her essay—describes her perspective as “*alienated from the world of other human beings,*” and her viewpoint as *fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive...living in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations....*” Didion responds to the evaluation in two succinct sentences: first, she states that the evaluation occurs shortly before she was named a *Los Angeles Times* “Woman of the Year;” second, she connects her medical condition to the time period: “By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968.” (15) Whether she is challenging the psychiatric establishment or downplaying her accomplishments, by way of a double negative and the adjoining, matter-of-fact statements, she subtly intimates that, considering the chaotic conditions of the “woman” and the “year” in question, the honorific is fitting. Further implicating her connection to the times by titling her essay “The White Album”—“The White Album” is also the name of the innovative, multi-genre 1968 Beatles album—Didion documents her own experimental journey through the end of the sixties. In stark contrast to Didion’s inability to sustain narrative, Charles Manson discerns messages in the Beatles’ recording that instruct him in carrying out his killing spree and apocalyptic race war. Perhaps her condition serves as a defense mechanism.

Didion merges the personal with the historical, absorbing the perplexing end of the decade at the edge of the continent. She is stirred by a numbing causality, or chain of events

that connect her to the Manson trials, from the mundane to the significant. The enigmatic ailments that Didion describes in the essay are physical and neurological manifestations of a time and place, analogous symptoms of cultural breakdown, where normal synapses and reactions are remote and anything is possible: “In this light all narrative was sentimental. In this light all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless.” (44)

A neurological metaphor, in which damaged nerve circuits reroute themselves with unaffected ones to carry messages, leads her to the following realization:

During the years when I found it necessary to revise the circuitry of my mind I discovered that I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor jumped or did not jump, or in why. I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind: her hair incandescent in the floodlights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge. (44)

Denoting passive resignation to the unexpected, to an incomprehensible causality, the visual image supplants narrative in her mind. The details that she gives in the above example do not form a whole picture, but a fragmented one, depicting only the top and the bottom, a montage of sensory detail. The absence of narrative is a means of preventing the messages from reaching their destination or blocking the transmission of pain receptors, yet the visual substitute—evocative of the cinematic—forges a connection between the subject and object.

Towards the conclusion of the essay, she frames the beginning and the end of the sixties with events from her life, merging the mundane and the violent: she recalls buying her wedding dress on the morning of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963; Roman Polanski spilling wine on that same dress a few years later; purchasing a dress for the key witness of

the Manson murder trials, Linda Kasabian, in which Polanski's wife, Sharon Tate, was one of the victims; and finally, being godparents to the same child as Roman Polanski.

In describing the Manson murders as the symbolic end of the sixties, the paranoia is self-fulfilling and the news spreads like “brushfire:” “Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled.” (47)

On the personal level, the other endpoint of the era occurs when she moves out of the Franklin Avenue house in January 1971. Her new home, on the sea in Malibu, contains relics of the occult movements that permeated the culture of the sixties in California—Scientology pamphlets, science fiction literature—but she manages to “exorcise” the place with the help of “power saws and the sea wind.” (48)

In both “endings,” she conjures the ingredients of destruction, illusion, and transformation. The unexpected confluence of quotidian details and seismic cultural shifts, the interlaced connections between the violent, the occult, and the political coalesce into a distinctly personal account of the time period. Fire, the sea, murder, fashion, paranoia, and the occult merge into an “authentically senseless chain of correspondences,” yet despite her attempts at narration, meaning continues to elude her: “writing has not yet helped me to see what it means.” (48)

This merging of such “senseless correspondences” is an inherent feature of the Los Angeles narrative, in which the interplay of cultural movements—whether underground or mainstream; elements—whether figurative or literal; and details—whether mundane or momentous, coexist equally to form the urban imaginary of Los Angeles. Likewise, Didion's

internalization of social disillusionment and its surfeit of counter-cultural and spiritual remedies, the psychosomatic and textual expression of her surroundings, exemplify the dynamics of self and place in the Los Angeles narrative. Like her protagonist Maria, who explicitly “sets down the facts,” (4) Didion itemizes without imposing an order, letting the white space between the details, sensations, and cultural forces be, inviting the reader to provide a narrative, to approximate the ineffable relationship between elements. Cultural incoherence manifests as a neurological conundrum or a crisis of interpretation and utterance. When the story or narrative fails, an image takes over, delivering the perceiver, the interlocutor, the narrator, to an indeterminate space, where an absence allows for a boundless inventory of analogy, possibility, and invention.

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