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L.A. Stories: Identity and Conflict in Posturban Culture

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Mikage Kuroki

December 2011

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The Dissertation of Mikage Kuroki is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

L.A. Stories: Identity and Conflict in Posturban Culture

by

Mikage Kuroki

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2011
Dr. John Ganim, Chairperson

Los Angeles represents the paradigmatic postmodern city, its centrifugal layout the antithesis of the modern ring-centered city of which Paris, London, and Vienna and their American counterparts New York and Chicago are prime examples. Despite its postmodern geography, however, L.A., like the modern city, equally threatens to intensify the lives and overwhelm the psyches of its residents. Over a century ago, Georg Simmel argued that the modern urban dweller represents a new human type who develops a blasé attitude as both a product of and a defense against such a modern, metropolitan existence. How do we consider Simmel's definition of metropolis to accommodate L.A.? Furthermore, would such a mental type effectively combat the stimulation of the city's landscape, given its propensity to disasters – both manmade, social disasters and natural ones? In the larger context, does L.A. literature suggest an

evolution in urban theory or convey what has been called a “particular posturban consciousness”?

Much of L.A. literature explores this particular posturban consciousness, offering what Simon Malpas identifies as one aim of postmodernism: to “[reread] and critique... modern values and projects” (43). My examination of L.A. literature from the last two decades - D.J. Waldie’s *Holy Land*, T.C. Boyle’s *Tortilla Curtain*, Steve Erickson’s *Amnesiascope*, Nina Revoyr’s *Southland*, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, Salvador Plascencia’s *People of Paper*, and Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames*— reflects such an aim. Moreover, these novels reveal this particular apocalyptic tension between disaster and the promise of new world orders. In Chapter One, I argue that Waldie and Boyle’s texts reveal the tensions of collectivity and anonymity and of utopia and apocalypse. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how natural disaster in Erickson and Revoyr’s novels serve a revelatory function, violently shaking the protagonists out of amnesiac stupor. In Chapter Three, I show how Yamashita and Plascencia’s works share a vision of disaster and redemption and re-imagine new transnational communities and consciousness, pushing for a New World (B)order. In Chapter Four, I examine Abani’s novel for its similar themes of apocalypse, disaster and redemption, identity crisis, and transnational relations.

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Introduction

As I was working on an early draft of this dissertation one summer weekend in 2008, I took a break to visit the Huntington Library in San Marino, California and enjoy *This Side of Paradise: Body and Landscape in L.A. Photographs*, the special exhibit at the time. The photographs on display varied widely, ranging from late 19th century pictorial histories of a burgeoning Los Angeles to more recent representations like *The Valley*, photographer Larry Sultan's photographic documentary of the thriving porn industry in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. Some photographs on display included William Garnett's famous aerial photographs of the development of the Lakewood suburb¹ and Ansel Adams's image of the tangled arteries of the L.A. freeway interchange²; others depicted manmade and natural disasters including the St. Francis Dam Disaster and the Long Beach Earthquake while still others captured the city's iconic beaches, boardwalks, surfers, and billboards featuring Angelyne.³ Trying to make sense of all of the images to imagine some single, coherent definition of L.A., all in a single afternoon proved to be a dizzying and futile effort on my part.

The futility of my efforts as a spectator to comprehend these various representations of L.A. as a unified narrative, as a single L.A. story, was one intended effect of the exhibit, I think. Like the novels I explore in the next chapters, the exhibit demonstrates the inability to sum up L.A., neither the landscape nor the residents who

¹ William A. Garnett, *Grading Lakewood California*, 1950; *Foundation and Slabs, Lakewood, California*, 1950; *Finished Housing, Lakewood, California*, 1950 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 59).

² Ansel Adams, *Interchange, Los Angeles Freeway*, 1967 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 43).

³ John Humble, *Selma Avenue at Vine Street, Hollywood, January 23, 1991*, 1991 (Watts and Bohn-Spector back jacket).

occupy its spaces, in a single coherent statement. In this respect, the exhibit is a postmodern endeavor, the sort of “rereading and critique of modern values and projects” one definition of postmodernism Simon Malpas offers (43). In other words, the play, anarchy, dispersal, difference, indeterminacy and antinarratives of postmodernism replace modernism’s imperatives of purpose, hierarchy, centering, origin, determinacy, and grand narratives, to borrow Ihab Hassan’s terms (280-1). Accordingly, my examination of L.A. literature from the last two decades - D.J. Waldie’s *Holy Land* (1996) and T.C. Boyle’s *Tortilla Curtain* (1995) in the first chapter, Steve Erickson’s *Amnesiascope* (1997) and Nina Revoyr’s *Southland* (2003) in the second, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Salvador Plascencia’s *People of Paper* (2005) in the third, and finally Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007) in my last chapter – may contain similar themes such as postmodern fragmentation, marginalization, colonialisms, transnationalism, natural and human disasters, humanity, apocalypse, reinvention, and renewal but no overarching category other than the loose umbrella of “L.A. stories ” can adequately encompass all of these works.

Significantly, the following words welcomed visitors at the entrance of the Huntington exhibit: “Contrary to popular belief, Los Angeles does not defy description so much as provoke it.” To say that the city cannot be described erroneously implies a lack on the city’s part, that L.A. must but cannot be reduced to a single definition or lens through which to view the city. However, as the exhibit’s message corrects, indeterminacy is precisely the beauty and terror of L.A., the city’s sheer number of possible representations, its ability to “provoke” diverse descriptions and interpretations.

To which side of paradise does the exhibit's title *This Side of Paradise* refer? The beautiful side? The wrong or ugly side? Of what paradise - paradise lost, found, enhanced, or perverted? Indeed, the authors of the L.A. stories I consider here are equally provoked by both the beauty and terror of the city, variously representing its urbanscape, identities, and conflicts as the title of my dissertation suggests.

The Los Angeles depicted in the exhibit and imagined in the literature I explore, can be understood as the antithesis of the modern ring-centered city, its postmodern layout "peculiarly resistant to conventional description" and distinguished by multiple centers rather than an urban core like those of traditional metropolises –Paris, London, and Vienna or their American counterparts New York and Chicago (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 222). Despite L.A.'s centrifugal layout, Angelenos may be no different from residents of such traditional metropolises in the sense that the constant shifting of faces, events, scenes, and other such stimuli equally threatens to over-stimulate, overwhelm, and consume them, erasing their individuality. The question then becomes, how does the L.A. subject survive in an environment that is both awe-inspiring and menacing at the same time, protecting against a landscape that signals modernity and progress yet also warns of potential annihilation?

Over a century ago, the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel argued that the modern urban dweller represents a new human type who develops a blasé attitude as both a product of and a defense against a modern, metropolitan existence in which the "swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" has a tendency to intensify his life and overwhelm his psyche. How do we consider Simmel's definition of

metropolis to accommodate the paradigmatic postmodern city of Los Angeles? Does the unique case of Los Angeles also demand a revised understanding of what qualifies as urban stimuli? Do Angelenos respond to urban stimuli in the same fashion as do residents of other metropolises? Do Los Angelenos respond uniformly with the blasé distance of Simmel's hypothesis for the most part? In the larger context, does the literature of Los Angeles suggest an evolution in urban theory or convey what has been called a "particular posturban consciousness"?

Twenty years ago, Los Angeles could be understood as the antithesis of the great European metropolis. Its horizontality, its multiple personalities as alternately a bucolic haven or a concrete urban playground interconnected and intersected by freeways, and its inclination to both anonymity and mobility were defined in what now seems to be a dated formulation in Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles, the "architecture of four ecologies."* However, although Los Angeles and Southern California now pose a substantially different relation to its casual observer, a new urbanism, a new density, and the tensions of Anglo hegemony as addressed in the writings of scholars like Mike Davis, suggest that the questions raised by classical urbanism, while requiring redefinition, are not entirely obsolete. Instead, a case can be made that it was the multi-nucleated landscape extolled by Banham that *produced* a characteristically blasé new type, at least in popular culture's estimation. The events of the past three decades evidence the intensity of the urban subject's paradoxical experience of both existential isolation from and increased interaction with the "other," and thus this new mental type resembles but also differs from the classic urban subject.

The *Paradise* exhibit prompted me to ask additional questions, particularly about the applicability of this mental type to Angelenos of diverse backgrounds. Does the blasé defense have the same significance for the different groups who call L.A. home? Does the blasé provide an equally effective shield for the various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups who occupy L.A., and is it blind to skin color or class? Or does the blasé have unintended consequences for some subjects? Does it effectively elide racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic specificity as Philip Brian Harper suggests of postmodernism, which fails to account for the specific kinds of “decenteredness” experienced by “socially marginalized groups” (4). Does the blasé amount to submission to oppressions perpetrated by a party wielding power? Does L.A. reveal itself in such a way that these questions are so difficult to answer, indeed requiring rewriting in the context of specific novels or other fiction, discourses about the city, or the distinct subjectivity of a particular decade or a particular subject position, whether redefined by ethnicity, class, gender, or some combination of such factors?

The motley arrangement and sheer number of photographic representations of L.A. highlighted the city’s competing issues of history, perspective, race and ethnicity, gender, industry, and desire. For example, among the photos at the Huntington exhibit were those documenting L.A.’s legacy of racial and socio-economic exclusion, depicting both spaces of marginalization and those of agency, calling to mind bell hooks’s phrase “locations of radical openness and possibility” (153). Chinatowns of squalor and claustrophobic confinement⁴ and barefoot Chinese field hands⁵ depicted in photographs

⁴ W.H. Fletcher, *Old Chinatown, Los Angeles*, 1888 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 84).

recall the practice of segregation in L.A. and labor conditions for the Asian immigrant. Images of young men clad in zoot suits remind us of the 1943 Zoot Suit riots. Two photos discursively engage in a discussion of “home”: home is defined differently for the white Santa Monica resident who stands proudly in the doorway of her home⁶ than for a Japanese American woman similarly posed in her doorway in a 1942 photograph, shortly before her family was sent to the interment camps.⁷ Several photos speak to the economic struggles of Angelenos past and present: *The Damm Family in Their Car* (1987),⁸ for example, evokes the poverty and itinerancy of the depression era and is reminiscent of *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange. Some images provided compelling contrasts to one another: a 1920s photo of African American beachgoers at “the Cross”⁹ remind viewers of the city’s history of segregation while another 1953 image of members of the Hollywood Negro Ballet euphorically leaping in the air on a L.A. beach suggest reappropriation of spaces previously denied them, signifying a bold response to segregation.¹⁰ Would the blasé work for these residents, or is the defense defined for middle and upper class white city residents? Does the urban unrest represented by the 1965 Watts¹¹ and 1992 L.A. race riots¹² suggest the limits of this new mental type?

⁵ C.C. Pierce, *Chinese Field Hands*, 1898 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 135).

⁶ *The Nagamine residence prior to evacuation of people of Japanese ancestry from this area, Los Angeles, California*, April 11, 1942 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 89).

⁷ Aileen Pringe in the Doorway at 722 Adelaide Place, Santa Monica, c. 1925 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 88).

⁸ Mary Ellen Mark, *The Damm Family in Their Car, Los Angeles, California*, 1987 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 104).

⁹ Unknown, *People at “The Cross,” the Boundary Between the Segregated Sections of Santa Monica and Venice Beaches*, c. 1925 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 71).

¹⁰ Unknown, *Members of the Hollywood Negro Ballet in a Publicity Photograph for Ebony Magazine*, November 1953 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 73).

¹¹ Robert Flora, *Watts Riots – Army Jeep*, 1965 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 191).

¹² Gary Leonard, *April 30, 1992, Los Angeles, CA*, 1992 (Watts and Bohn-Spector 196).

Furthermore, would such a mental type effectively combat the stimulation of the Los Angeles landscape, given its propensity to disasters – both manmade ones like race riots and natural disasters like earthquakes and floods? Certainly the potential for disaster is always on the minds of people, including Angelenos. In her essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” Susan Sontag writes about our fear of “depersonalization,” the fear of being overrun by an alien “other,” (223) and of “collective incineration and extinction which could come at any time, virtually without warning” (224). Sontag further claims, “[T]he imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an inadequate response” (224) and “perpetuate clichés about identity, volition, power, knowledge, happiness, social consensus, guilt, responsibility” (225). However, Sontag makes these arguments with respect to the science fiction genre and the medium of film. In contrast, does literature, the written word, offer an opportunity for more in-depth explorations? Can, and do the texts I examine below, demonstrate how disaster can give birth to growth and renewal? Theorizing about the apocalyptic vision in literature, Lois Parkinson Zamora sheds light on this issue: “Apocalypse,” according to Zamora, “is *not* merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos. It is, in fact, a synonym for ‘revelation,’ and if the Judeo-Christian revelation of the end of history includes – indeed, catalogues – disasters, it also envisions a millennial order which represents the potential antithesis to the undeniable abuses of human history” (*Writing* 10). The novels I examine below reveal this particular apocalyptic tension between disaster and the promise of new world orders.

In my first chapter, “D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land* and T. C. Boyle’s *Tortilla Curtain: Collectivity and Anonymity, Utopia and Apocalypse*,” I argue that these works reveal two particular tensions, that of collectivity and anonymity and of utopia and apocalypse as the chapter title suggests. According to Zamora, “[t]he best fiction from...the United States...dramatizes the integral relation between private and social destiny. Because the myth of apocalypse insists on the inevitable link between individual and collective fate, it is precisely those writers prone to apocalyptic visions who are most likely to concern themselves with essential relations between the self and its surroundings, between autonomy and solidarity” (*Writing* 190). Both Waldie and Boyle’s texts push for moral accountability, urging us to honor the individual but to also consider the individual’s relation to the larger brotherhood of man. Though both works depict the current state of humanity as less than ideal, they see potential in the future.

In his memoir, Waldie reveals the ways in which residents of his hometown found comfort and identity in the (sub)urban collective Lakewood offered them. Waldie explains how the 50x100 ft. homes of Lakewood, the “enchanted islands” to which his parents arrived each time like “pilgrims” to the holy land, ensured both independence and identity. Paradoxically, the nearly identical homes of the L.A. suburb afforded protection against anonymizing urban forces, marking a certain degree of freedom for the Lakewood resident; residents are grateful for the distance between the homes that preserves their identities, and Waldie argues that the “daily life” of Lakewood residents is characterized by “an inertia that people believe in” (11). This is not to suggest Lakewood’s lack of human connection because as Waldie asserts, while the residents require a manageable

distance between their personal, enchanted islands, they also crave social relationships, even if such relationships tend toward the reserved. The suburban home might thus represent the ideal combination of identity, independence, and human connection. The author's depiction of Lakewood counters both popular depictions of the suburb in American literature as spaces of mind-numbing conformity as Catherine Jurca suggests in her exploration of American literature during the first half of the twentieth-century and Banham's image of the "Plains of Id." Furthermore, the Lakewood of Waldie's imagination also speaks to the Raymond Williams's rural ideals, John Winthrop's "city on a hill," and the American Dream.

On the other hand, *Tortilla Curtain* conveys an altogether different tone and attitude toward the built environment. T.C. Boyle's depiction of one L.A. suburb, the fictional Arroyo Blanco Estates in the Topanga Canyon, is one marked by urgency and panic on the part of its residents, sentiments that seem to be embodied in the architecture of the Arroyo Blanco. However, unlike the Lakewood of Waldie's imagination, the architecture of this private development – their blasé defense - fails to protect the residents from outside forces. *Tortilla Curtain* cautions against these battlements of xenophobes thinly disguised as idyllic retreats, echoing Mike Davis's observation that many Anglo majority neighborhoods have become a "gilded periphery to the bustling Latino metropolis" (*Magical* 53). Though these residents attempt to assert an independent identity and divorce themselves from L.A.'s masses, their identity is defined by the exploitation of undocumented immigrant laborers, a paradox to which the residents are blind. Boyle's novel exposes the dangerous attitudes such communities

cultivate, yet as Umberto Eco suggests, the kind of clannishness exhibited by these residents does not have to be; here lies the opportunity to forge new alliances with and recognize their immigrant neighbor as an equal member of the larger collective called humanity and a member of an increasingly transnational community.

I pair Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope* and Nina Revoyr's *Southland* in Chapter Two, "Earthquakes, Aftershocks, and Amnesia in Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope* and Nina Revoyr's *Southland*." Erickson's novel depicts an apocalyptic Los Angeles, whose crumbling neighborhoods and business districts are the consequence of the great Quake, but despite this gritty and unreal landscape, reminiscent of the neo-noir setting of *Blade Runner*, the author's doomsday does not necessarily negate all hope. Rather, natural disaster represents a constant in Erickson's novel and furthermore, serves a revelatory function. One pervasive theme of *Amnesiascope* is that of amnesia, a permanent present: the main character is unable to remember his past and as a result, feels disconnected from the people and places in his life. Erickson seems to suggest that his character's amnesia and emotional are symptomatic of the larger problem of L.A., the city's excessive focus on the "now" and the overall tendency of many to discount the existence of a historical narrative with respect to L.A. and thus in this respect, eternally tied to the present time. The catastrophic earthquake that takes place and the narrator's childhood stuttering condition are two key metaphors in the novel, both representative of necessary shake-downs that force this Angeleno to pause and reflect upon his past, enabling him to finally realize his future. Using Mary Ann Doane's conception of time, Sigmund Freud's idea of the "uncanny" and Carl Jung's "synchronicity" theory, I demonstrate how Erickson's

novel insists that the past must be revisited to understand the direction of the future. Thus, the protagonist needs not a blasé defense but the very opposite, more stimulation in the form of memories, even if confronting his past proves painful.

Like *Amnesiascope*, Nina Revoyr's *Southland* also uses the themes of apocalypse, natural disaster, and human disaster to explore a slightly different form of amnesia than that of *Amnesiascope*'s narrator: a social and cultural amnesia. *Southland* also suggests a certain noir sensibility, and its events take place in Los Angeles, just weeks after the Northridge earthquake of 1993. Teeming with allusions to tremors and cracking fault lines, the novel tells the stories of three generations of Japanese Americans, all who suffer, in some degree, from fractured identities, which Revoyr traces back to the experience of Japanese American internment during WWII. In her efforts to fulfill one particular wish outlined in her grandfather Frank's handwritten will, Jackie Ishida finds herself playing detective to a murder mystery, piecing together the fragments of her family's history, and more importantly finally reintegrating the pieces of her own fragmented identity. At first, Jackie's imagined a life of conformity effectively serves as her blasé defense, but such a defense suppresses the very specificity absent from her life – her identity as a Japanese American, Asian American, person of color, and gay individual among other identifications that speak to her membership to a larger humanity. Thus, for Jackie, the world of starched white shirts and big law firms promises not a protective collective identity but rather a numb and emotionless existence until she is able to acknowledge and deal with her racial self-loathing. Only then can she “see” herself as Frank's granddaughter, connect to her family's past, identify with the Japanese American

community, and finally recognize her obligations to a higher moral order that defines her relationship as an individual to society.

Chapter Three, “Los Angeles as the New World (B)order: *The Tropic of Orange* and *People of Paper*,” focuses on Karen Tei Yamashita and Salvador Plascencia’s respective novels. These two novels employ magical realism and like the works examined in the first two chapters, share a vision of disaster and redemption, exemplifying Zamora’s notion of apocalyptic tension. In *Tropic*, Yamashita probes the question of history even further, questioning the existence of a single, comprehensive narrative that tells the story of Los Angeles and the greater Southern California region. One theme of Yamashita’s work is the refusal of various marginalized Angeleno communities to remain in the shadows of the mainstream. The author’s definition of marginalized Angelenos is extraordinarily inclusive: neighborhoods overshadowed by the freeway, illegal immigrant and diasporic populations, the homeless, and even what Yamashita sees as the community most hidden in the shadows of mainstream L.A. society, those living abroad but nevertheless affected by the U.S.’s colonizing reach. Resonating with Jose David Saldívar and Claudia Sadowski-Smith’s arguments about the fiction of borders, *Tropic* addresses the erasure of national borders by *maquiladora* economies and hemispheric free trade agreements. Like the freeway that serves to “other” certain communities in the city, national borders function as another medium for marginalization. Through the various fantastical events that occur in the novel, including the shifting of the tropic of cancer from Mazatlan to L.A., the city is forced to acknowledge these communities overshadowed whether by freeway or national borders.

Warning against the kind of ethnic nostalgia and multiculturalism that Caroline Rody and Lisa Lowe respectively write about, *Tropic* reimagines a differently-defined community. The novel pushes for a New World (B)order, a new transnational community and consciousness, hybrid in nature, that transforms these transnational spaces from the site of oppressive colonialism to what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as “contact zones” (*Imperial* 241).

Salvador Plascencia’s *People of Paper* takes readers on a journey to El Monte, a working-class neighborhood in L.A. that usually does not find itself the subject of L.A. fiction. Because most Angelenos know El Monte, if at all, by its relation to the freeways that dominate its cartography bisect the community, this neighborhood might fit the Plains of Id category; however, the spirit that characterizes the El Monte community of Plascencia’s description demonstrates their refusal of such an identity. In the novel, the residents of El Monte engage in a full-fledged war against an oppressive force known as Saturn. Like *Tropic*, *People* employs magical realism to address diaspora and the permeability of borders, again echoing Saldívar and Sadowski-Smith’s ideas. Using the arguments of James Clifford and Mary Louise Pratt, I argue how *People* addresses the multiple colonialisms experienced by L.A.’s marginalized communities. Saturn, who colonizes the thoughts of El Monte’s residents, commodifies their stories of sadness for his own profit and is thus a “travel writer” in Pratt’s understanding of the term. Each time Saturn peers into the thoughts of others, he benefits from the “thought capital” or “intellectual labor” of the El Monte’s residents without justly compensating them. Finally, borrowing from the metafiction and memoir genres, *People* also explores the

fragility of history and the writer's difficulty in communicating ideas given the limits of language, the typographical tricks included in Plascencia's novel enhancing this theme.

In my final chapter "*The Virgin of Flames: The Urban Purgatory of Los Angeles*," I draw upon the indecent theology theory of Marcella Altheus-Reid and Cheryl Stobie to examine Chris Abani's L.A. novel which addresses similar themes of apocalypse, disaster and redemption, identity crisis, and transnational relations. Like the novels of the previous chapters, Abani's work beckons readers toward the marginal spaces of the city, a location that offers insight into the individual and his relationship to community. By building on the theme of hybridity and problematizing binaries, *Virgin* imagines the sort of marginality that hooks argues is a "site of resistance" and "of radical openness and possibility," rather than as a site of oppression (153). L.A.'s margins become a transformative space for the protagonist Black who is literally over-stimulated, suffering from an almost permanent erection that he must bind to conceal. Black's name, a name he gives himself, initially implies agency, his acknowledgement of a troubled past; however, his emotional and spiritual darkness eventually threaten to destroy him until he confronts his past traumas, a condition stemming from unresolved feelings toward his parents, both dead, particularly his relationship to a religiously fanatical mother. Guided by the symbolic L.A. River and by his own personal guardian angel, Black must re-envision himself first as a cross-dressed Virgin Guadalupe and then as Fatima whom he paints in a mural as part of his therapy. In this way, he blends the sacred with the profane in order to transcend his current purgatorial state and disentangle himself from the ghosts of his past.

These examples of L.A. literature demonstrate how disasters may represent the antidote to human error, “historical crisis [having]... the cleansing effect of radical renewal” (*Writing* 10). Ultimately, the various Los Angeles landscapes and experiences depicted in the works by Waldie, Boyle, Erickson, Revoyr, Yamashita, Plascencia, and Abani – a suburban holy land, enclaves of privilege and xenophobia, a post-apocalyptic cityscape, forgotten niches from L.A.’s past, a transnational metropolis, the site of multiple colonialisms, and the city’s most marginal spaces – demonstrate how Angelenos are poised for the apocalypse, ready for reinvention, redemption, and phoenix-like rebirth.

Chapter One

D. J. Waldie's *Holy Land* and T. C. Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain*: Collectivity and Anonymity, Utopia and Apocalypse

Introduction

The situation of the city for its residents has always been the question of maintaining one's identity and its accordant freedoms in the face of what many perceive as the city's anonymizing forces. Georg Simmel, German philosopher and sociologist, identifies this very struggle in "The Metropolis and Mental Life," asserting that the "the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (70). The blasé contrasts Walter Benjamin's characterization of the flâneur, "who, feigning disinterest, is generated in opposition to – yet equally spawned by – the anonymity of modern existence" (Leach 24). Traversing the urban center of the traditional metropolis, the flâneur defines himself *against* the throngs of people who crowd its streets. In a sense, the flâneur's relationship to his urban environment is comparable to the composition of a painting: if the crowd of the traditional metropolis represents the background of a painting, then the flâneur is the subject of the same, defining himself against such a background. In contrast, the blasé individual about whom Simmel writes paradoxically derives his existence, his individual identity, from the very

crowd and anonymity with whom the flâneur finds himself at odds (Leach 24). The blasé attitude serves as a “protective organ” against the crowd, a defense against a modern, metropolitan existence in which the “swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” can overwhelm the urban subject, and in this respect, the blasé individual’s anonymity protects his identity, promising particular freedoms through his membership to the urban collective (Simmel 70).

While Simmel’s conception of the blasé relies on a traditional understanding of the city defined by a city-center unlike the postmodern metropolis of which Los Angeles with its multiple foci of urban and suburban nodes is a paradigmatic example, I would argue that the concept of the blasé is nonetheless relevant to the case of L.A. though its effectiveness as a personal strategy is always in question. Two texts in particular come to mind in considering the question of the blasé: *Holy Land* (1996), a memoir by D.J. Waldie, and T.C. Boyle’s novel *Tortilla Curtain* (1995). Combining a modest version of the American Dream, rural ideals, and anonymity in the guise of conformity, the Lakewood residents of *Holy Land* construct a collective identity that functions as their blasé defense. Accordingly, Waldie’s text recognizes the freedoms promised by membership to Lakewood’s (sub)urban collective, their residents defining themselves *as part of* a modest, largely working-class community. Unlike the Lakewood residents who view themselves as members of a collective identity, the residents of the fictional Arroyo Blanco Estates in *Tortilla Curtain*, however, do not identify with the larger population of L.A. Yet, at the same time, because no “crowd” exists in L.A., given the city’s centrifugal layout, and because the novel’s protagonist Delaney lacks the flâneur’s self-

assurance and sense of identity, he can never be a flâneur. Instead, an ominous cloud of anonymity, the dread of being overtaken by the city's masses of working-class Latino immigrants, dominates his life. He is consumed by the terrifying prospect of apocalypse, erasure and identity-loss, and thus his privileged status does not offer the same protective shield and opportunities for self-definition as it does for the flâneur. In this respect, the main difference between the Lakewood residents whom Waldie describes and Boyle's characters is their respective interpretation of the urban stimuli of L.A.: while Boyle's characters read the city's stimuli - diversity - as the potential for obliteration and thus the end of their world as they know it, L.A. poses for Waldie's Lakewood residents exactly the opposite, the potential for a meaningful existence, a new beginning imbued with only promise.

Holy Land: An Urban Collectivity

Although existing criticism on *Holy Land* is relatively sparse, commentary about D.J. Waldie's text has focused on the writer's style and organization of his work, his ability to capture a shift in an American way of life, the voice that it represents for the common man, the new definition of community that it offers, and the modest material and rich spiritual opportunities of Lakewood touched upon in the memoir. The author, who worked as the city's Public Information Officer for almost three decades, uses language that has been described as "quick, translucent prose that's both highly specific and strangely elliptical" (Kakutani), and the structure of his memoir - 316 chapters that

range from a sentence to a page in length – likened to “an extended prose poem”(Curwen). Each chapter is a vignette, reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* as well as Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (Kakutani). Some critics note *Holy Land* for its celebration of an evolution in mass home construction and its depiction of “the ways in which a community collectively suffers, thrives and is redeemed” (Johnson).

Others note how *Holy Land* contrasts the material benefits enjoyed by the Lakewood’s developers to the spiritual benefits appreciated by its residents; Curwen calls Lakewood the “first church of the suburb” and *Holy Land* a resident’s “bible.” Waldie explains that his memoir touches upon “the possibility of leading a redeemed life in this kind of suburban place--a life that has some value to others and a life in which one gets saved" (qtd. in Curwen). Key to the community Waldie defines is the unspoken social contract for which “[r]esponsibility and obligation are...the linchpins of this faith, holding neighbors and communities together to make this a real holy land” (Curwen). California historian Kevin Starr asserts that Waldie’s writings – both *Holy Land* and his more recent *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles*, a collection of essays – lend “dignity” to Lakewood, giving “voice” to the area identified as the “Plains of Id” by Reyner Banham, “as if to suggest this region was a vast and submerged steppe, brooding and inchoate, subconscious in its knowledge of itself, resentful of the more glittery possibilities of the upscale communities aligning its borders.” *Holy Land*, for Starr, represents a voice for the common man, “the successors to the Folks who migrated to Los Angeles from the Midwest in the 1920s: the ordinary people who flocked to the

Southland following World War II and for whom the Plains of Plenty -- which is to say, agricultural Los Angeles County -- were asphalted and covered in suburban and semi-suburban development after 1945” (Starr, “Pilgrim”).

In *Holy Land*, the physical makeup of Lakewood contributes to what Waldie paints as a model of urban collectivity, one that imbues the lives of its citizens with meaning. At the time of its development, Lakewood was a social experiment of sorts, built in the post-WWII boom of the 1950s for working-class residents. In *Bourgeois Utopias*, Robert Fishman argues that post-war housing developments signaled the emergence of the decentralized technoburb, which did not depend upon a “central city” like the suburb and which was in fact, a new type of city.¹³ Modest, perhaps even austere in comparison to many of L.A.’s older middle-class neighborhoods and the McMansions of L.A.’s more recent housing developments, Lakewood was once noted for this very lack of distinction, merely rows of simple and nearly identical houses, an example of suburban sprawl, which Peter Blake disparages in *God’s Own Junkyard* (6). Blake portrays such prolific suburban development as a blight upon the American landscape, blaming such sprawl on a combination of misguided financial incentives offered by the FHA, the introduction of mass production techniques in the area of homebuilding, and a distortion of the “garden city” communities envisioned by urban planners and architects

¹³ According to Fishman, “the most important feature of postwar American development has been the almost simultaneous decentralization of housing, industry, specialized services, and office jobs; the consequent breakaway of the urban periphery from a central city it no longer needs; and the creation of a decentralized environment that nevertheless possesses all the economic and the technological dynamism we associate with the city (*Bourgeois* 184).

like Frank Lloyd Wright.¹⁴ In his book, the author juxtaposes photographs of several well-known post-war suburban developments against other images to convey his main argument, how the destruction of America's landscape has been planned: a photo of Levittown, New York is juxtaposed against an image of the farmland Levittown had once been, not yet razed by bulldozers; a photo of an Oakland, California area suburb is juxtaposed against the aerial photograph of an auto graveyard, the paths between cars not unlike the streets that bisect a suburban neighborhood; the image of a Plainview, Long Island development is juxtaposed next to the photo of a literal graveyard as if to suggest that suburbs signal death of the human spirit. Wright would later refer to such suburban sprawl as "a series of anonymous bodies that go into a row on row upon row" (qtd. in Blake 17).

Waldie, on the other hand, refuses to depict his hometown in this manner, instead choosing to equate Lakewood's uniformity with a collective identity, describing the suburb as "cells in a beehive," at once both individual and unified in purpose (108). The homogeneity of the city's homes and its efficient grid-like pattern of streets intersecting at right angles are then, metaphorical representations of this collective identity: despite the similar designs of the homes, each home still represents a discrete unit, complete with a unique set of attributes. As a result, rather than erase one's identity, the anonymity consistent with Lakewood living paradoxically amplifies this identity, becoming nothing

¹⁴ Peter Blake explains that many of these homebuilders took advantage of the FHA's financial incentives like \$300 credits for each \$20,000 house built. Yet, while the FHA encouraged developers, through such offers, to "[deface] the nearest roadsides with hideously garlanded model houses, billboards, and even sideshows," it did nothing to encourage the beautification of new communities with trees, laments Blake. Blake equated such large-scale development efforts to manufacturing using mass-production techniques. Moreover, rather than build one house per acre as Wright had envisioned, these developers often built five houses per acre, detracting from the agrarian element of such neighborhoods (17).

less than an integral component. Simmel's comment that "[t]he same factors, which, in the exactness and the minute precision of the form of life, have coalesced into a structure of the highest impersonality, have, on the other hand, an influence in a highly personal direction" affirms the very paradox of Lakewood, the personal nature of its collective identity comparable to a "many membered organism" (72). This collective identity does not detract from the individuality of each member of the larger organism.

Personal Associations and the American Dream: Elements of the Lakewood Collectivity

Essential to this particular collective identity are two crucial elements: the personal associations implied in the text and the humble version of the American Dream which Lakewood residents share. In a 2005 interview, the author explains, "Lakewood suggests...certain social relationships that are more communitarian in nature than what [the author] [imagines] contemporary middle-class values to be" ("Waldie").

Lakewood's very architecture lends itself to the personal, this "communitarian" sensibility, with the homes themselves metaphorically representations of the sorts of intimate relations that characterize the neighborhood. Homes sit precisely 15 feet from one another in this community, a proximity that allows residents staring out of their kitchen windows to see the windows of a neighbor's bedroom, one of the more intimate spaces of a home. Thus, "[m]ost things [in Lakewood] are close enough for comfort" with the "houses...close enough so that [residents] might hear...a neighbor's baby cry, a

father arguing with a teenage son, or a television playing early on a summer night” (134). In this respect, though families might find themselves isolated from one another in these individual homes, they are still able to share those meaningful, intimate moments. In fact, the homes function as a medium for interaction between residents, counteracting the anonymizing forces of the city that threaten to belittle their existence. These interactions illustrate what Raymond Williams identifies as the “structure of feeling” that distinguishes the country from the city (35). The layout of Lakewood also serves as a blasé shield, allowing its residents to effectively negotiate the boundary between public and private existence by providing them with just enough privacy to afford them an individual identity but also sufficient proximity to neighbors to fend off alienation as Waldie explains in *Where We Are Now* (48). The author speaks of a suburban “education in narrow streets,” one that does not require Lakewood’s residents “to love all of the possibilities for civility handed to [them] roughly by the close circumstances of working-class suburbia, but [that does require residents] to love enough of them” or risk [living], as some do, numbly, or in a state of permanent, mild fury” (49). For Waldie, this “suburban education” was a lesson in humility, an agreed upon “modesty” (49). This blasé defense, accordingly, represents a compromise between the unmediated barrage of urban living and secession from the city that the Arroyo Blanco residents in *Tortilla Curtain* attempt, as I argue below.

Waldie’s text is also filled with the very intimate experiences of life and death, the changes in the seasons paralleling the life cycle of the residents and Lakewood offering an ideal setting for family histories: “They built the city where my family lived

where my mother and father died” (110). One of the most poignant moments in *Holy Land* is the author’s account of how his father died of a heart attack “behind a well-made, wooden bathroom door” (24) which Waldie could not break down to come to his father’s aid (26). Here, the author juxtaposes the durability of the wood used to construct his house with what must be one of the most painful, emotional experiences of his life, and a memory as abiding as the frame and fixtures of his family home. Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard’s characterization of “home” and memories associated with home are affirmed by such accounts in *Holy Land*: “[W]e shall see that the imagination functions in t his direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection” (86). For Waldie, his home, and the homes in Lakewood in general, signify the kinds of familial bonds and cherished memories that cannot be broken, metaphorical represented by the solid construction of his home.

Moreover, the physical plan of Waldie’s neighborhood, a grid of seemingly impersonal tract houses, belies the very intimacy that defines the space of each home. Connecting this grid to his relationship with his mother, Waldie likens Lakewood’s layout to a map that cannot be charted, implying that outsiders are not privy to the neighborhood’s true significance. Recalling his mother’s last day alive and his longing to understand her final message to him, Waldie explains that all afternoon she had been counting out numbers - “3, 2, 5, 3, 2...coordinates for a map [he] did not have” (23). Here, Waldie conveys his longing to understand what his mother was trying to tell him. Later in the text, the author again demonstrates his affection for his mother, telling

readers of the simple dignity and compassion for which his mother stood. Before Waldie and his brother were born, his mother's friend and neighbor Mrs. R, had come to the doorstep in tears after her infant stopped breathing. Because like many women at that time, neither owned a car or could drive, and like many households, neither owned a phone, his mother and Mrs. R could do nothing to save the baby's life. Using water from the kitchen faucet, Mrs. Waldie baptized the child in a gesture of dignity and compassion to save at least the infant's soul because "[i]t was all she could do" (95).

And what could be more personal than anomalies within a community?

Marginality, the failure of some individuals to adhere to and function within expected social norms, is proof of the persistence of individual spirit that disrupts the usual rhythms of this suburb. Waldie speaks of a neighbor who sets fire to her own home, her motives unclear (30). Interestingly, Waldie connects her act of arson to his father's fatal heart attack, noting that county firemen provided aid at both incidents (30). However, Waldie also juxtaposes the two events in an effort to highlight the emotionality of both moments. And just as Waldie's father's heart had registered an unruly heartbeat on the electrocardiograph's monitor, these two experiences with grief register on the emotional monitor of the neighborhood. Other moments disrupt the usual rhythms of the neighborhood. Mrs. A, for example, claims that underneath her house, "the military defense contractors, and the makers of nuclear waste toil and murder, running their engines, secretly burying "the dead from the nearby aircraft plant," and hiding "trainloads of atomic waste...[that] kill her lawn and bubble to the surface in pools of red liquid to stain her garage floor" (16-17). Yet another anomaly Mr. H stores excessive quantities of

building materials and broken equipment for his “construction plans” (19). In the eyes of his neighbors, Mr. H’s behavior represents “a ripple on the surface of their neighborhood, a defection from predictability,” and the city codes are powerless to “make Mr. H a good citizen” (20). Even the inability of the Mrs. A, and Mr. H to find protection under the collective identity of Lakewood, contributes to the suburb’s personal nature, their experiences reminders of their individual struggles and demons and the negotiations, compromise, and conflict at the heart of any society.

In this respect, Waldie uses *Holy Land* to draw a map of these emotional connections, charting for readers a place of such remarkable virtue and faith that moves beyond the bonds embodied by the country upon which Raymond Williams elaborates in *The Country and the City*. Over 30 years ago, Williams examined the country and city dichotomy, noting that the country promotes a “natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue” in contrast to the city where man’s achievements as a place of “learning, communication, light” (1). Local interests and needs reign in the country, a place of emotional connections and relationships whereas the city, in contrast, provides the setting for the more impersonal and calculated decisions of money and abstract ideas, politics, and international relations. Not only were Lakewood’s beginnings rural, originally situated next to hog farms and dairies, but the tracts of Lakewood homes are also reminiscent of the fields of crops that once dotted the landscape, soothing in their predictable patterns. Discussing one particular early 20s photograph in which a group of farmhands pose on the farmland that would eventually become Lakewood, Waldie refers to the photo’s subjects as “patterns,” thereby implying their collectivity as a force and

connecting the comforting predictability of Lakewood's homes with the city's rural beginnings (7). Finally, this image conveys "communitiveness," Frederick Law Olmsted's term for the connections between people and community, and signals the inseparability of nature and community, as Olmsted's argues about California (qtd. in *Where* 81).

The Economics of Lakewood

Though Lakewood more closely approximates a rural existence, this is not to say that its planners did not originally envision it as an extension of the city and its homes just part of a larger, promising business venture. Lakewood was the site where "two powerfully conceived national interests, that of keeping the economic engine running and that of creating an enlarged middle class, could be seen to converge" ("Trouble" 46). Unlike a garden suburb whose pattern of homes are driven by aesthetics, the pattern of homes in a post-war suburb like Lakewood suggests minimalism and economy:

The streets [in Lakewood] do not curve or offer vistas...The street grid always intersects at right angles. The north-south roads are avenues...The east-west roads are streets. The four-lane highways in either compass orientation are boulevards. People passing through the city often mention the trees [but][t]hey never mention the pattern over which they pass. (21)

Despite this distinction, however, both suburban varieties reflect, to some degree, the interests of the city; while a garden suburb might stand for the city's wealth and power, post-war suburbs represent the means by which the city acquires its wealth and maintains its power. For example, Levitt and Sons, the famed builders of Levittown, were

concerned with the affordability of housing for the returning vet and his young family (Hayden 135). Likewise, Lakewood's own trio of developers – Ben Weingart, Louis Boyar, and Mark Taper – had the additional concern of density, an issue of profitability. Density is defined as “[t]he number of houses per acre is the subdivision's yield. This is a measure of its profitability, which is not the number of houses that can be sold, but the subdivision's population density” (12). Appealing to the builders of shopping centers like the May Co. that would ultimately anchor the Lakewood mall, density, not the sales of homes, proved to be the most significant source of profit for Weingart, Boyar, and Taper. Symbolically, the four giant Ms that adorned the otherwise austere exterior of the May Co. seemingly announced to passersby its power and the central role the department store played in the development of Lakewood. For this reason, popular aerial photographs depict Lakewood from the impersonal perspective of the profiteer, as “images of the developers crude pride...the grid, briefly empty of associations...just a pattern predicting itself” (6). The grid from this view is at once, “beautiful and terrible,” not in terms of aesthetics but rather for the boldness of the enterprise it represents, the subdivision yield or purchasing power of future residents a potentially formidable force (5).

Moreover, towns like Lakewood and its famous predecessor Levittown were intended to be experimental ventures and would redefine the science and business of homebuilding forever. Postwar homebuilding was revolutionary: whereas prior to the WWII, most homes were built by their owners or small-scale contractors, after the war, large builders were responsible for constructing two-thirds of all homes (Hayden 132).

The actual building process was also innovative, and Hayden aptly refers to Levitt and Sons as the “General Motors of Housing Production” (132). Comparing the modern to a car, Levitt understood that the standardizing and limiting home design, architectural options, and house parts was key. In fact, in describing the building process of his homes, he used the term “assemble” rather than build, highlighting the standardization process, reminiscent of “Taylorization,” the analysis of a worker’s essential movements in the performance of a task to develop more efficient ways of getting the task done. Moreover, Hayden comments on what would become known as the “Lakewood system,” an approach to housing development that involves burgeoning municipalities “contracting for services with [the] [c]ounty rather than organizing and paying for firefighters, police, and other essential town services after incorporation as an independent city” (140). Contracting for such services helped homebuilders increase that bottom line. In this respect, Lakewood reflects the money courts and big business of the city as well as the anonymity of the city forces that Williams describes.

If politics are also centered in the city, then the collectivity of Lakewood represents for its residents a defense against threats to its stability resulting from national and international political decision-making. For instance, the Cold War era was haunted by fears of atom or hydrogen bombs leveling the American landscape (24). These shared fears, anxieties, and losses help foster the intimacy within this community, becoming crucial elements of Lakewood’s social fabric: “Waiting was one of the things I understood fully. Rain and the hydrogen bomb were the two aspects of the same loss” (2). Just as rainy days keep children and adults alike indoors, hindering human

connection, the hydrogen bomb was a menace to their bliss. Another way in which they alleviated their fears was by displaying a F-3D fighter jet at a public park, the fighter jet a symbol of their fear and its location symbolically taming the fighter jet as a means of coping with the unknown. Sycamore trees obscured the fighter jet from the boulevard, shielding residents, if only momentarily, from anxiety evoked by televised footage of the Vietnam War's latest casualties. In these ways, the suburban landscape of Lakewood steadies their worries of world wars to some extent. Significantly, Waldie juxtaposes these real images of the war dead on TV to his father's death, comparing the color of his father's dead body to the black and white images on TV. Although the images captured on film depict far-away events, the ensuing emotional loss is nevertheless immediate and devastating as the experience of losing a parent.

Despite the economic motives of these large-scale builders and what might appear to be a less-than-ideal environment in which to cultivate community, that is exactly what Waldie proves happens in his holy land. The rural ideal would continue to survive even after uniform rows of crops were replaced by equally tidy rows of homes. Accordingly, a country-city tension characterizes Lakewood, and in this light, Lakewood is not exclusively country but rather a combination of the two, more country but undeniably city to some degree. Raymond Williams, too, acknowledges the existence of such "in-between" locales that occupy various points on the country-city spectrum; as a result, such places like Lakewood evoke, in varying degrees, both the distinct feelings associated with the country and the emotional distance that characterizes the city (35). This hybrid of country and city is, to some degree, what Ebenezer Howard envisioned as

Garden Cities, communities that like towns, appeal to the individual's economic aspirations and desire for sociability while at the same time, preserve his relationship to nature: "that beautiful land of ours, with its canopy of sky, the air that blows upon it, the sun that warms it, the rain and dew that moisten it – the very embodiment of Divine love for man" (Author's 310).

Just as Howard's Garden City effectively "marries" town to country, so might Lakewood be seen as such a hybrid community. Yes, Lakewood may have begun as an extension of the city, profit its primary aim. However, Waldie challenges the claims of California's "primal mythmakers...its real estate agents" that the suburb of Lakewood "still attracts aspirant homebuyers because 'it's in the heart of the metroplex'" (vii). Shifting the focus from the metroplex to the personal, Waldie offers an alternate explanation, rejecting the capitalism that the city symbolizes and highlighting the personal: "Maybe Lakewood is just in the heart" (vii). And even the calculated efforts of developers to maximize profit cannot eclipse the personal stories Waldie captures in *Holy Land*. While the author acknowledges that from 500 feet in the air, "the intersection of character and place" is impossible to detect, he insists that such a connection does exist, offering his readers an intimate close-up of those who call Lakewood home (vi). Moreover, Lakewood ultimately evolved into a community, its "structure of feeling" soon dominating any urban anonymity that may have originally loomed in its horizon. Thus, while Lakewood becomes the setting for collisions between the cold, calculated decisions of the city and the emotional bonds of residents, this suburban space also becomes the locus of collaboration and community.

This element of the personal in *Holy Land* is a far cry from conventional representations of the suburb in American literature as cookie-cutter spaces that evoke fears of anonymity and mediocrity. In *White Diaspora*, Catherine Jurca discusses this very anxiety, using Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the a Gray Flannel Suit* as a primary example. In Wilson's novel, Tom and Betsy Rath are a couple who reside in suburban Southport, Connecticut. Their home, identical to all the other homes on the block, does not "[obliterate] who they are; rather, the "shabby house reveals [who they are] too readily in ways that discredit and distort them...Far from nurturing its inhabitants, it is 'a trap'" (133). Not only does the structure confirm Tom and Betsy's lack of financial success and ability, it also indicates to passersby, the predetermined identity of its inhabitants. Each evening, passersby in Tom and Betsy's neighborhood can imagine 5,000 housewives preparing dinner on 5,000 identical stoves, awaiting the return of 5,000 PMC (professional-managerial class) husbands from work. Wilson refers to such uninspired living as "middle class," a term that suggests the interchangeability of the residents and erasure of identity, anonymizing suburban forces that residents like Tom and Betsy find " [require] eternal and exhausting vigilance to preserve one's integrity against it" (148). Jurca also points to a second example *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, arguing that in that text, "the suburb is treated as a living space that is in constant danger of contaminating" new residents Frank and April Wheeler, "of turning [them] into something [they're] not –to someone who belongs there" (148). Again, the Wheelers fear the predetermined identity that a suburban existence promises and what is described as threats to a person's individuality and essence. In this respect, "[t]he mass production of

housing did not liberate people from residential mediocrity, as Depression-era visionaries had hoped, but made it the national standard” (134-35). This life is a “dishonest” one, a life characterized by “the corrupting influences of postwar suburban culture” (154). Unlike the lives described by Waldie, the lives of these two couples are not marked by the individual but rather by predictable experiences, activities, and even meals: their persistent but futile attempts to prove that they are not ordinary, dinners of hamburger and hotdog rather than more wholesome dishes, and mindless hours of television in lieu of more communal activities like family reading-time or after-dinner conversation. For the couples of these two novels, middle class status becomes a life sentence, and their suburban existence a prison for drones whose lives are neither healthy nor particularly creative.

Lakewood: A Place of Divine Inspiration

In contrast to the middle class identity of the Rathes and Wheelers, Waldie clearly explains that Lakewood’s “[h]ouses never were middle class, nor were the people living in them. They became altogether something else” (104). While the Southport of *The Man in the a Gray Flannel Suit* becomes synonymous with residential mediocrity, Lakewood becomes a holy land of sorts, a place of worship, divine inspiration, and redemption. The streets that comprise Lakewood are a divinely mandated “compass of possibilities,” a place imbued with direction and purpose. For this reason, Waldie mentions that Lakewood’s modest grid is part of the larger, more significant grid of Los

Angeles, one that “came from God” according to the Spaniards (22). Waldie states that in 1781, the then Spanish governor of California Colonel Felipe de Neve carried from Mexico City to present day Los Angeles a map of Los Angeles believed to be divinely inspired, a grid reproduced from the Law of the Indies¹⁵ (22). In this respect, Waldie also compares the cartography of Lakewood to the plat Joseph Smith drew of the City of Zion; like the Mormons who envisioned and built their City of Zion, the development and settlement of this stretch of land formerly occupied by hog farms and dairies was the result of divine ordinance in Waldie’s eyes. Despite initial scorn of those who were sure that Lakewood would deteriorate into a slum or ghost town or that the homes would appeal only to “jackrabbits,” Lakewood became a Mecca for the “thirty thousand GIs and their wives [who] would take to frame and stucco houses on small, rectangular lots next to hog farms and dairies” (21). Thus, in this fashion, the homes come to represent “enchanted islands” to which members of this collective identity return to after a day’s work like “pilgrims” to a holy land as the title of Waldie’s memoir text implies. Furthermore, just as Jewish graves are often positioned east toward Jerusalem, the graves of his parents face Lakewood with a similar religious significance. In this respect, the pattern of asphalt, grass, and concrete constantly remind Lakewood residents of the blessing of Providence.

Alluding to John Winthrop’s use of the phrase “city on a hill,” *Holy Land* portrays Lakewood as singular in vision, a divinely mandated community, a social experiment,

¹⁵ According to California historian Kevin Starr, the Law of the Indies contained detailed instructions for town planning, the “integration and interaction of ecclesiastical and secular societies,” the conversion of the Native Americans to Christian practice, and the transition of these towns from mission-based societies to one of more traditional church hierarchy (*California* 28).

and a model for other communities all at once. In 1630, John Winthrop used this phrase in “A Modell of Christian Charity,” a sermon he allegedly gave enroute to America aboard the ship *Arbella* in hopes of “[uniting] his people behind a single purpose, the creation of a due form of government, ecclesiastical as well as civil, so that their community would be a model for the Christian world to emulate” (Towner 27). In his sermon, Winthrop reminds his followers that the tasks that lay ahead of them would require them to exercise to the fullest Christian charity. Moreover, his words also serve as a reality check, reminding them of the “Condicion of mankinde,” the diverse audience of all classes and human imperfections with whom they would be expected to work: “in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion,” and the *Model* is an attempt to “hold conformity” with God’s plan and “wisdome in the variety and difference of the Creatures and the glory of his power, in ordering all these differences for the preservacion and good of the whole” (282-3). As “Stewards” of the “Great King,” they have been assigned by God the duty of working together as a single unit, “[t]hat every man might haue need of other, and from hence they might be all knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion” (283). It is this bond that Winthrop hoped would prove the driving force of their new community:

[W]ee shall finde that the God of Israell is among vs, when tenn of vs shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies when hee shall make vs a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the eies of all people are vppon vs. (294-5)

Thus, Winthrop acknowledges the diversity of the future settlement but at the same time, speaks to the sense of community, a model of the Christian values that unite various people under one God. In this respect, the community Winthrop envisions is necessarily an experimental enterprise in society, but one that, if successful, would serve as a model for future communities.

Likewise, Lakewood, “the city as new as tomorrow” was also a social experiment in community-building that united people based on common values and a subscription to common ideals, not based on socio-economic backgrounds (37). Here, blue-collar factory workers lived side-by-side with business owners and professionals. One particular ideal signified by Lakewood at its inception was the American Dream, their mutual subscription to which was crucial to fostering its sense of community. John Truslow Adams, often credited with first coining the phrase “American Dream,” defines the Dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (415). He also explains the outlook demanded of such an ideal:

The point is that if we are to have a rich and full life in which all are to share and play their parts, if the American dream is to be a reality, our communal spiritual and intellectual life must be distinctly higher than elsewhere, where classes and groups have their separate interests, habits, markets, arts, and lives. If the dream is not to prove possible of fulfillment, we might as well become stark realists, become once more class-conscious, and struggle as individuals or classes against one another. But if the dream is to come true, those on top, financially, intellectually, or otherwise, have got to devote themselves to the “Great Society,” and those who are below in the scale have got to strive to rise, not merely economically, but culturally. We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusements. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. (422)

In this sense, Adams's description of the American Dream echoes Winthrop's appeal three centuries earlier for the sacrifice of personal desire and pleasure for the common good, to contribute to a particular collectivity. Adams is careful to warn that though the American Dream may entail "motor cars and high wages," it represents more than just the acquisition of wealth (415). More importantly, the American Dream imagines a new "social order" that encourages Americans to act upon their full potential, rewarding individual achievement rather than reserving happiness for those born into privilege (415).

Like other American Dream hopefuls, Lakewood's citizens saw in the city the prospect of a new beginning and a better life. On the first day homes became available for sale, nearly 25,000 buyers, most of them previously unable to afford a home, lined up in anticipation of home ownership. Many of Lakewood's residents were WWII veterans taking advantage of the VA loans and the suburb's affordable homes; others were once dustbowl refugees of the 30s, disparagingly referred to as "Okies," whose lives – marked by poverty, economic exploitation, social discrimination, and struggle – was popularly depicted in Steinbeck's *Grape of Wrath*. Originally from the border South, many Lakewood residents were the offspring of dustbowl refugees whose parents had fled the economic devastation of states like Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, or Kansas for migrant farmwork in California's San Joaquin Valley or opportunities in the state's oil fields (162). WWII gave these individuals, many of whom had spent their childhoods in tar paper shacks in the oilfields or in farming encampments housed by only tents, a

chance at a modest version of the American Dream when opportunities in the aircraft industry opened up (163); in 1942, they made up between 30 and 50 percent of newly-hired aircraft workers. However, while they may have hid their “border state twang” and exchanged poverty for a humble slice of the American Dream and “their Pentecostal religion for milder forms of faith,” they retained their humility, “never [losing] their appreciation for the climate...which expressed itself in the fruit trees in the backyards of [Waldie’s] neighborhood” and the bags of fruit exchanged between neighbors over backyard fences (172). For the would-be Lakewood resident, home ownership exemplified the American Dream, albeit a humble version of it. The modesty and uniformity of its homes, 1000 to 1100 square foot homes situated on 50x150 foot lots, were reflective of both the modesty of their dreams and just how essential this modesty was to the progress promised by the American Dream, from the uncertainty of poverty to participation in a more stable, “better...richer and fuller” way of life (415).

Waldie’s detailed account of the new social order Lakewood once represented reveals then, a certain nostalgic longing for a bygone era, and in this respect *Holy Land* expresses the author’s desire to return to the better days of the past. Waldie shares another connection to Winthrop and Adams, all three cautioning Americans not to mistake material success for social or spiritual evolution. Roger Williams, 15 years after Winthrop’s death, would lament upon what he saw as the gradual death of the once-shared Christian ideals expressed in Winthrop’s sermon:

[W]hen we that have been the eldest, and are rotting, (to-morrow or next day) a generation will act, I fear, far unlike the first Winthrops and their Models of Love: I fear that the common Trinity of the world, (Profit, Preferment, Pleasure) will here be the Tria omnia, as in all the world beside...that God Land will be (as now

it is) as great a god with us English as God Gold was with the Spaniards. (qtd. in Towner 41)

And like Adams, who writing in 1933, four years after the 1929 stock market crash that sent America's economy into a downward spiral, Adams implored the American public to consider the spiritual lessons learned from that experience, to not only rethink the value of a lifestyle devoted to material acquisition and to instead embrace or re-embrace the pursuit of "[developing] some greatness in our own individual souls"; he also warned that given the corrupted values of America at the time, Americans could hardly expect politicians to "rise higher than the source of their power" (427).

Holy Land, however, is not merely a document in the historical trajectory of the suburbs but more significantly, an indictment against a society that feigns community and progress with its housing developments and home design but in actuality signal a new violence against the larger collective we call humanity and a loss of the ideals and values of the past. Significantly, Waldie chose the memoir form through which to express this sense of loss, and as a memoirist who attempts "to connect with the elusive feelings and sensations of what happened so long ago," he might be called a "lyrical seeker"¹⁶ (Birkerts 25). Rather than represent a historical document, *Holy Land* is instead an assertion of Waldie's identity, what Birkerts would define as "the memoirist's 'I'...an inhabited character, a voice that takes possession and its account," (26) and who is "in search of lost time" (27).

¹⁶ Examining the works of Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, and Annie Dillard in the *Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts categorizes memoirists into several categories based on the nature of their inspiration: past trauma, a particular occasion, or a desire to reconnect with the past.

Other critics have defined the memoir as the intersection of memory and desire, a definition also befitting of Waldie's text (Lazar 100). Though *Holy Land* does not provide the antidote to today's toxic environments, Waldie, in essence, remaps the spirituality, ideals, and values of Lakewood-past in an effort to reassert them in the context of not only Lakewood today but also L.A and even suburbia today. He navigates his memories, seeking meaning as do memoirists for whom "[t]he point of the recollection of thing, person, or event is in large part to reinhabit to some degree, the former self, an essential step in trying to find the meaning in one's own experience" (Birkerts 26). This meaning is the pattern of which Virginia Woolf elaborates, asserting that as a writer, particular experiences prove particularly memorable to her because they have shocked her system, revealing the "philosophy" or "pattern" hidden in the weave of wool (qtd. in Birkerts 46).

Waldie detects the pattern that belies Lakewood, which to the untrained eye might seem the image of the cookie-cutter suburb, quietly urging us to once again erect cities upon the hill, models, not of God Land but of God Man, centers which celebrate collective action and the human spirit, places where residents embrace each other in the name of some higher brotherhood, refusing to substitute the private *I* for the public *we*. In *Where We Are Now*, Waldie writes about the toxicity of "gated enclaves and McMansion wastelands of Los Angeles," (not unlike the Arroyo Blanco depicted in *Tortilla Curtain*) that may exemplify material success but also reveal an alarming estrangement, a lack of faith in mankind and his ability to navigate the terrain of human conflict, such negotiations the nature of true society. The author observes how many

Angelenos have opted for the homogeneity of such “bunker [neighborhoods]” rather than negotiate the diversity of a “mestizo city” (14). Communities that once welcomed social and economic diversity are tragically disappearing, and gated communities like the Arroyo Blanco development depicted in *Tortilla Curtain* are rapidly increasing. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis refers to such developments that epitomize “high-tech castles” equipped with security technology that rivals that of embassies and the military (248). Davis also points out just how common restrictions on public access of otherwise public facilities has become, “baroque layers of regulations” and local “passport control” being used “to build invisible walls” that shield wealthy enclaves from the reality of LA’s diversity: any trespassers who might threaten the community’s homogeneity (246). Their privatized governments (homeowners’ associations that enforce strict CC&Rs), private streets, and green spaces that resemble public parks but that are off-limits to non-residents imply secession from public life and defeat of democratic ideals (*Where* 48).

Waldie’s memoir might also be viewed as a criticism of New Urbanist community design that on the surface, appears to share similar design features with post-war suburbs like Lakewood - the grid, proximity to neighborhood centers and employment that encourages pedestrian traffic, reminiscent of Lakewood’s early days when the sight of housewives walking to shopping centers and their children riding in baby carriages or wagons was not unusual (Fishman 563). Yet, as Waldie notes, New Urbanism, in contrast to the post-war suburb, relies on the design of neighborhoods, architectural elements (like front porches), and restrictive CC&Rs to “make people neighborly,” (*Where* 103) and a mix of housing types to achieve a mix of income levels as urban

historian Robert Fishman explains (563). Despite the more or less identical design and size of Lakewood's homes, what attracted residents of varying incomes was clearly something else altogether: "the extreme uniformity of Lakewood's built environment somehow fostered both community and individuality" (Fishman 563). All that these new developments represent are feeble substitutes for true society and again, a breakdown of our society.

Although Waldie's criticisms of present-day Lakewood in *Holy Land* is less explicit than the comments he makes in *Where We Are Now*, the author nonetheless hints in his memoir, at the various ways in which once vigilantly-guarded values have fallen to the wayside in McMansion enclaves and even in Lakewood, values which are so desperately needed to reinvigorate American society today. As Douglas Burton-Christie asserts, *Holy Land* identifies our increasing failure to recognize the divine presence in what is ordinary, "amidst the ever shifting and ambiguous currents of everyday life"; instead our neighborhoods reveal how we have "adopted a false hierarchy of value that tends to denigrate the ordinary in favor of the extraordinary" (viii). According to Greeley, "The world of the Catholic is haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of Grace," which Waldie likens to the "habits of being" upon which Flannery O'Connor elaborates (qtd. in Waldie, "The Making" 60). Only when we finally learn a lesson in humility and correct our misguided outlook will we find salvation. Noting how the nuisance of barking dogs was once the community's biggest problem, Waldie explains how crime was relatively non-existent during Lakewood's early years. Offenses were limited to public code violations and occasional

tragedies like a suicide, drownings or other fatal accidents, or mentally ill resident deliberately setting ablaze her own house. Today, something more menacing lurks the streets of this once serene neighborhood, threatening to disrupt the existing order and to impose upon this suburb a new code. He speaks of areas of Lakewood known for gang activity (75). Once robbed at gunpoint while walking home from city hall, Waldie had assumed that the driver of a car wanted directions when he pulled up to the curb near the author (54). As the would-be robber demanded the author's wallet, Waldie told him, "I'm sorry, I don't understand you," and fell backwards onto the front lawn of someone's house. Although Waldie fluently speaks the language of community, he has yet to acquire the vocabulary of this new, more sinister code that now seems to pervade his city.

While Waldie seems to desire and encourage a return to the human relationships and values that once imbued Lakewood, others interpret the new code of the suburbs as evidence of a way of life that has since ceased to be useful. In her own memoir *Where I Was From*, Joan Didion, like Waldie, reminisces upon those important places in L.A. that have shaped her life. At one point, she reflects upon suburban living, wondering if the violence that Lakewood saw in the early 1990s represents the social costs of creating and preserving an "artificial ownership class" of working-class suburbs, the not-middle class existence in Lakewood of which Waldie speaks (*Where I Was From* 113). Lakewood gained notoriety in 1993 when members of the Spur Posse, a loose association of middle-class white suburban teens, were accused of various sex crimes ranging from rape to lewd conduct with minors. Local communities like Lakewood once supplied the labor force for Southern California's aerospace companies and shipyards, but in the 1990s, young

men found themselves to be the casualties of a dying industry¹⁷ (Didion, “Trouble” 47). Disillusioned by the mass exodus of jobs to other states, recent high school graduates or those on the cusp of adulthood felt disenfranchised, their dashed hopes and diminished opportunities a stark reminder of their tenuous position in society. The Spur Posse scandal, according to Didion, exemplifies at its ugliest, the consequences of an artificial ownership class that no longer works (*Where I Was From* 113). Alida Brill makes a similar connection, attributing Lakewood’s inability “to adjust to current realities” to “an emotional and cultural ethos” in Lakewood that “seemed somehow to make many original residents and their offspring. . . believe they were (and are) entitled to a lifetime of work, safety, homogeneity, and virtual seclusion from the compromises other communities have had to make to remain viable” (98).

Places like Lakewood that fueled the illusion of middle-class existence “could be seen . . . as the wrong side of the California Dream” (Didion, “Trouble” 57). Calling into question Waldie’s depiction of Lakewood as not middle-class, Didion identifies a “tacit dissonance” of perception: Was the Spur Posse representative of a one-time ripple on the surface of normalcy or of regular behavior among the city’s younger generation? Didion explains that the adolescent or post-adolescent male, who, in time of economic plenty, was Lakewood’s MVP, “already married and mortgaged, in harness to the plant, a good worker, a steady consumer, a team player, someone who played ball, a good citizen”; however, in lean years, some of these same young men felt hopeless and saw little point

¹⁷ In 1993, at the time of the publication of Didion’s article, the Lakewood Rockwell plant had already closed, the Long Beach naval station was scheduled to close in 1996, the Long Beach naval shipyard was expected to also shut down, and Lakewood and Long Beach residents feared the Douglas plant might also close its doors (Didion, “Trouble” 47).

in acting the part of the good citizen when little reward awaited them (Didion, “Trouble” 64). Far from illustrating the bounty signified by rural society, some argue that Lakewood follows a plantation model, residents dependent upon the generosity and economic profit of the “big house,” employers like Douglas (Didion, “Trouble” 65). Others like Brill connect the Spur Posse’s dark behavior to an attempt to reassert their masculinity: rather than assert their manhood through more appropriate channels by playing competitive sports, serving in the armed forces, or being a breadwinner, working at one of the local plants as did Lakewood’s men in the past, the Spur Posse chose a more disturbing means.

Though Waldie seems to focus mainly on the benefits of the Lakewood experience, such an expanded ownership class, and never explicitly mentions the Spur Posse in *Holy Land*, one cannot help but wonder if the author’s reflections upon the Spur Posse travesty and other evidence of our society’s dysfunction are hidden between his nostalgic lines about the Lakewood of his childhood. Waldie laments what he sees as the disappearance of conviviality between neighbors, once formed perhaps in part due to shared pasts of social and economic oppression. Once a city official for Lakewood who sometimes fielded calls from residents, he remembers one caller who, upset that the trash service refused to collect her Christmas tree because it had not been chopped into smaller pieces, confessed that she was not acquainted enough with her neighbors to ask for assistance. Gone are such days of neighborly gestures; gone are the intimate bonds between neighbors once exemplified by shared experiences, even those of loss, like the makeshift baptism performed by Waldie’s mother on Mrs. R’s dead child. In this respect,

Waldie's memoir of the place he calls home affirms phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard's assertion that when an individual moves into a new house, that individual brings with him or her an "entire past" the memories of which function as a shield, "the inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I" (87). Despite the loss of close associations between neighbors, the metamorphosis of some teenage boys into sexual predators, and other unwelcome changes to the neighborhood of Lakewood, for Waldie, "[t]hrough dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days" (87). These dreams or memories of a treasured past shield the author, and though he does not literally move into a new home, the changing face of his neighborhood forces him into a new house, so to speak.

Paul Wilkes, in his review of Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Imagination*, refers to this sensibility, the housing of memories and longings, as a "sympathetic pragmatism" (qtd. in Waldie, "The Making" 63). For Waldie, his "'sense of place' is based on the belief that each of us has an imaginative, inner landscape compounded of memory and longing that seeks to be connected to an outer landscape of people, circumstances, and things. . . [S]uch a 'sense of place' is, like a sense of self, part of the equipment of a conscious mind ("The Making" 62). In his discussion of the San Fernando Valley (an area which Waldie cites as "another place of terrible ordinariness"), author and environmentalist Barry Lopez equates "sense of place" not with the "conventional markers of community building: institutions, political processes, or assertions of a tradition" but with an individual's "vulnerability" to a particular place. He says, "With the deepening and widening of our imagination as an aspect of faith, we become more

and more trusting. In becoming vulnerable, we acquire a ‘sense of place.’ With that sensibility, we become implicated in a particular history and the common stories that bear our individual and shared memories.” (qtd. in Waldie, “The Making” 65). But is Waldie simply reveling in cherished bonds and shared values of a past that cannot be recovered? Or is the author, in his own quiet way, reminding us what a community could be, the values to which the various communities of L.A. should once again aspire?

Holy Land, for Waldie, represents an attempt to negotiate between a desired identity and the existing reality of living in present-day Los Angeles. Kevin Starr explains that the literary personas invented by writers is the product of this particular negotiation:

Drawing upon conscious, subconscious and intuitive elements, writers construct identities for themselves – masques they might be called, in reference to ancient drama – and these identities, in turn, operating between the writer and the chaos of reality, allow a writer to pick, choose, organize, evaluate and find the right words. And so the voice – the Masque – of these essays represents a semi-stylized projection on the part of a writer who is also struggling, personally, existentially, with the meaning of it all, to include his own conditioning by family, place, culture and history (“Pilgrim”).

This masking, in turn, reveals the blasé shield that Waldie himself utilizes to negotiate his reality, yet at the same time, hold on to his own sense of self, his own identity, in the face of a reality that reveals its violent nature and otherwise threatens to crumble the author’s faith in his way of life. However, Waldie’s mask is not completely opaque; the faith that he describes in *Holy Land* is a call-to-arms for the reshaping of Lakewood, in a way that would reinvolve this faith of yesterday without ignoring the realities of today. Waldie explains that distinguishing faith from mere nostalgia is key, warning Lakewood residents to neither “project into [the city’s social fabric] a myth of the past nor get “lost”

in a history that cannot be resurrected: “The difficulty with nostalgia is that it doesn’t pressure the person to make historical changes. It is important to be clear-eyed, along with being loyal” (qtd. in Brill 108). In response to writer Moshe Safdie’s conception of the city as a “temporary encampment,” Waldie suggests an alternative vision when he says, “[P]erhaps one of the ways to look at the next American city might be to look at the last American city and see in the fabric of its everydayness some things of permanence to stand against the conviction that everything around us is a temporary encampment”; an “everyday place” like Lakewood can “harbor qualities of life that are profound” (“Waldie”).

It is important to note that Waldie is careful not to depict the Lakewood from the past as a social experiment with perfect results. He states that Lakewood, like most places in L.A. at the time, excluded ethnic Americans from its boundaries and was far from being a refuge for all hoping to live the suburban dream. Black families were not permitted to apply for a home in Lakewood when the sales office first opened its doors. Like the neighboring city of Long Beach, racial covenants that excluded African Americans, Mexicans, and Jews from its boundaries were often attached to deeds even after the Supreme Court ruled such restrictions unenforceable¹⁸ (73); Mexican families might have to lie about their heritage and claim Spanish birth and ethnicity to purchase a home in a Long Beach suburb (102-3). Waldie writes about a photograph (presumably

¹⁸ Josh Sides, in his study of African Americans in L.A. from the Great Depression until the present, identifies “the hardening racial segregation of the late 1910s and 1920s,” tracing the history of the nonwhite Angeleno’s struggle against racial covenants. In 1919, the Supreme Court ruled that property sales could not be restricted based on race, a limited victory at best for L.A.’s minority citizens Angelenos, who could now buy property in neighborhoods formerly off-limits but who could still not live in them. In the 1948 ruling of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Supreme Court ruled racially restrictive covenants illegal though some new developments and neighborhoods would continue to follow such covenants.

from the early days of Lakewood) in which a Mexican family sits on the front lawn of their corner house waiting for the bus (56). The anomalous presence of a visibly ethnic family (the father in the picture wears a hat particular to his region in Mexico) in an otherwise homogeneously white neighborhood, compounded by their equally conspicuous behavior (socializing on the front yard is conspicuous by Lakewood's standards), failure to conform to suburbia's unwritten rules limiting use of the front yard threatens the uniformity of the neighborhood. Significantly, the author points out that this family's home is situated near the intersection of Amos and Andy,¹⁹ streets named after a popular radio comedy series from the 1920s until the 1950s and was made into short-lived television sitcom in the early 1950s but received criticism for its use of white actors in blackface. Yes, Lakewood was conceived of in a different era. Furthermore, when developers Louis Boyar, Mark Taper, and Ben Weingart bought the existing subdivision²⁰ land that would become Lakewood, it was a subdivision that would have been off-limits to them, too, though they would later remove the restrictions for potential Jewish homebuyers. And while similar exclusionary restrictions may have been practiced in Long Beach, this change illustrates the expanding definition "white" as Eric Avila notes: "The settlement of Jews in Lakewood demonstrates the extent to which postwar suburbanization in southern California sustained the 'whitening' of a social

¹⁹ For more on the *Amos 'N' Andy* series, see Melvin Patrick Ely's *The Adventures of Amos 'N' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*.

²⁰ Waldie explains that Clark Bonner, President of the Montana Land Company that owned and in 1929, subdivided the former beet fields 6 miles from Long Beach into 70x120 lots; he had intended to sell these empty lots to potential middle class residents before Boyar, Taper, and Weingart purchased the holdings of the Montana Land Company, including the remaining undeveloped lots in the subdivision and the golf course (64-5).

group that endured centuries of racist persecution,” progress that owed its success in large part to the Jewish identity of developers like Boyar, Taper, and Weingart” (43).

Although Lakewood did not embrace everyone regardless of ethnic background, the community did expand the definition of American, gesturing, in this light, toward a more democratic frontier, one that was necessarily connected to the American Dream. Many individuals previously excluded from the suburban life saw in Lakewood an opportunity. Living side-by-side were Catholics and Protestants alike, working-class families and the solidly middle class, and those with a dustbowl refugee heritage.

This more homogeneous mix signaled the increasingly democratic nature and broadening membership of the suburb: “It was often said of this suburb, as its houses filled quickly in 1950 and 1951, that every other house was either Jewish or Catholic” (74). While not perfect, at that time Lakewood reflected the American Dream, a desire which Adams asserts is far nobler than that of “material conquest and upbuilding” or “the pot of gold” at the end of the rainbow (414). Rather, Adams insists that the rainbow itself, figuratively speaking, was of utmost importance and “promised...a hope for mankind” (415): the opportunity to pursue that pot of gold, “the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (416). Access to the suburban life and all that it signifies should be listed among the examples of such opportunities and achievements Adams lists – achievements in science, literature and arts, humanitarian efforts, international relations, and admirable public figures like Washington and Lincoln. After all, inclusion in the suburban dream signaled a modest achievement for Lakewood’s first homeowners, who hailed from crowded

urban cities (like Waldie's own parents), were returning veterans, or had spent childhoods in the tents of migratory labor camps or "in tarpaper shacks among the oil fields on the outskirts of Bakersfield" (172). A life in Lakewood gave many individuals a chance to soothe the sting of poverty that marked their pasts. Thus, though Lakewood did not represent a home for everyone, the mere fact that it expanded its boundaries to include many from classes previously scorned redefining what it meant to be an American. For this reason, Lakewood signified a home, in Bachelard's sense of the term, as that place of "original warmth" (88). Accordingly, Waldie refuses to let die that original warmth of Lakewood, those values that once made it an ideal place to live.

In this sense, then, Waldie's version of the American Dream alludes to the significance that the frontier has held in the imagination of Americans everywhere, though not just in terms of Frederick Jackson Turner's literal definition of the frontier, "the colonization of the Great West" (1). Though Turner's frontier thesis has been as vigorously criticized as it has been defended,²¹ the concept of the frontier continues to define the American character and significantly shape American culture. The frontier has, in the American imagination, variously signified political freedom and radicalism, mobility, abundance, colonization, and conquest – all factors said to have shaped American civilization.²² Taking issue with Turner's statement that westward expansion halted after 1890, John Carl Parish expands the definitions of the frontier and westward

²¹ See Ray Allen Billington's *The American Frontier Thesis: Attack and Defense* for a summary of major criticism on Turner's thesis.

²² Earl Pomeroy elaborates upon the "unqualified western radicalism" implied in Turner's thesis, while John D. Barnhart upon frontier democracy, Everett S. Lee on the theme of mobility, and David M. Potter upon the theme of "abundance."

expansion from mere geographic movement westward to “frontiers of material development and transforming ideas expands the definition”; among these frontiers are those of conservation, agricultural practices, banking, manufacturing, and the arts (qtd. in Bennett 84). If the suburban frontier, in this respect, qualifies as one such “transforming idea,” then Waldie’s memoir is a study of the American character in terms of the westward expansion on the suburban edge that Lakewood represents. “The grid on which my city is built opens outward, without limits, states Waldie. “It’s the antithesis of a ghetto” (118). These words capture the limitless potential imagined by the frontier and pay tribute to the pioneering role Lakewood played in democratizing the suburb, symbolically transforming former bean and sugar beet fields into a geographic representation of the American’s limitless potential, the *pursuit* of that pot of gold.”

In another sense, Waldie marvels at the American ingenuity of Lakewood’s developers and their revolutionary homebuilding practices based on the principles of Taylorization and creative financing. Lakewood, from its very conception, was quintessentially American in nature. Never before had anyone financed a housing development on such a large scale and in such a manner. The novel way in which Louis Boyar and Ben Weingart obtained 100-percent financing from the government for the construction of Lakewood’s homes was equally revolutionary. Section 213 of the National Housing Act was a New Deal program that allowed Boyar and Weingart to obtain such financing so long as “the houses were built by...nonprofit [cooperatives] of property owners,” of which the pair would set up many (166). Moreover, the shapes of the lots, for example, are reminiscent of, if on a

comparatively minuscule scale, acreage granted to these optimistic pioneers. The land ordinance of 1785, which offered would-be homesteaders mile-square sections of wilderness west of the Ohio River, allowed settlers to achieve their dreams of a space to call their own, what Williams refers to as a “purchased freehold house in the country” (47). In this respect, despite Lakewood’s obvious suburban features, its residents dreamt not of a suburban identity but rather of a space that approximates more closely the space of the country, a space that still affords them with an individual identity. Thus, these plots of former hog farms and dairies become the potential vehicles for many L.A. working-class citizens to cultivate that “better and richer life” (415).

It is this rural and American Dream-inspired collective identity that is at the heart of Waldie’s memoir. In Lakewood, the residents’ subscription to a mutual belief system – a set of truths, beliefs, and desires - should not be confused with conformity. When Waldie explains that the nuns at his childhood Catholic elementary school made him “hate communists, then intolerance, and finally everything that could break the charmed patterns of [their] lives (60),” he is referring to this shared belief system, a “compact among neighbors” to maintain a “manageable life” (20). Voluntarily choosing to adhere to this compact, the residents permit a particular “inertia” (11) to define their daily lives, and this manageable life may be straightforward and unadorned as the Lakewood’s homes, but this life is sturdy and resolute as are the dependable “stucco-over chicken wire” homes (31). In this light, the grid that is Lakewood may “[limit their] choices, exactly as urban planners said it would,” these limits aren’t paralyzing and in fact,

contribute to a corporate society, “compelling a conviviality that people got used to and made into a substitute for choices including not choosing at all” (116). Again, such conviviality can be understood as a shared way of thinking, a mutual respect of one another, and a common desire for good citizenship. So in sync are the residents’ attitudes, decisions, and activities with the attitudes, decisions, and activities of their neighbors that the sound of a dog barking is likened to the neighborhood “clearing its throat before going to bed” (7).

Tortilla Curtain: The Apocalyptic Dread of Anonymity

However, not all L.A. fiction represents life in L.A. as a “charmed pattern” that offers opportunities to expand rather than limit the possibilities of its citizens. While Waldie’s *Holy Land* applauds the freedoms of a collectivity that is “not middle class,” other works of fiction recognize the anonymity of the city as an ominous cloud that threatens to destroy, rather than protect, the identity of Angelenos. T.C. Boyle, writing in the absurdist and experimental literary tradition of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce and his “quirky characters, lush descriptions, and cynical humor” reminiscent of Barth, Pynchon, and Evelyn Waugh,” explores this very topic in his 1995 novel *Tortilla Curtain* (qtd. in “T.C. Boyle”). The author’s prose, which Charles Champlin describes as “a presence, a litany, a symphony of words, a chorale of idioms ancient and modern, a treasury of strange and wondrous place names, a glossary of things, good food and horrendous ills” contributes to message of the novel (qtd. in “T.C.

Boyle”). For example, the author’s use of language only emphasizes the misgivings of characters, about the daily struggle to make it for some and the sense of impending doom for others. In Boyle’s novel, anonymity proves not to be a protective shield that imbues the novel’s characters with a sense of identity and belonging but rather a menacing force whose power to annihilate sends members of the Los Angeles elite scampering up the hills into the city’s more posh retreats. For the residents of the privileged Arroyo Blanco Estates, L.A.’s teeming Latino population, particularly its illegal immigrant population, proves to be this menacing force. “Space, like time, is an arbiter of social relations, and the identities that we inhabit – race, class, gender, sexuality – are codified within a set of spaces that we describe as neighborhoods, homes, cities, streets, suburbs, parks, factories, office buildings, freeways, and so on,” asserts Eric Avila (xv). *Tortilla Curtain*, in this respect, is Boyle’s commentary on the xenophobia that not only afflicts L.A.’s elite but also speaks to the very core of their identity.

Centering on the lives of two main couples -the affluent Mossbachers and the illegal Mexican immigrant Rincóns, *Tortilla Curtain* is considered Boyle’s most controversial novel not only because the author addresses the contentious issue of illegal immigration but also in large part, because he tells part of the story from the perspectives of two illegal immigrants from Mexico, an approach some critics see as “politically irresponsible” (Gleason 94). For instance, in a book review for the *New Statesman*, Julie Wheelwright comments that “Boyle explores powerful issues, but they operate just shy of caricature,” depicting the Mexican couple as “naive, but essentially good, while their Anglo counterparts grow increasingly ugly with rage” (qtd. in “T.C. Boyle”). Still,

Boyle's other critics like Barbara Kingsolver maintain that Boyle's novel addresses what has historically been "the great American political dilemma: In a country that proudly defines itself as a nation of immigrants, who gets to slam the door on whom?" (qtd. in "T.C. Boyle"). Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher call Arroyo Blanco Estates home, a luxurious development situated

[h]igh up the [Topanga] canyon, nestled in a fan-shaped depression dug out of the side of the side of the western ridge by the action of some long-forgotten stream, lay the subdivision known as Arroyo Blanco Estates. It was a private community, comprising a golf course, ten tennis courts, a community center and some two hundred and fifty homes, each set on one-point-five acres and strictly conforming to the covenants, conditions, and restrictions set forth in the 1973 articles of incorporation. (30)

The Rincóns, on the other hand, hail from rural Mexico, currently squatting in the very canyon that the Arroyo Blanco overlooks: Cándido, whose name alludes to the naïve protagonist of Voltaire's novel, and his young, pregnant wife América, whose name signifies the couple's immigrant hopes, earn their living as day laborers, soliciting employment at the local labor exchange. Though the lives of these couples could not be more different, their lives soon become inextricably entwined not only because Delaney accidentally runs over Cándido but more importantly because the luxury lifestyle of the Mossbachers and their Arroyo Blanco neighbors is necessarily dependent upon exploitation of the Rincóns; despite this fact, however, the Arroyo Blanco residents find the presence of the Latino immigrant unsettling, their panic against the plurality of L.A. soon giving way to apocalyptic dread.

As the privileged to retreat from L.A.'s larger population into the hills, it becomes apparent that they, unlike the Lakewood residents, do not identify with the city's masses,

and in this respect, they do not feel a bond with the majority nor do they seek unity through a particular collectivity. From this vantage point, the Arroyo Blanco elite do not see themselves as “men of the crowd,” or at least of the relative crowd L.A. represents. A man of the crowd is lured into the whirl of the crowd and content to be identified *with* it, shielded by the blasé defense of which Simmel theorizes. In this respect, whereas the Lakewood welcomed persons of diverse origins (the poor, working-class, and Catholic were considered diverse categories at the time) under the protective umbrella of Lakewood’s collectivity, the attitude of the Arroyo Blanco residents is quite the opposite.

Nor is Delaney a flâneur, In Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the term, a man of leisure and privilege who takes pleasure in observing the crowd but never becomes part of it, able to define himself *in contrast to* crowd. Being jostled by people on a congested street does not bother the flâneur whose privileged position of power allows him to always disassociate himself from the masses and thus preserve his own identity.²³ The first verse of Baudelaire’s sonnet conveys the ability of the speaker, a flâneur, to distance himself from but at the same time enjoy and consume the street scene that surrounds him:

The deafening street was screaming all around me.
Tall, slender, in deep mourning – majestic grief –
A woman made her way, with fastidious hand
Raising and swaying festoon and him;

Significantly, the street scene “screams all around” him, but he is able to maintain a sufficient distance to preserve his identity sanity and at the same time, is able to indulge

²³ Walter Benjamin identifies Hoffman’s cousin in E.T.A. Hoffman’s story “The Cousin’s Corner Window” as an example of flâneur; Hoffman’s cousin looks out the window of a second story apartment, from which vantage point he can “[scrutinize] the throng” below using his opera glasses. In this respect, the street scene is for him a form of entertainment, something to be consumed.

in the “deep mourning” and majestic grief” of a passing woman. Rather than connect with her grief, empathize with her distress, the flâneur sees the woman, and other members of the crowd, as texts for consumption, to be used and discarded at will: “He becomes deeply involved with them, only to delegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt” (Benjamin 172).

Delaney shares with the flâneur a privileged social position; he is also well-dressed, roaming the canyon in his expensive trekking gear, and consumes the labor of the Latino immigrant. On the other hand, unlike the flâneur who strolls through the congested arcades of Paris, Delaney’s hikes through the Canyon are largely a solitary activity, lacking the element of the crowd, the emptiness of the canyon in stark contrast to the crowded Valley. In fact, Delaney and his fellow Arroyo Blanco residents take no delight in the crowd, the dark, unmediated skin of the Latino immigrant offensively pocking the pristine topography of the Canyon, their “dark language” invading its peace and immediately triggering his suspicion. For instance, because they object to the sight of the Latino day laborers who congregate in the post office parking lot awaiting employment opportunities, the residents later build a shelter to quarantine the laborers from sight, an action which only confirms their uninvited status. Thus, Delaney does not define himself again this *urban* landscape as does a flâneur but rather against an empty canyon, signaling his lack of identification with the larger population of L.A.

Interpreting the Political and Social Climate of L.A.

Significantly both *Holy Land* and *Tortilla Curtain* were written a few years after the 1992 L.A. Riots and during a period of heated debates over Prop 187.²⁴ The locus of memory and desire, *Holy Land* represents a memorial to a bygone era that has since been replaced by poor substitutes for community; while the Lakewood that Waldie reimagines is neither perfect nor entirely innocent, this suburb did stand for progress and an increasing accessibility to the ownership class, and thus fulfillment of the American Dream for many. In contrast, *Tortilla Curtain* focuses on the present and an uncertain future in L.A., urging us to acknowledge the need for immigration reform, current labor exploitation and segregationist housing practices, and a U.S. history of immigrant exploitation, whether through importing cheap labor from abroad, fostering a *maquiladora* industry, destroying domestic economies through international trade agreements that push economic refugees to cross the border legally and illegally, or, as in the case of *Tortilla Curtain*, creating a privileged lifestyle dependent upon the exploitation of the socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged. Boyle's novel represents not a longing for but rather a social and political critique of the past, of our society's legacy of failure and its consequent affronts to humanity: the failure of the U.S. to recognize its membership to a larger global community, the failure to acknowledge a history of exploiting immigrant laborers, creating conditions that encourage illegal immigration, and dehumanization of the Latino immigrant.

²⁴ Proposition 187 was a measure passed in 1994 which denied undocumented immigrants public education, health services and other benefits.

Yet, unlike historical records that document past events, dates, and facts; examine causes and effects of past events; and identify and trace patterns particular to a nation or common to various nations, Boyle's novel conveys interpretations or what Henry James calls "impressions" of these realities through invented stories and characters.²⁵

According to James, a novel, defined in its broadest terms, is "a personal, direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" (15). Conveying the intensity of such impressions requires the novelist to possess and exercise a particular "faculty":

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience. (James 17)

In this respect, perhaps what separates a novelist from a historian is the novelist's ability to interpret and give shape to objective events of life – the "seen," those "things," the "whole piece," and the "pattern." Novelists discern the subtleties of the world in which they live, pinpointing the less obvious, interpreting patterns, exploring consequences of actions and values, and attaching emotion and meaning to an objective sequence of events. Boyle's novel examines illegal immigration, the underground economy of undocumented labor, the luxury lifestyle of the privileged, the Angeleno's retreat into hillside living, and the private development, its quasi-governmental entity the

²⁵ In contrast, Roland Barthes argues that the novel and history share the narrative form and that the novel represents a bourgeoisie genre whose structure incorrectly implies a coherence that does not exist, depicting an "autarkic world which elaborates its own dimensions and limits, and organizes within these its own Time, its own Space, its population, its own set of objects and its myths" (93).

homeowners' association, and its restrictive covenants. From these objective facts, Boyle conveys the experiences of man, uncovering for his readers the "unseen" and detecting in the words and actions of the Mossbachers and the Rincóns patterns that piece together an intimate portrait of humanity's bleak condition, "the maxed-out Los Angeles stripped of all glamour and most opportunities" according to Nick Gillespie. Moreover, as Gleason argues, Boyle's novel questions the sincerity of the current rhetoric of political correctness: though Delaney views himself as a liberal humanist, his actions do not match his words (Gleason 94). Heike Paul comments upon the styles of the Mossbacher and Rincón narratives respectively, arguing that because we lack details about Delaney and Kyra's former lives and because their narrative is satiric, the Mossbachers strike us as superficial; on the other hand, the background information on the Rincóns give a more complete picture of the couple, painting them as more complex and human, as deserving of our sympathy (263). Due to its social commentary, *Tortilla Curtain* might also be considered a documentary novel, which "is distinguished by its insistence that it contains some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world" as Barbara Foley defines (394). "Extratextual" in nature, the documentary novel "implicitly claims to replicate certain features of actuality in a relatively direct and unmediated fashion; it invokes familiar novelistic conventions, but it requires the reader to accept certain textual elements – characters, incidents, or actual documents – as possessing referents in the world of the reader" (Foley 394). These "textual elements" may be likened to what James understands to the "seen."

A City Marked by Diversity

Los Angeles's Spanish name alone hints at its non-Anglo origins and history, and census figures for the past three decades only confirm that the Latino population continues to grow. According to the United States Census Bureau, approximately 38% of L.A. County's residents identified themselves as Hispanic in 1990; that figure was approximately 45% in 2000 and approximately 48% in 2010. This face of increasing diversity in L.A. has spawned fear among some of L.A.'s privileged. Like the Lakewood residents, the Mossbachers and their Arroyo Blanco neighbors share a need to protect themselves from the unknown, namely their fears of the changing face of L.A., and they find a solution, however flawed, in the exclusive Arroyo Blanco. Interestingly, the name of this Topanga Canyon enclave literally refers to a *white* arroyo or dry gulch, paradoxically hinting at both the Latinization of L.A. and the xenophobia that pervades this private community. Incorporated in the early 70s, a few years before Latinos became the city's majority-minority population, the Arroyo Blanco represents the residents' anticipation of and panicked reaction toward the city's growing Latino presence, particularly illegal immigrant presence.

However, as Boyle implies, American citizens like those of the Arroyo Blanco are unwilling to acknowledge their complicity in creating the very stimuli that haunts them, what they perceive as this country's illegal immigration problem. For example, concerned about the depletion of public resources, Americans like Arroyo Blanco resident Jack Jardine attribute the large-scale illegal immigration from Mexico and

Central America to the push-pull theory, asserting that poverty pushes these would-be immigrants out of their homeland while the promise of a better financial future pulls them into the United States. However, José David Saldívar, drawing upon Gerald Lopez, considers causes beyond those reasons inspired in part by clichéd notions of the American Dream: disagreeing with the push-pull causation, Saldívar instead attributes this trend to other factors, including America's historically complicated relationship with the Mexican immigrant, both legal and illegal (109-10). The United States, through official policy, actively solicited Mexican immigrants to fill its labor needs, most notably through the 1942 Bracero Program, the U.S. treaty with Mexico, which granted Mexican citizens temporary permission to work in the United States.

Arguably, the current number of undocumented laborers in this country might suggest America's continued demand for such labor. Yet, so oblivious are L.A.'s elite to true nature of the immigration problem that the Mossbachers miss the news report about 37 illegal immigrant Chinese nationals who drowned en route to San Francisco (33). These Chinese nationals' willingness to endure the dangers of a transpacific journey echoes the willingness of Central Americans to endure similar treacherous journeys. Although such solicitation may not be legally sanctioned, the current laxity of labor law enforcement²⁶ nonetheless encourages undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America to cross the U.S. border and seek employment because the demand for such undocumented labor exists, a condition that refutes the push-pull theory to which Jack

²⁶ In comparison to the price that undocumented workers pay, U.S. employers are subject to relatively small sanctions, if they pay a price at all, for employing undocumented workers. As a result, undocumented workers bear the brunt of "their 'illegality' (in deportation, lost wages, even imprisonment) – a powerful tool for intimidating workers and discouraging unionization" (Davis, *Magical* 28).

Jardine subscribes. Thus, illegal immigrants occupy a particular space in both our social, economic, legal, and moral fabric: “This bizarre combination of ineffectuality and force at the border determines the niches that undocumented immigrants occupy” (Davis, *Magical* 28).

Tortilla Curtain contains several examples of the affluent or business-owning Californian’s use of and dependence upon undocumented labor. Neighbor Jim Shirley, for example, has no qualms about or trouble obtaining the services of an undocumented laborer, his efforts limited to driving to the labor exchange and soliciting América’s services (the irony of América’s name is apparent). The Arroyo Blanco Homeowners Association also hires undocumented day laborers from the labor exchange with no apparent consequence. Ironically, even the very wall designed to exclude the immigrant requires the immigrant labor, including that of undocumented Cándido. Furthermore, Cándido’s multiple crossings of the US-Mexico border are in response to this demand. The residents of the Arroyo Blanco eventually attempt to oust those whose labor they had once actively solicited, continuing the exploitive cycle of use and disposal of undocumented labor. In this respect, the undocumented laborer becomes nothing more than a commodity (not unlike the *sushi*, *samosas*, “Taco Bell moderne” architecture of outlying suburbs,²⁷ and Japanese luxury vehicles) purchased by those who wield power in L.A.’s political economy like the Arroyo Blanco residents. *Tortilla Curtain* also exemplifies this theme of ethnic/racial exploitation with respect to Jim Shirley’s business

²⁷ Mike Davis uses this term in *Magical Urbanism* (56).

of importing cheap *Eastern* art from Asia; he also employs undocumented América Rincón to shine dozens of Buddha statues.

Strongholds against Diversity: the Private Development

It is from this immigrant L.A. that Delaney and his neighbors retreat, withdrawing into themselves. Commenting on Homi Bhabha's observation of the "almost 'global fear and loathing'" that pervades suburban enclaves, Catherine Jurca describes the current trend of contemporary suburbs that "evolve toward ever greater insulation by developing...gated communities, where residents are willing to lock themselves in to shut the world out" (19). Like other similarly situated white Angelenos in Los Angeles, Kyra's clients have developed anxiety concerning the changing demographics, strains upon public funds, crime, and other resulting social issues:

Since the riots she'd met dozens of couples...[who] wanted something out of the way, something rustic, rural, safe –something removed from people of whatever class and color, but particularly from the hordes or immigrants pouring in from Mexico and Central America, from Dubai, Burundi and Lithuania, from Asia and India and everywhere else in the world. (107)

The violence of the 1992 Los Angeles riots badly frightened some unsuspecting, though equally blameworthy, upper middle class whites but instead of accepting complicity, they run as does Bill Greutert, one of Kyra's clients. He points out, "It's just so crowded down there...you get this feeling of the city closing in on you, even in Bel Air. There's just so many...*people*, you know what I mean" (107). The residents' withdrawal into the private development is reminiscent of the panic that pervades L.A. survivalist fiction

from the 1970s, which plots often include a white minority fighting to stave off ethnic hordes likened to wild animals: American Nazi Andrew McDonald's *Turner Diaries*, Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, Nicolas Cain's anti-Vietnamese *Little Saigon*, James Cameron's *Strange Days*, John Carpenter's *Escape from LA*, and the divine genocide of LA's unwanted populations in Pat Robertson's *End of the Age* are but a few examples of this genre (Davis, *Ecology* 339). The private development becomes the solution to the numerous complexities posed by an increasingly heterogeneous and exotic L.A. populace.

The Arroyo Blanco residents take refuge behind their Topanga Canyon stronghold where their segregationist attitude is thinly veiled as exclusivity and taste. Kyra, a real estate agent who specializes in distinctive, high-end homes, especially those governed by restrictive covenants, observes that most people lack taste. On the surface, CC&Rs are designed to ensure that homes in private communities conform to what has been deemed "tasteful" as the Arroyo Blanco's own exterior paint restriction implies: "If you wanted to paint your house sky-blue or Provencal-pink with lime-green shutters, you were perfectly welcome to move into the San Fernando Valley or to Santa Monica or anywhere else you chose, but if you bought into Arroyo Blanco Estates, your house would be white and your roof orange" (30). Such restrictions have also been referred to as "snob zoning," enacting ordinances that require large lots and floor plans. Many critics have argued that such exclusionary zoning practices reflect a panicked response to L.A.'s increasing racial, cultural, and economic diversity, amounting to a new set of Jim Crow laws designed to maintain the "white wall" as Mike Davis suggests (*Quartz* 161). Becky

Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese also discuss the “class-oriented lexicon of property values, landscape aesthetics, tax rates, congestion, and even traffic safety” that has since replaced specific housing restrictions against race (439-40).

In this respect, aesthetics becomes the Arroyo Blanco codeword for racial exclusion. Though this private enclave is not exclusively WASP with the occasional Hernandez and Dagolian peppering the homeowners’ association roster, “white” represents the socio-economic and racial norm to which all residents are expected to conform. Symbolically, their CC&Rs allow for very little diversity, the exterior paint palette limited to just three prescribed shades of white. Moreover, when outsiders fail to read properly interpret these signs of racial exclusion and trespass upon the grounds of the Arroyo Blanco and environs, the Homeowners’ Association chooses a more explicit means of racial exclusion in an effort to restrict the city’s darker elements – the “Salvadorans, the Mexicans, the blacks, the gangbangers and taggers and carjackers” to the Metro section of the *L.A. Times* (101). To this end, they erect a gate, hire a guard, install a chain link fence, and eventually build a thick wall to defend their exclusive lifestyle²⁸ (39). In this respect, CC&Rs²⁹ might be considered more than a legal measure designed to protect the aesthetic value of the development but rather a form of legalized segregation, and the homeowners’ association the private government that enforces them. As Heather J. Hicks asserts, material possessions, which in this case includes homes, define whiteness in *Tortilla Curtain* (46).

²⁸ For Mike Davis, these barriers and fortified perimeters exemplify the “proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous ‘armed response’ and represent a means of defending luxury lifestyles” (*Quartz* 223).

²⁹ For more on restrictive covenants, see Josh Sides’s *L.A. City Limits*.

In turn, this fortification signals a shift in thinking, a commentary on the diminished democracy that the Arroyo Blanco represents, its substitution of deed restrictions and privatized governments, i.e., CC&Rs and vigilant homeowners' associations, for traditional, public law-making processes; the "messiness of everyday public life"; and the "day-to-day compromise and live-and-let-live that successful small towns have" of which Waldie discusses in *Where We Are Now* (102-3). Although Waldie makes this comment about New Urbanist developments, the Arroyo Blanco shares with this school of design, what Waldie sees as the misguided idea that restrictive covenants promote neighborly attitudes; instead, they, as in the case of Delaney and his neighbors, only have the effect of dividing a community, causing them to divorce themselves from the larger L.A. community. Rather than deal openly and publicly with the immigration issue, the residents choose to flee and fortify, transforming themselves from true citizens who participate in the shaping of their community to consumers who purchase a secessionist lifestyle in response to their fear. And rather than celebrate the ordinary as does the Lakewood depicted in *Holy Land*, the Arroyo Blanco residents are characterized by a certain smugness; symbolically, they position themselves like gods high above the Plains of Id where they attempt to separate themselves from the follies of the common man. As Nicolaides and Wiese contend, this "fragmentation" of the affluent from the general public implies an attack on democratic values and "the very concept of civitas—organized community life" (453). No longer are the problems of immigration, poverty, and crime viewed as a collective problem:

Many Americans called into question the assumption of shared values and shared responsibility to the commonweal. At the end of the twentieth century,

suburbanites still searched for secure, comforting definitions of ‘our town,’ but distinctions between who belonged and who did not remained matters of intense concern. An exclusionary sensibility continued to shape the suburban landscape. (439)

Unlike the preamble to the Constitution that begins with “We the people,” the rhetoric of the Arroyo Blanco Estates is largely dominated by an exclusionary sensibility, “us vs. them” language. Very few residents object to transforming the Arroyo Blanco from an open community – one governed by “the freedom to come and go- and not just for those of privileged enough to be able to live here, but for anyone- any citizen – rich or poor” – into a gated one (43). The Arroyo Blanco, characterized by excess -isolation and square footage - precisely fits Waldie’s description of “toxic...McMansion wastelands” that lack “enough of the play between life in public and life in private (*Where* 48). Instead, the residents ultimately vote to “balkanize” or alternatively, “brazilianize” their community, unwilling to acknowledge the public life that exists outside its very ramparts and in the eyes of some critics, their attitude classist.³⁰ Michael Lind asserts that class, not race, will ultimately divide our society, creating an “informal caste system” like that of Brazil:

The real threat is not the Balkanization but the Brazilianization of America, not fragmentation along racial lines but fissioning along class lines. Brazilianization is symbolized by the increasing withdrawal of the white American overclass into its own barricaded nation-within-a nation, a world of private neighborhoods, private schools, private police, private health care, and even private roads, walled off from the spreading squalor beyond. Like a Latin American oligarchy, the rich and well-connected members of the overclass can flourish in a decadent America with Third World levels of inequality and crime. (14)

³⁰ David Boaz summarizes critics of fortress communities, citing Mike Davis, who writes about the phenomenon of privatizing communities into what essentially function as fortress cities; LA City Council member Rita Walters who refers to this phenomenon as the “Balkanization of the city”; and one San Diego residents description of the city’s gated communities the Los Angelization of Sa n Diego (451).

This secession signals a refusal on the part of those like the Arroyo Blanco residents to interact with working-class individuals in the true nature of community, their interactions limited to contracting with them for their services as nannies and day laborers.

In *Tortilla Curtain*, the private development in L.A. is conflated with a white identity, a theme that Jurca explores in her examination of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*. Although *Tortilla Curtain* was written 80 years later, it shares with *Tarzan*, a similar theme of racial exclusivity in the subdivision. In Burroughs's novel, Tarzan is raised by apes after his parents are killed but later realizes that he is different from his foster community, eventually concluding that they are barbarians. As a result, he opts to return to his parents' original home, which Jurca interprets as "a white subdivision...his fortress" (38). Jurca also points out that this underlying theme, the white subdivision-citadel, is no coincidence, for Burroughs was also a real estate developer whose achievements included Tarzana, a suburb in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley, "modeled along the lines of other twentieth century suburbs, as a place intended to ensure that white American civilization could thrive in isolation and where ordinary middleclass people could think of themselves as extraordinary Anglo-Saxons" (Jurca 43). In this respect, the Arroyo Blanco resembles the once exclusively white Tarzana, representing the newest headquarters for xenophobic Angelenos. The frequent homeowners association meetings, the get-togethers at Jack Jardine's and at Dominic Flood's homes all indicate a self-imposed alienation in which the residents more than voluntarily choose to live outside the city limits; more importantly, they exhibit a desire

to congregate only amongst their own kind. Though race relations in L.A. have improved since the publication of *Tarzan of the Apes*, authors like T.C. Boyle warn that such racist ideology persists and threatens to re-emerge in an even uglier form.

The Arroyo Blanco, a Medieval-Class Development

Because a white identity is defined against the figurative dark skin of the Latino immigrant, in *Tortilla Curtain*, the residents of the Arroyo Blanco ironically require his presence even as they transform their development into the picture of the bastioned city to keep “them” out; the immigrant’s assimilation would negate the very definition of this white identity. Though Delaney says it in jest, he and his neighbors really do have utopian dreams of “[walling] the whole place in like a medieval city,” (189) with “ramparts and boiling oil” not far behind (245). Urban planner Edward J. Blakely comments on the response of the middle class to “fortress up” against poverty and other challenges faced by the working-class : the latest trend, private developments not unlike the Arroyo Blanco, offer the middle and upper classes a means of skirting school integration, maintaining property values, and securing their “economic advantage” (452-53). Self-preservation drives the more privileged city dwellers inward behind dense walls (as opposed to outward in a gesture of reaching out or solidarity), and upward into the hills, a strategic albeit transitory vantage point from which to keep an eye on these enemies. Because they perceive a malfunctioning of the world as they know it, they retreat first upward into the hills and then inward behind walls to hide from antagonizing

unknown forces. Perhaps at one time, the Arroyo Blanco residents, like Lakewood's first residents, could walk out their front door and look to the left, look to the right, only to see mirrored images of themselves, but in the face of present-day L.A.'s increasing diversity, they panic.

Umberto Eco's discussion of a "new Middle Ages" is helpful in understanding the actions and reactions of Delaney and his neighbors. Drawing upon Giuseppe Sacco's discussion of the "medievalization of the city," Eco writes about the phenomenon of suburban clan-formation:

A series of minorities [who] rejecting integration, form clans,...each clan [picking] a neighborhood that becomes its own center, often inaccessible...The clan spirit dominates also the well to do classes who, pursuing the myth of nature, withdraw from the city to the garden suburbs with their own shopping malls, bringing other types of microsocieties into existence. (76)

Eco further explains that this medieval clannishness is a response to the demise of "a great peace" and "a great international power" who now perceives the threat of "barbarians...pressing at its borders...barbarians [who] are not necessarily uncultivated, but [who] are bringing new customs, new views of the world...spreading new faiths and new perspectives of life (74). In other words, there is a trade-off: a tumultuous world but also opportunity for new beliefs and knowledge of the world in exchange for predictability and peace. In *Tortilla Curtain*, clannishness manifests itself in the form of a private community nestled in a canyon, which they believe to be inaccessible; and though the homes are set on 1.5 acre lots, a detail reminiscent of Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept, they fail to marry the best aspects of town to country: the society and economic opportunity of the city with the spiritual health of the country. If the

exclusive suburban subdivision is a metaphor for the status of the U.S. as a political and economic world power, then the “barbarians” knock because America has gained this status on the backs of other nations, Mexico included. For example, America’s long relationship with Mexico is a history of imperialism and exploitation: annexation, importation of cheap labor, *maquiladoras*, free trade agreements, and illegal immigration that is in part, attributable to the destruction of Mexico’s domestic economy. Thus, if the barbarian in *Tortilla Curtain*, a barbarian for having “new faiths and new perspectives,” is the illegal Latino immigrant, then the Arroyo Blanco resident is responsible for the very collapse of a previous way of life. Although residents like Jack Jardine refuse to admit complicity, the tortilla curtain and the border-crossings of illegal immigrants that he so greatly fears is of America’s own making.

The Arroyo Blanco residents’ reactions and not the perceived enemy, however, exemplify the true barriers to promise, a missed opportunity to forge a new world society. Eco explains that those who press at a nation’s borders offer potentially enriching experiences as the “incredible intellectual vitality, of impassioned dialogue among barbarian civilizations” that occurred during the early Middle Ages (75). From these cultural clashes may be born a new man:

This is where modern man came to maturity, and it is in this sense that a model of the Middle Ages can help us understand what is happening in our own day. At the collapse of a great Pax, crisis and insecurity ensue, different civilizations clash, and slowly the image of a new man is outlined. It will come clear only afterwards, but the basic elements are already there, bubbling in a dramatic cauldron. (Eco 75)

The Arroyo Blanco residents ignore an opportunity to create new ties, to devise an outline of the new man who neither barricades himself behind walls nor behind an

exclusive national identity. Defense of their luxury lifestyle is symptomatic of xenophobic rejection of a modern world dominated by globalization and a refusal to recognize Cándido and América's shared membership to a larger collective known as humanity. Rather than acknowledge the globalized nature of their relationship to communities abroad and especially to our country's immigrant community, the Mossbachers choose ignorance.

American Dreams

Roland Walters argues that *Tortilla Curtain* questions the accessibility of the American Dream, depicting it “as a living myth distorted by a self-serving dynamic...that affirms Anglo-American identity” (qtd. in Gleason 98). The Ríncons desire the security of a home to exemplify the “better and richer and fuller” life promised by the American Dream. Cándido and América's desires echo the hopes of the Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*: “But I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever' place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees...maybe we can get one of them little white houses (118). Likewise, the rows of pretty houses along Sherman Way form América's “vision of paradise,” and she describes them as “adorable, linda, simpatico, cute,” taking in the lushness of the bougainvillea that adorns them (207). Cándido and América dream of renting a modest apartment with four walls, a roof, and running water.

Yet the American Dream is out of reach for both the Mossbachers and Ríncons for reasons that are related. The Mossbachers have misinterpreted the American Dream for material acquisition rather than an ideal “social order” that rewards individual on the basis of merit; as a result, their luxuries contribute to their anxieties rather than to their happiness. Furthermore, their life of material luxury depends upon the continued exploitation of those like Cándido and América. And if the Ríncons thought, at one time, that they, too, could participate in the American Dream, they were wrong, for the “better and richer and fuller” life that Adams wrote about is not yet possible for them. Accordingly, a wildfire symbolically destroys both families’ Thanksgiving holiday, an opportunity to express gratitude for and share God’s bounty, when Cándido sets the canyon ablaze after attempting to roast a turkey over an open fire. Although the Arroyo Blanco residents have retreated into the Topanga Canyon in an attempt to flee from the poverty, crime, and ethnic element of the city, the wildfire violently reminds them that their lifestyle is dependent upon the misery of another; but for Cándido and América’s poverty, they would not be living in the canyon in the first place.

The experiences of Cándido and Delaney illustrate M.M. Bakhtin’s assertion that one of the core themes of novels is the hero’s “unrealized surplus of humanness” (59).

Either the conditions of life thwart the hero’s efforts at expression of his full human potential, or the hero does not, for whatever reason, express his full humanness despite an ability to do so:

One of the basic internal themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the hero’s inadequacy to his fate or his situation. The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man. He cannot become once and for all a clerk, a landowner, a merchant, a fiancé, a jealous lover, a father and so forth. If

the hero of a novel actually become something of the sort – that is, if he completely coincides with his situation and his fate (as do generic, everyday heroes, the majority of secondary characters in a novel) – then the surplus inhering in the human condition is realized in the protagonist (Bakhtin 57-8).

Cândido crosses the border illegally the first time in hopes of making a better life for his mother, first wife, and himself; he builds a home for his mother with his earnings despite her cruelty in the past and returns only to find that his first wife has been unfaithful. Yet, despite his miserable childhood and failed marriage, he attempts love a second time with América, the younger sister of his first wife, together with whom he crosses the border a second time. While he is not perfect, sometimes giving in to petty jealousies, on the whole, his solid work ethic, ability to pick himself up despite repeated setbacks, and devotion to América are admirable. His resolve is apparent even after the flood as he recalls all the challenges life has posed: “[M]en endured; they worked for three dollars a day tanning hides til their fingernails fell out; they swallowed kerosene and spat out fire for tourists on streetcorners; they worked til there was no more work left in them” (355).

However, it is society that is not ready to receive Cândido’s full potential and willingness to participate as a productive member. Despite the fact that both couples “shop at the same grocery store, are married to independent and strong women, enjoy drinking beer, cook a turkey on Thanksgiving, and live in the same section of Los Angeles,” poverty and race still divide them (Gleason 98). Despite their obvious wealth, the Arroyo Blanco residents share none of it, and for this reason, the canyon comes to represent a prison for Cândido and América: the couple describe their canyon abode as

“a prison of trees,” (202) a “prison by the stream,” (206) or alternatively the “leafy dolorous hell of the canyon,” (207) and the morale of day laborers as “bent and whipped and defeated as branches torn from a tree” (209). Furthermore, Cándido finds the “abundance” in the supermarket “devastating,” noting that even dogs and cats have their own special food while he must go hungry (122-3). Though the “vast cornucopia” of the supermarket with its altar-like fruit and vegetable displays evoke images of worship of nature’s bounty and though Cándido and America do eat that night, hunger is a constant reminder of their poverty (123). This devastating abundance parallels a scene from *Grapes of Wrath* when perfectly edible crops are burned while hungry farm laborers look on. In the end, Cándido loses both his wife and his infant daughter to the flood that destroys the Arroyo Blanco development yet saves Delaney’s life by lifting him out of the flood, despite Delaney’s part in destroying Cándido’s life. Cándido’s potential must thus remain unrealized, for he is “greater than his fate.” Though the plot leaves the future uncertain for the Mossbachers and the remaining Ríncon, this uncertainty is a necessary element of the story, perhaps to emphasize the possibility held by an uncertain future: “There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for his future must be found” (58). In this respect, as a novel, *Tortilla Curtain* in its orientation to the future differs from a historical document that looks backward.

Delaney, in contrast, is what Bakhtin would say is “less than his condition as a man,” (58) for despite his social privilege and economic means, despite opportunities to treat Cándido with the compassion deserving of any human being or to welcome him into

the brotherhood of man, Delaney chooses to adopt the same racist rhetoric of his Arroyo Blanco neighbors. When Delaney runs over Rather Cándido, rather than seek medical care for Cándido, Delaney callously hands his victim a twenty-dollar bill, later justifying his omissions to Kyra by telling her that Cándido “was a *Mexican*” (15). In fact, Delaney prioritizes his concerns immediately following the accident in the following order: the well-being of his Lexus, how the accident may impact his good-driver insurance discount, and last and not least, Cándido’s welfare (4). Furthermore, future encounters with his unofficial neighbor in the canyon only make Delaney resentful, even angry. Very few people treat Cándido with dignity; among these few are the Señor Willis who treats Cándido with dignity by paying him a fair wage, and the farmer who rescues a lost Cándido from an Oregon winter, nourishing and later helping him find his way back to Los Angeles. In contrast, the Arroyo Blanco residents do not embody such notions of shared humanity. For these reasons, Delaney falls short of his full humanity, and “[t]here remains in him unrealized potential and unrealized demands” (Bakhtin 58). This character finds himself in “the zone of contact with an inconclusive present” where he attempts to make sense of his world, the result is an “incongruity” between man and himself (Bakhtin 58). While the past contains concrete numbers, dates, and events with respect to immigration issues, the fact that the present and future are still being negotiated is precisely the point of Boyle’s novel; there still exists an opportunity to better the world, to confront challenges of reality, and to create community. Delaney is precisely in this driver’s seat.

White Identity's Conflation of Arcadia and Utopia

Delaney particular possessiveness of the canyon, his imagination of a found paradise in the splendor of the Topanga Canyon, exemplifies another way in which he falls short of his true potential as man. *Tortilla Curtain*, like other works of California literature, explores themes of rural paradise and the imagined bounty of the Golden State. William Alexander McClung analyzes Anglo mythologies of L.A. in *Landscapes of Desire* such as the myth of a “recoverable past,” arguing that Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* is “imbued with nostalgia yet capable of resuscitation” (47). Delaney Mossbacher, too, seeks to resuscitate some paradise lost, longing to recover the Eden of his childhood, “the fenceless expanse of lawns, the shared space, the deep lush marshy woods where he’d first discovered ferns, frogs, garter snakes, the whole shining envelope of creation” (41-2). The boom in Kyra’s real estate business and her own Arroyo Blanco home evidence the demand for such rural retreats. Moreover, even the names of the residents evoke the bucolic and symbolize their underlying desires: Mossbacher, Jordan (as in the river), Cherrystone, Jardine (“garden” in French), Flood, and Da Ros. Significantly, these residents seek not only a fortress-city populated by a homogeneous group of persons but also a “rustic, rural, safe” space, separated from the city and the faces of immigrants who threaten their homogeneity. As James Machor argues, L.A.’s cultural plurality often triggers in some residents, an “urban pastoralism” or desire to “[fuse], sometimes on a subconscious level, divergent values central to American life;

specifically the continued nostalgia for rusticity amidst a tenacious striving for a more advanced urban civilization” (16). Unwilling to acknowledge and confront the realities of a “culturally plural” L.A., residents like those who call the Arroyo Blanco home, “[abandon] the flatlands of the Valley and the hills of the Westside to live up [in the hills], outside the city limits, in the midst of...scenic splendor” (39). In this respect, open space and the rural become essential elements of a white identity.

The beauty of the Topanga Canyon misleads Delaney to believe that he has stumbled across his very own arcadia: his backyard opens right out onto the wilderness, an environment replete with “chaparral and [...]mist-hung mountains” as ready sources of inspiration for his writing, and tellingly, Delaney divides his day between a home office where he works on his column “Pilgrim at Topanga Creek,” an allusion to Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek*, and the hiking trails of his backyard expanse (33). Delaney re-envisioned *Walden Pond* in which communing with nature represents a spiritual calling for Thoreau:

Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air –to a higher life than we fell asleep from. (84-5)

Like Thoreau who viewed each morning as “a cheerful invitation to make [his] life...with Nature herself,” (84) Delaney, too, saw in the Canyon this same opportunity, the twittering birds his “celestial music.” For example, Delaney cherishes the purposeful omission of streetlights from the development’s outdoor design, a feature that he insists

contributes to its “rural feel, the sense that [he was] somehow separated from the city and wedded to the mountains” (63).

Yet, the echoes of the Spanish language in the canyon antagonize Delaney just as the factory bells antagonized Thoreau, both reminders that they cannot completely divorce themselves from the cultural plurality of L.A. Moreover, Delaney and his Arroyo Blanco neighbors demonstrate a racist possessiveness over the spaces of the canyon, a reaction that signals more than a desire to preserve the canyon’s natural beauty, underscoring Paul Gleason’s argument that “[Delaney’s] environmentalism contributes to his underlying racist attitudes toward poor Mexican migrant workers” (Gleason 95). The sight of Jose Navidad, a day laborer, trekking through the woods with camping gear in tow, infuriates Delaney; he thinks to call the sheriff to take Navidad and his companion “right back to wherever they’d come from, slums, *favelas*, *barrios*, whatever they called them. They didn’t belong here, that was for sure” (117). Delaney’s anger echoes his earlier reaction to learning that Cándido using the canyon as his “own private domicile,” failing to realize the irony in his attitude (11). While Cándido reuses and repurposes otherwise discarded items like the bird trap he plans to fashion out of a piece of plastic mesh, the Arroyo Blanco development inflicts significant damage upon the landscape, altering the Canyon’s ecology by introducing non-native species of flora and fauna, contributing to erosion, polluting the local stream with runoff from their lawns and septic systems.

Tragically, Socorro, Cándido and América baby, is born blind, a birth defect that may be attributable in part, to these poisoned waters. Accordingly, the residents’ choice

to live in this canyon community discloses more than an appreciation for natural settings: because exclusive membership is a requisite factor in their eyes, what they actually envision is a utopia of monumental homes set amidst a *private* garden of equally huge proportions – the Topanga Canyon itself.

The residents have unknowingly conflated arcadia with their utopian ideals. As a real estate agent and aspiring developer, Kyra longs to find a new, unpopulated space in which to reconstruct her own vision of paradise as her penchant for empty houses suggests. An empty house, she argues, is a “neutral environment” in which she can feel she is a “queen of some fanciful country pondering her domain” (70). The Da Ros home also gives her this feeling; not only did it sit at the end of a private street, but the home was even more remote than the Arroyo Blanco Estates and was so large as to represent a city in itself: twenty large rooms in addition to a separate library, billiard room, servants’ quarters, and manicured gardens. McClung writes about this historical phenomenon, the propensity of the Angeleno to confuse utopia for arcadia. Whereas “the built environment defers to the unbuilt” in arcadian paradises, “[a] utopian designer treats the landscape as raw material to be shaped for human purposes and is never shy about asserting the dominance of the built over the unbuilt (*Landscapes* 4-5). While Southern California was often depicted as a found paradise, such images of nature also implied a blank canvas for development. For example, though an 1899 real estate brochure for a future development displays alluring images of rural paradise complete with piping boy, the actual results often bore more resemblance to an “image of upper-class ease and

repletion” with stately homes dominating the landscape rather than the reverse (McClung, *Landscapes* 4).

Moreover, the residents’ imagination of the Topanga Canyon as the ideal setting for their utopian society is connected to the concept of the American frontier. Symbolically, Delaney’s column appears in a journal entitled *Wide Open Spaces*, and in the articles he pens, he distinguishes himself from the city dweller, explaining in one piece that he “has these mountains to roam and these legs to carry [him]” (76). The title of his column also suggests his explorer-conqueror persona: longing to divorce himself from the crowded streets of the Old World (metropolitan L.A.), he, like the Pilgrims in the New World, looks forward to shaping wilderness into an ideal society. Additionally, the Mossbachers’ home sits at the end of Piñon Drive, “[marking] the last frontier of urban development,” a refuge from the “endless plane of parallel boulevards, houses, mini-malls, and streetlights” of the San Fernando Valley (63-4). Less than a decade earlier, the Canyon was nothing more than a canyon, as Cándido notes, but as the crowds, poverty, and crime increased in the San Fernando Valley, its wealthier residents sought refuge in the Topanga Canyon. Here, in a private development away from the L.A.’s masses, residents seek refuge from challenges posed by a diverse city and protect their identity. Kevin Starr argues that the desire to create (or recreate) such private communities “represents a desire to withdraw from urban society, or to better control it” in the utopian spirit (*Coast* 307-08). Despite this desire for control, however, the insecurity Delaney now feels in his home echoes Davis’s comment about the irony of bourgeois utopias in the “Americanized big city”: “the quest for the bourgeois utopia of

a totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity (*unheimlich*)”³¹ (*Dead* 8). For example, the “American car, older, a big boat of a thing with mag wheels and an elaborate metal-flake paint job” that menacingly sidles up to Delaney as he strolls through his neighborhood one night is for Delaney uncanny, rousing in him feelings of paranoia and summing up his greatest fears of the city: L.A. was creeping, and Delaney senses it, increasingly “unable to focus on the natural world when the unnatural one was encroaching on everything he held sacred” (318). The “*ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump*” of the hotrod’s overactive bass system pervades the Canyon, symbolically threatening to annex and subsume the Arroyo Blanco into the larger fabric of the city.

Thus Boyle’s novel examines the conflation of the wide, open spaces Delaney relishes with a white identity, and the conflation of urban development with ethnic and lower classes with urban development. These conflations suggest a particular sentiment in the suburbs, the desire for order designed to combat the “dangers” of the city such as “congestion, crime, pollution, anonymity, promiscuity, and diversity” (Avila xv). Any pastoral illusions of the Arroyo Blanco are nothing more than euphemisms for what George Lipsitz identifies as a “possessive investment in whiteness” and intolerance to diversity (2). Richard Dyer also asserts that “white power” surreptitiously “secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular” but is nonetheless a vital “organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (qtd. in Lipsitz 341). He adds,

³¹ Drawing upon Freud, Davis argues that the uncanny for urban America involves a return of the repressed that in urban turns might mean the transformation of high-rise buildings into “fiery infernos” and other disasters (*Dead* 7).

“More than the project of private prejudices, whiteness emerged as a relevant category in American life largely because of realities created by slavery and segregation, by immigration restriction and Indian policy, by conquest and colonialism. A fictive identity of ‘whiteness’ appeared in law as an abstraction, and it became actualized in every day life in many ways” (qtd. in Lipsitz 341).

Paradoxically, however, because preservation of their utopian society is necessarily dependent upon undocumented immigrant labor, Delaney and his neighbors cannot escape the Latino immigrant presence and their blanched New Eden cannot be. L.A.’s privileged find themselves unable to disentangle themselves from the city because the white identity they seek to preserve is based on the services of Latino immigrants, including the exploitation of the more vulnerable undocumented laborer. Without the labor signified by the contrasting skin of these “dark, intense men,” the Arroyo Blanco cannot maintain its “whiteness.” Thus, the residents’ conception of whiteness is wholly dependent upon the existence on the Latino presence. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison discusses a similar binary in which the ideology of whiteness exists only because of the presence, visible or otherwise, of the dark other: “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence – one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (6). Morrison, in theorizing how American literary tradition has been shaped in large part by the veiled presence of the dark other, was referring to African Americans and to American literature. Similarly, the very

lifestyle that excludes Cándido and América cannot exist with them, and thus the Arroyo Blanco's white identity cannot be divorced from the teeming millions of "dark men" who call the Valley home. Only after he runs Cándido over with his car does Delaney begin to realize Latino immigrant's proximity to his own home³² and the extent of this dependence when he recognizes the presence of "dark intense men" everywhere, valet-parking vehicles, "mopping up the floors at McDonald's, inverting trash cans in the alley out back of Emilio's or moving purposively behind the rakes and blowers that combed the pristine lawns of Arroyo Blanco Estates twice a week" (11).

The White Wall: Keeping Predators Out

Ironically, the Arroyo Blanco residents even hire these immigrant laborers to erect the very wall designed to keep them out though the residents do not seem to agree as to which perceived predators the wall is designed to keep out: burglars, coyotes, or the Latino immigrant. The battle between homeowner and coyote in the novel metaphorically speaks to the racist characterization of the Latino immigrant as predator. The coyote, in this particular battle, occupies the shadowy role of the dark other, for the Arroyo Blanco residents perceive these animals that dwell in the canyon as menacing predators who prey upon the families and pets, like one of the Mossbachers' beloved

³² In "Borders and Social Distinction in the Global Suburb," Kristen Maher elaborates upon this economic relationship between the affluent Southern Californian and Latino immigrant in her concept of the "global suburb." Maher uses Irvine, an affluent Orange County, California enclave, as her model to show how the global suburb is a city model which...[no longer operates] within a [traditional] core-periphery model of segregation" where because of distance, the low-paid immigrant service workers must live in proximity to their affluent employers for daily commute to be possible (781).

dogs, of the Arroyo Blanco. Significantly, the residents employ a similar predator-prey rhetoric when discussing the Latino immigrant, viewing themselves as the victims of illegal immigration. With the image of Jose Navidad trespassing on the Da Ros's property (in her eyes, anyways) still vivid, Kyra supports Jack's proposal to surround the Arroyo Blanco with a seven-foot stucco wall. Tellingly, the Mossbachers' vague pronoun usage during their debate over the wall, which Delaney initially opposes, effectively blurs any distinction between the Latino immigrant, burglars, and coyotes. While the justification Jack gave was to secure their community from burglars, Kyra cites the threat of coyotes, one of which killed and ate her beloved dog Osbert (219). Although Kyra reminds Delaney that the Arroyo Blanco is a community, not "some kind of nature preserve," she, too, senses perceived threat of criminal infiltration (220-21).

Although the wall represents an affront to his Edenic retreat, Delaney eventually relents to the wall's construction in part due to his own xenophobic fears of white victimization. Delaney and Kyra's anxieties reveal some of the very questions explored by cultural animal geographers³³ like Emel, Wilbert, and Wolch who, in studying the varying intersections between human geography, social theory, cultural studies, natural sciences, and environmental ethics, identify a connection between animals and representations of race:

Stimulating new considerations of human as well as animal representations and identities, critical race and postcolonial theorists highlighted connections between race and representations of 'animality'...animal geographers expanded on these insights, focusing on the role of animals in the formation of heterogeneous identities – individual and collective that people adopt or have ascribed to them.

³³ Jennifer Wolch traces the development and primary issues of animal geography in "*Anima Urbis*."

These identities may be linked to particular eras, places and nations and racial/ethnic, cultural, or gendered identities. (408)

In this case, the conflation of the Latino immigrant and the coyote and the construction of the wall to keep both “intruders” out indicate ways in which the white cultural identity of the Arroyo Blanco residents is socially constructed. As Heather Hicks points out, the names of Kyra’s dogs, Osbert and Sacheverell, allude to British cultural icons and signal a protectiveness over something else, a elite white identity (4). Hicks equates the “tense white form” (Osbert) in the coyote’s mouth to a white identity that stands to be “annihilated by a hungry horde of brown ‘others’” (4). This panicked fear of annihilation echoes the panicked passage of Proposition 187 in Southern California.³⁴ Kyra’s angry statement toward the end of the novel summarizes the attitude of many who misunderstand the true problem with the proposition’s passage: “It was the Mexicans who’d [started the fire]. Illegals. Goons with their hats turned backward on their heads. Sneaking across the border, ruining the schools, gutting property values and freeloading on welfare, and as if that wasn’t enough, now they were burning everybody else out too” (311). Furthermore, when some one scrawls “*pinche puta*” on the wall of the Da Ros’s property, Kyra even suggests that the illegal immigrant is marking his territory though the territory belonged to white residents like herself.

Identifying themselves as victims of the illegal immigration problem and still unable to secure the “tortilla curtain” as Jack Jardine says, the residents perceive a walled-in Arroyo Blanco to be the next best step. Earlier in the novel, Jack attempts to

³⁴ Proposition 187 was a measure passed in 1994 which denied undocumented immigrants public education, health services and other benefits.

convince Delaney that upper middle class whites like themselves were under siege and he gently accuses Delaney of being a bleeding liberal who sees nothing wrong with issuing an open invitation to invite the world's poor, failing to consider the real dollar costs to taxpayers. The panicked reactions of the Arroyo Blanco residents are reminiscent of popular nineteenth-century captivity narratives that helped promote the "theme of white victimization central to the American understanding of Indian wars (White 29). Citing "Massacre of Baldwin's Family by the Savages" and "Murder of the Whole Family of Samuel Wells. . .by the Indians," historian Richard White asserts that "[p]ictures of Indians attacking helpless white women and children or badly outnumbered white men became a staple of nineteenth-century popular histories" and like (29). White discusses how "Buffalo Bill" Cody's popular *Wild West* shows of the late 1800s continued the tradition of these captivity narratives shows by exploiting the theme of white victimization (29).

Yet, Delaney's article in which he discusses the coyote's remarkable ability to adapt reveals the depths of his "descent into racism," an aspect of *Tortilla Curtain* that Gleason argues forces Boyle's audience to "examine and evaluate their own opinions on race and illegal immigration" (94). At first, Delaney fits neither the image of the "Keep America White" nativist nor that of the minuteman, an armed vigilante guarding the U.S.-Mexico border; while Delaney mistakenly sees himself as a liberal, at the very least, his initial attitude posits him on the spectrum as a moderate of some sort. For Delaney's initial embrace of America's heterogeneity and immigrant history, his initial rejection of Jack's panicked attitude toward illegal but also legal immigration, and his initial disgust

at hearing Jack Jr.'s racist comments about Latinas show his sensitivity and conscious humanist desire. However, his most recent piece exposes both his subconscious admission of complicity in the illegal immigration "problem" and adoption of xenophobic rhetoric similar to that of his neighbors when he unknowingly transfers the characteristics of the coyote onto the Latino immigrant laborer, equating the Latino immigrant with an animal that trespasses on man's property, preys upon his family, feeds on their garbage, and whose presence is unwanted. He writes of the coyote's ability to adapt to an environment that has been reshaped by man, learning to drink from PVC pipes, scale fences, prey upon pets, and eat whatever discarded treats with which oblivious homeowners inadvertently attract the animal.³⁵ As Delaney suggests in his column, ironically man, not coyote, has encroached upon the other's habitat by building homes in the canyon, yet residents see themselves as neither the predator nor trespasser; instead of recognizing their complicity in luring the creatures by throwing out food in unsecured garbage cans or worse, leaving food out for pets, they erect walls to keep the perceived predators out. For example, Delaney blames the Dagolians for leaving out fried chicken, which lured the coyote who killed Kyra's dog to the Arroyo Blanco. Significantly, the Dagolian's surname suggests an Armenian heritage and also contains the pejorative "dago," hinting at both Delaney's subconscious racial loathing and the inability of ethnic individuals to fully assimilate into the Arroyo Blanco's definition of white.

³⁵ Conservationist Stephen DeStefano elaborates upon the ways in which suburbanites, not unlike the Arroyo Blanco residents, have created hospitable environments for the coyote by building homes that encroach into the coyote's domain.

Despite the racist undertones of the residents' conflation of the coyote and the Latino immigrant, this comparison of coyote to illegal immigrant, from a different perspective, might be otherwise understood as *Tortilla Curtain's* demand for the redefinition of the community concept. Again, community, in the eyes of these residents, extends no further than the Arroyo Blanco's symbolically white walls and is guarded by rent-a-sentry. Delaney's neighbors fail to acknowledge the coyote's right to coexist with its human neighbors in "borderland communities, those spaces where "humans and free animals share space," contributing to the "social construction of landscapes and places" (Emel, Wilbert, and Wolch 409). Emel, Wilbert, and Wolch demand a revised understanding of the role and rights of "animals in the moral landscape" (410). Conservationist Stephen DeStefano, too, argues for a suburban land ethic that better appreciates the ways in which resident and coyote must necessarily coexist in suburban ecologies, drawing upon Aldo Leopold's concept of a "land ethic" (154). Leopold's land ethic outlines a moral code that acknowledges the various mutually dependent members of a community: human, flora, and fauna alike (qtd in DeStefano 410).

Delaney and many of the Arroyo Blanco community fail to see Cándido as an equal member of the larger collective called humanity or at the very minimum in socio-political and economic terms, as a member of an increasingly transnational community. Both coyote, as Delaney admits in his article, and many Latino immigrants, as he subconsciously admits, have found themselves displaced: the coyote from the canyon and laborer from his native country and more recently, from the labor exchange after the Arroyo Blanco residents see to its dismantling. Yet, the residents lack compassion for the

plight of these displaced citizens of the world. The epigraph of *Tortilla Curtain*, a quotation from Steinbeck's celebrated *Grapes of Wrath*, sums up the Latino immigrant's reception in L.A and the racist outlook Delaney ultimately adopts: "They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable." Accordingly, the coyote is not the predator of humans and likewise, the Latino immigrant laborer is not predator to the affluent resident, but rather the opposite is true. This predatory nature becomes even more apparent when Delaney, no longer able to suppress his subconscious feelings, devolves into a hater, surrendering to and acting upon the racist thoughts that now surface in earnest. Initially, Delaney's racism is limited to inaction: earlier, when he witnesses Cándido being harassed in the parking lot, Delaney does nothing to intervene but instead perversely desires to "see this dark alien little man crushed and obliterated, out of his life, forever" (105). Over time, he translates his hatred into deliberate action. Furious after finding graffiti sprayed on a canyon wall, Delaney becomes determined to identify the vandals with a trip-wire camera; however, when he discovers Jack Jr. to be the culprit, he ignores reason, chooses to blame Cándido anyways, and arms himself with a handgun before beginning his manhunt. This once liberal humanist has devolved, signaling our society's increasing inhumanity, an inhumanity that is sometimes submerged in the subconscious policing of neighborhoods.

The Disturbing Fruits of Whiteness

Even more disturbing however, are the fruits of whiteness. Jose Navidad, who meets América for the first time at the labor exchange, proves to be the most menacing character in the novel, his criminal behavior suggestive of the social costs of preserving a white identity. Navidad is part-white and part-Latino; América comments that he is tall with “skin so light he could almost have passed for one of them, but it was his eyes that gave him away, hard burnished unblinking eyes the color of calf’s liver” (81). América senses both Navidad’s emotional damage and something sinister about Jose’s behavior; tragically, her instincts later prove correct. While Cándido is away soliciting work at the labor exchange one day, Navidad comes across a pregnant América in the canyon and rapes her. If his mixed ancestry is a metaphor for the unequal relations between the U.S. and Mexico, then his physical exploitation of América’s body is, in a sense, learned behavior, reflecting the sins of a country that enjoys the fruits of his labor yet scorns his presence. The consequence of maintaining this white identity perpetuates a two-tiered system of citizenship, relegating the Latino immigrant laborer to second-class status.

Jose Navidad is an allusion to the protagonist of William Faulkner’s *A Light in August*, a novel set after the Civil War and in both the North and South. Navidad is an implicitly conflicted individual, who, like Joe Christmas,³⁶ finds his mixed heritage the source of much painful racial self-loathing as Hicks argues. Navidad’s identity mirrors that of Joe Christmas, whose white heritage paradoxically becomes a constant reminder

³⁶ Joe Christmas grows up in an orphanage where the white janitor who torments him is, unbeknownst to him, his maternal grandfather

of the social privilege he is denied. Christmas's conflicted feelings about race drive him to violence. In the North, for example, in response to white women, indifferent to his race, are willing to sleep with him, he either beats them or becomes violently ill himself. In the South, Christmas, at one point, lives on the property of Joanna Burden, a white woman and descendent of abolitionists.³⁷ Joanna engages Christmas in several twisted role-playing games (slave mistress/slave and black rapist/white rape victim) that emphasize the racist ideology of slavery from which the characters – white, black, and mixed alike – seem unable to extricate themselves.³⁸ Although we have little information on Navidad's background, his name implies the outsidership that he shares with Christmas. On the one hand, he is ostracized for his race, but on the other hand, he is also part of the very identity – whiteness – that ostracizes and exploits him as a laborer. Boyle compares Navidad's propensity for violence to Christmas's use of violence as a reflexive response to a deep-rooted fear of outside forces that attempt to subvert his power or otherwise feminize him.³⁹ Navidad is a victim as well: the residents accuse of starting a fire in the canyon though they lack proof, Delaney even going as far as lying to

³⁷ Though she suggests that Christmas obtain an education, her encouragement is not born of pure motives but rather a desire make Christmas docile. Like religion, Negro "education" was often encouraged by abolitionists was not necessarily born of pure motives and was used also as a means of keeping the black in his place. Joanna's abolitionist grandfather helped blacks acquire an education, not out of kindness, but rather out of guilt and obligation: "Damn, lowbuilt black folks: low built because of the weight of the wrath of god, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh" (234). Joanna shares her grandfather's attitude, encouraging Christmas to learn the law at a "nigger college" and from a "nigger lawyer," so that he could help other blacks "out of the darkness" (261).

³⁸ While Burden inhabits the antebellum plantation house on her property, Christmas moves into a former slave cabin on the premises, implicitly assuming the role of plantation mistress and field slave respectively. This mistress/slave relationship is further perpetuated by the traditional slave dishes Burden prepares for Christmas, which she insists he pick up at the back door rather than at the home's front entrance (217). Most disturbingly, however, are the rape scenes, which she forces him to enact; he plays the role of a black intruder who breaks into her home and violates her Southern white womanhood.

³⁹ Christmas experiences a similar feminization when he witnesses a young African American girl have sex with multiple partners, willingly submitted to the inferior role in his eyes.

the police officers who arrest Navidad and his companion. The mob that forms around Navidad is also reminiscent of the angry mob that surrounds Christmas as he is being transported to the courthouse for his trial for the murder of Joanna Burden. The Arroyo Blanco residents angrily shout racial epithets at Navidad and Delaney physically attacks him. The code “Mexican” incites rage for the residents who look on in anger at Navidad just as “black” becomes the magic fomentor of the mob’s rage in Faulkner’s novel (Weinstein 176). Thus, though the Arroyo Blanco residents appear to accuse Jose of starting a brushfire, they actually accuse him of much more complicated: his skin color.

Another ugly offspring of whiteness is of course, Jack Jr., Jack Jardine’s son. Ironically, parents like Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher choose to live in private developments like the Arroyo Blanco because they believe such places are positive, nurturing environment for their children, giving them “all the advantages (224). However, building bigger and bigger walls, literally or figuratively, only emphasizes the barrier to cultural, ethnic and socio-economic exchange. When Delaney overhears Jack Jr.’s derogatory remarks about Latinas, he becomes disgusted. Jack Jr. tells a friend that the upside of attending Cal State Northridge are the “Mexican chicks” who in their teens are “killers, but from then on, every year they gain ten pounds till they wind up looking like the Pillsbury Dough Boy with a suntan—and who wants to stick your dick in something like that, even their mouth” (224). Hate shapes Jack Jr.’s actions as well, who, along with an accomplice, destroys Cándido’s camp by flinging all of their belongings into the creek and spray-painting “BEANERS DIE” on the rocks (61). As Cándido suggests, Jack Jr.’s actions represent learned behavior: “[T]he way they’d

attacked his harmless little bundle of things had real teeth in it, real venom. They were dangerous and crazy and the parents who'd raised them must have been even worse" (84). Thus, as Delaney considers, private developments like the Arroyo Blanco can function as the potential breeding ground for hate: "[I]t might keep *them* out, but look what it keeps in" (224). In this respect, this commentary echoes the Joan Didion's remarks about the Spur Posse, who, like Jack Jr., were a product of their environment.

A Fiery Ending to the Arroyo Blanco

By first escaping the diversity of L.A.'s population by seeking refuge in Topanga Canyon and then by building a wall to the outside world, the Arroyo Blanco residents futilely attempt to take themselves outside the context of urban Los Angeles, haunted by apocalyptic visions; *Tortilla Curtain*, in this respect, follows the apocalypse tradition in American literature. Lois Parkinson Zamora argues that "U.S. fiction...[dramatizes] the retreat from communal categories into the hermetic realm of the alienated self" and that the characters of U.S. literature "are haunted by suspicions of apocalypse" (*Writing* 179). If evidence of urban strife like the 1992 Los Angeles riots provoke fear of an urban apocalypse in the minds of the upper middle class, then the residents' rustic refuge, divorced from reality, necessarily represents their isolation from "communal and historical environments" (Zamora, *Writing* 179). Perhaps they mourn a lifestyle they have destroyed themselves, a loss for which they are inherently responsible given their lifestyle of hillside vistas and dependence on an immigrant underclass. At first glance,

the blaze that destroys the Arroyo Blanco development might be blamed on Cándido's naiveté when he attempts to roast a turkey in his canyon camp one November day, during the peak of California's wildfire season. However, as ecologists explain, such developments lie directly in the path of the Santa Anas, winds that predictably fan the flames of wildfires annually; nature, as much as, arsonists, illegal campfires, or careless smokers are not responsible for sparking hillside infernos.⁴⁰ It is only a matter of time before the development sees its fiery ruin. Additionally, but for the Arroyo Blanco development and its exploitation of an immigrant underclass, Cándido would not be camping in the canyon in the first place. There is a lifestyle borne on the backs of this underclass, a dependence only underscored by the physical proximity of the illegal immigrant to the privileged. Thus, luxury living comes at a hefty price, and neither Mother Nature nor the illegal immigrant but rather the Arroyo Blanco's own imperialist endeavors reduce their lifestyle to a smoldering rubble. In this respect, Delaney and his neighbors may suffer from a case of "imperialist nostalgia," a condition Renato Resaldo explores in *Culture and Truth* (69). Attempts to colonize nature and to exploit immigrant labor literally backfires on the residents, resulting in a flood that devastates their development after the fires strip the hillside of all vegetation thus compromising the

⁴⁰ Unlike earthquakes, wildfires and flooding represent more predictable elements of the region's ecology, occurrences so regular in fact that during California's early days, the Chumash and Tongva Native American tribes practiced prescriptive burning in the San Gabriel Mountains (Davis, *Ecology* 99). Every few years, they would burn the mountainside to clear it of overgrown brush, an effort that eliminated much would-be fuel from the path of wildfires spread by the fierce Santa Ana winds every year. And without large amounts of fuel, they reduced the likelihood of large-scale wildfires that could wipe the mountainsides clean of vegetation and thereby create ideal conditions for catastrophic mudslides. Thus, according to the author, fires and ensuing mudslides should come as no surprise to Los Angeles residents; instead, they are well-known elements of Southern California's ecology. Beginning with the Spanish ban on this Native American practice during California's early years, however, history has revealed that humans play the most significant role in the ugly cycle of fear, fire, mudslides, and doom, creating the perfect (fire)storm by routinely situating residential neighborhoods in Mother Nature's path (99).

stability of the soil. The novel's apocalyptic ending only highlights the futility of their endeavors.

Yet, even though Cándido, América, baby Socorro, and Delaney are swept away in the flood, the novel ends on a redemptive note when first Cándido and América survive the water (the infant does not) and second, when Cándido pulls Delaney out of the muddy waters, saving him from certain death. In this respect, *Tortilla Curtain* suggests at once annihilation and renewal, exemplifying the apocalyptic tradition in literature, capturing the “dialectic between cataclysm and millennium” in the same way Puritan literature captures the tensions between “good and evil, light and darkness”⁴¹ (Zamora, “The Myth” 104). Tracing, this literary tradition in “The Myth of Apocalypse and the American Literary Tradition,” Zamora explains that apocalyptic literature, unlike examples of merely “optimistic” or merely “pessimistic” literature, contains “a myth of radical transformation, a myth of transcendence” in which [o]ld worlds can be supplanted by new ones” (98). For example, in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Edwards writes about both God’s potential wrath as well as his potential for mercy upon the righteous, illustrating “[t]he Puritans’ belief in God’s retributive justice [that] made the destruction of the world a positive act” (104). In the nineteenth century, the notion of a New Jerusalem depicted in Puritan literature is replaced with the image of “Arcadia, or a secular Eden”⁴²:

Instead of the apocalyptic contraries of God and Satan, light and darkness, history came to be seen as a dialectic between innocence and experience, and Eden

⁴¹ The works of early American literature by William Bradford, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards illustrate this very tension.

⁴² Zamora examines nineteenth century works by Crèvecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

became the symbolic setting like that dialectic, for wasn't Eden a pristine natural setting for America? And wasn't the American pioneer a New Adam, experiencing unfallen nature once again. (If Eden seems somehow unlike the New Jerusalem – a reversion into the past, rather than a projection into the future—the two are nevertheless cognates in their visions of timeless perfection. America's innocence was geographical and moral but, above all, it was temporal). (108)

Thoreau's *Walden Pond* is one such nineteenth century example that illustrates this “dialectic between innocence and experience,” exhorting man to respond to his own “Genius” and to his “newly acquired force and aspirations from within” instead of “the mechanical nudgings of some servitor,” the toll of “factory bells” that called men to conform to the debased ideals of the industrialized city.

With respect to twentieth century literature, Zamora carefully distinguishes between apocalyptic and thus redemptive literature by William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald⁴³ and its doomsday counterparts, among which are Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (109-10). Tracing the ways in which apocalyptic literature has examined race in America, Zamora cites various examples such as Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and even the “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which “was conceived in terms of the battle of Armageddon” (111). She also cites Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, African American writers who explore the topic of race in the context of apocalypse. Apocalyptic literature also includes works that address the “technological exploitation of nature” in response to

⁴³ Fitzgerald juxtaposes Jay Gatsby's “incomparable milk of wonder” and the “foul dust that trails his dreams” (qtd. in Zamora, “The Myth” 110).

destruction of wilderness and rapid American industrialization: James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* and Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," for example (111). Finally, the theme of individualism taken too far also prominently figures in apocalyptic literature: "The individual freedom which seemed so attractive to America had as its terrifying consequence the destruction of cohesive community and meaningful traditions" (Zamora, "The Myth" 113).

Tortilla Curtain marries several of these apocalyptic traditions, highlighting the themes of racial exploitation, exploitation of nature, and excessive individualism and natural disaster to signify a social breakdown for which the residents themselves are responsible. Boyle's New Adam is Delaney, a character whose fall from Eden can be attributed to his failure to recognize Cándido and other Latino immigrants like Cándido as members of a larger humanity, a heterogeneous community of various ethnicities, cultures, nationalities, and economic means. Delaney and his neighbors have incorrectly defined the Arroyo Blanco as a community, which otherwise represents a like-minded group of upper middle class privilege, whose lifestyle is dependent upon the exploitation of those like Cándido and whose development exploits and slowly destroys the local ecology. Yet, perhaps, there is hope for individuals like Delaney. He, like Kyra, also resists integration with the larger L.A. population, content to spend his mornings as a pilgrim in the wilderness of the Topanga Canyon but soon detects the overwhelming presence of the very population from which he wants to divorce himself. Because he must always defend this solitude against invasion, he is, as Zamora says of the

“apocalyptic visionary. . . at times overwhelmed by the solitude of his self-created world” (“The Myth” 113).

Tortilla Curtain, in this light, represents a social commentary on the destructive forces of racism, greed, and general inhumanity upon which such a community is constructed. However, the residents’ fixation on the idyllic splendor of the Topanga Canyon speaks to another *man-made* disaster, the cost of sustaining their vision of Eden, not in dollar terms but rather in regards to the expense to humanity. Undoubtedly, some of the Arroyo Blanco residents blame this catastrophe on the illegal immigrant (Càndido), employing what Saldívar identifies as “classic colonialist discourse terms” to metaphorically refer to illegal immigration as a flood: torrential, alien, and undesirable (111). Yet, tellingly, one particularly predatory Arroyo Blanco resident is named Dominick Flood, underscoring the culpability shared by the residents for the various problems they experience; Flood, currently on house arrest, befriends Kyra’s mother at a cocktail party, slips his ankle bracelet into her purse, and escapes to the Bahamas or some other haven for white collar criminals.

The moral decay, greed, selfishness, cruelty, and general inhumanity exemplified by Flood and the others cannot go unpunished; although Flood escapes, the remaining Arroyo Blanco residents must pay for their collective sins. Despite the reckoning that takes the life of Socorro, the flood also promises renewal. The flood wipes out false gods, the material excess of the Arroyo Blanco. Freed of these distractions, all Delaney has left is Càndido’s helping hand and finds in Càndido, who lifts him out of the water and onto the roof of the U.S. Post Office, a guide to help him back on the more righteous

path toward humanity. Despite the experience of discrimination, persecution from Delaney, and repeated setbacks, Cándido still journeys on the righteous path and recognizes the humanity in Delaney. If Delaney has yet to realize his surplus of humanness, here is his second chance with Cándido as his model. Accordingly, in spite of the lapsed innocence of this New Adam from his Eden, his fall hints at a better world just as the promise of progeny lie outside the former paradise of original Adam, echoing Zamora's argument that for "time is impelled forward by a moral dialectic, the present always future-tending for such Adams (98).

In this respect, both *Holy Land* and *Tortilla Curtain* speak to models for society that have either ceased to exist or that do not work, but at the same time, both texts suggest the existence of a better world. For Waldie and Boyle, this better world cannot be found in the past, and they seek not the recovery of some paradise lost; rather, the better world they imagine is necessarily "future-tending," a New Eden landscaped to meet the challenges of a modern world. The fire and deluge punish Angelenos in *Tortilla Curtain*, knocking down the white walls of the Arroyo Blanco and wiping out their backyard canyon, reducing everything and everyone to one color to match the "black swirl of the current" (355). This calamity poses hard questions about the status of our humanity and demands a more honest interpretation of our behavior of which housing and consumption are important parts. For instance, the withdrawal of L.A.'s privileged classes into rustic strongholds imply a certain diminished democracy and a rejection of diversity, an unwillingness to interact with people of different national origin, races, ethnicities, and economic classes as complicated and fraught as some of the negotiations

may be. *Tortilla Curtain* demands moral accountability, urging us to recognize individuals for the worth as human beings not in terms of dollars and cents or worth and cost; we must, accordingly, take down the figurative “white wall,” a racial, social, and economic barrier to the larger brotherhood of man, and thus improve accessibility to the American Dream.

In *Holy Land*, the message is similar. If the Spur Posse incident and the lack of conviviality that characterizes Lakewood are modern day examples of apocalypse, then *Holy Land* remains resolutely positioned toward a future of possibility. Significantly, the author ends his memoir with his personal account as an altar boy on Good Friday, a holiday that is inherently future-tending. Good Friday commemorates the day Jesus Christ died on the cross, three days after which he rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. Thus, just as *Holy Land* ends on a redemptive note, in anticipation of the resurrection of Christ in whose death man could find salvation, the memoir also looks toward a new collective order that reinvigorates Lakewood and other places with a renewed sense of community; Waldie demands the forging of a new belief system and a new society that recognizes a larger humanity (Winthrop’s “God Man”), whose focus is the intimacy of human bonds, common ideals of humanity, collective action, and the American Dream. While neither Boyle’s novel nor Waldie’s memoir offer any concrete solutions, they remain hopeful messages about the city Los Angeles could be.

Chapter Two

Earthquakes, Aftershocks, and Amnesia in Nina Revoyr's *Southland* and Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope*: Disrupting Narrative Continuity in L.A.

Introduction

The fact that the *Tortilla Curtain*'s Arroyo Blanco community is destroyed by natural disaster is no coincidence. Rather, the multiple catastrophes that destroy Delaney's neighborhood – a fiery inferno followed by an unforgiving deluge – exemplify a preoccupation with apocalyptic destruction specific to Southern Californians who even celebrate disaster at local theme parks.⁴⁴ And for good reason: wildfires represent a seasonal affliction, characterized by a “relentless staccato rhythm, syncopated by landslides and floods,” according to Mike Davis (*Ecology* 97). Moreover, living in perpetual dread of the “Big One,” Southern Californians have suffered from several large-magnitude earthquakes during the past 50 years – including the Sylmar, Whittier Narrow, and Northridge earthquakes⁴⁵ – three of the most destructive earthquakes in the history of the state.

Not surprisingly, disaster figures significantly in much of L.A. literature, especially as a metaphor for social breakdown in novels such as *Tortilla Curtain* as well as Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope* (1997) and Nina Revoyr's *Southland* (2003) – the

⁴⁴ For example, “Backdraft” and “Earthquake: The Big One” are two former rides at Universal Studio Hollywood and Universal Studios Florida respectively.

⁴⁵ According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the 1971 Sylmar earthquake registered at M 6.7 and killed 65 people. The 1987 Whittier Narrow earthquake registered at M 5.9, claiming 8 lives while the 1994 Northridge earthquake proved more destructive at M 6.7, killing 60 people (U.S.).

focus of this chapter. In *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis observes that “a quorum of the region’s best writers including Octavia Butler, Carolyn See, Steve Erickson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Cynthia Kadohata have routinely sited their fiction in the golden ruins of Los Angeles’s future” (280). Categorizing the stories by type of destruction from earthquakes, firestorms, and floods to man-made nuclear holocausts, Davis provides a dizzying tally of the number of 20th century disaster tales set in the City of Angels.⁴⁶ The author explains that “[w]hat is most distinctive about Los Angeles is not simply its conjugation of earthquakes, wildfires, and floods, but its uniquely explosive mixture of natural hazards and social contradictions,” (54) social contradictions that include racial anxiety: “[T]he abiding hysteria of Los Angeles disaster fiction, and perhaps of all disaster fiction – the urge to strike out and destroy, to wipe out an entire city and thousands of its inhabitants – is rooted in racial anxiety” (*Ecology* 281). Thus, disaster serves as a barometer for L.A.’s social climate in these works, exposing the city’s moral shortcomings and the darker side of an otherwise sunny paradise. In *The Day of the Locust*, Tod Hackett’s response to the riots and fire is symptomatic of his “helplessness before a monumental natural disaster, a world that has suddenly lost its monitor, and gone out of control” as Norman Klein suggests (82).

Unlike West’s novel, the settings of both *Amnesiascope* and *Southland* are post-disaster like Tod Hackett’s L.A., their worlds having already “lost [their] monitor, and gone out of control” (Klein 82). Erickson and Revoyr’s novels suggest that if disaster is the language of L.A., what we posit as extraordinary disasters – fires, floods,

⁴⁶ Among the other types of “literary destruction” are invasions of hordes, monsters, pollution, gangs/terrorists, plagues, volcanoes, riots, and even Bermuda grass (281).

earthquakes— are really natural and ordinary while the truly extraordinary are social disasters that demand communal healing: urban crises that signal the erasure of humanity, social “isms” that wound whole communities, institutional racism, politically and legally backed racist measures, and social unrest. And just as L.A.’s population suffers from natural disaster “amnesia” (annually forgetting the seasonal nature of fires and floods in Southern California), they also suffer from an amnesia of social disasters. Significantly, in *Tortilla Curtain*, Kyra Mossbacher begins imagining an entirely new private paradise after she stumbles upon a vacant lot even more secluded from L.A.’s masses. Based on the same possessive investment in whiteness and isolationist hysteria, the new development she imagines will only fail to appease her anxieties once again.

While *Amnesiascope* and *Southland*, like Boyle’s novel, touch upon similar themes of disaster, noir, contradiction, and amnesia, these two novels focus on the post-apocalyptic aftermath and are set in traumatized landscapes. *Southland* is set during the recent weeks after the Northridge earthquake and less than two years after the 1992 L.A. riots, again juxtaposing natural disasters with the man-made variety like civil unrest. Similarly, *Amnesiascope*, published after the Northridge earthquake, takes place “post-Quake” in the rubble of L.A.’s future, and as the novel’s title suggests, known only as “S,” the narrator suffers from memory loss, a condition that might be interpreted as tragic. Like other L.A. disaster tales, *Amnesiascope* and *Southland* lend themselves particularly well to the noir and neo-noir genres. Klein traces the popularity of similar noir-disaster tale in 20th century fiction: “According to noir novels and film since 1930, L.A. is supposed to die by fire, earthquake, suffocation, amnesia, in the dark, in a movie

theater, or in some way seen from a distance, perhaps through the window of a car” (73). Erickson’s neo-noir settings as well as his characters have been compared to Russian dolls, “nestled within one another [churning] in constant metamorphosis [with a]... troubling excess of meaning” and his “ruined cities, moreover, are not merely enchanted...they are supernatural life-forms with occult powers of their own. The city-as-alien has become a living monstrosity” (Davis, *Ecology* 350). In this sense, the “city-as-alien” landscape of *Amnesiascope* metaphorically reflects the urban social traumas, ones that are not easily untangled from one another.

Picking up where *Holy Land* and *Tortilla Curtain* leave off, *Amnesiascope* and *Southland* explore the implicit question posed by Waldie and Boyle: What kind of city could and should Los Angeles be? Unlike *Tortilla Curtain*, both *Amnesiascope* and *Southland* are works of fiction that ironically depict L.A.’s traumatized landscape as the ideal setting in which to forge a new world, and in this respect, Erickson and Revoyr’s novels more fully develop the above question and illustrate Lois Parkinson Zamora’s assertion that apocalyptic literature “is concerned with [the] relationship of man to temporal reality not only as it *is* but as it *should be*.” Zamora further explains,

The myth of the apocalypse, and thus apocalyptic literature, contains both a positive and a negative side. In the myth, millennium is opposed to cataclysm, reward to retribution, salvation to damnation, order to chaos...It is the *tension* between these symbolic opposites that creates the compelling ironies in apocalyptic literature and carries forward the literary dialogue. (“The Myth” 97-8)

Thus, L.A. is poised for the apocalypse, “[t]he scriptural idea of the ‘apocalyptic origin’ of historical narratives figures history simultaneously as linear and cyclical in its progression toward an end that is always also a beginning” as Lee Spinks suggests about

another Erickson novel *Arc D'X* (216). Furthermore, Spinks's statement that for Erickson, "American identity is always involved in a reciprocal relationship with apocalypse, death, or an experience of the limit that these terms represent" echoes Zamora's discussion of the binaries inherent in apocalyptic fiction (220).

The physically and socially fractured cityscapes of Erickson and Revoyr's imaginations are depicted as ideal conditions that ultimately foster society, the sort of personal connections that Raymond Williams asserts is characteristic of rural society; although the stories take place in the aftermath of disaster, the unique nature of Los Angeles still manages to foster a "structure of feeling," perhaps even *because of* rather than in spite of such disaster. In this respect, the narrator's amnesia in Erickson's novel represents an opportunity to piece together his past in order to decipher his future; more importantly, however, amnesia also functions as a remedy, healing the narrator's inability to emote.

Like Erickson, Revoyr also addresses amnesia, specifically the condition of cultural amnesia from which the novel's protagonist Jackie Ishida suffers; as a result of this cultural amnesia, Jackie is an empty individual, devoid of emotions, and without a secure sense of self. Like the narrator of *Amnesiascope*, Jackie's cultural amnesia affords her, ironically, with a similar opportunity to restore her sense of self, cultural memory (of a Japanese American past), and a family history largely unknown to her. Accordingly, Revoyr's novel imagines for readers a revised definition of L.A. society, one that looks to inter-cultural bonds as a means of addressing some of the most pervasive social "isms" that plague L.A. Thus, in contrast to the traditional understanding of rural communities,

in these novels, the persistence of personal relationships and structure of feeling is found *inside* the minds and hearts of characters rather than manifested in their physical environment. If these Angelenos cannot combat the potential for alienation by locating the rural in their external environment, they need to dig deeper, oftentimes within themselves to locate human connection; after all, what is more personal than embracing one's sense of self. In this sense, natural disasters, a metaphor for both the breakdown of society and the potential for meaning, paradoxically provide the context for a structure of feeling.

Furthermore, as in *Amnesiascope*, the earthquake in Revoyr's Los Angeles functions as a catalyst for mending the consequences of human disasters, rupturing old wounds but at the same time reviving a much needed dialogue about racism's pernicious effects on communities and initiating a healing. In this respect, novels like *Southland* and *Amnesiascope* resemble survivalist novels like *Parable of the Sower* and *Kindred*, exploring past traumas through time travel, using the earthquake as a mechanism for revisiting the past. As Jackie begins to learn about her Japanese American heritage, forced to reckon with the emotional, cultural, and personal traumas of her Japanese American past, she also experiences personal growth, learning to emote and to connect with other human beings as does the narrator in Erickson's novel.

Hope amidst the Rubble: Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope*

Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi note that Steve Erickson's talent has yet to be recognized because readers have been slow to appreciate the unique nature of his fiction: his use of setting, character, and structure to reflect his inner "psyche, a region of blasted hopes, confusion, idealism, self-lacerating guilt, and perpetual isolation" and his painting of "a dark, troubling, but extraordinarily vivid self-portrait of an artist struggling to strike through the masks of illusion and self-deception and uncover the real" (396-7). His fiction has often been misunderstood, neither mainstream enough for mainstream audiences nor adequately rational and scientific for science fiction audiences (396). The "passion and psychology" and "fiercely moralistic treatment of self and society" of Erickson's fiction as well as his literary influences – "William Faulkner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Bob Dylan in his mid-sixties visionary period" rather than...Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and the cyberpunks" – may explain his mixed reception (396). Yet, as McCaffery and Tatsumi assert, Erickson's works represent a significant contribution to L.A. fiction and to American literature as a whole: "Collectively and individually, his novels have captured more convincingly than any writer since Nathanael West Los Angeles's peculiar ability to disorient and deceive with its glitzy, seductive facades and illusions" (395).

The settings of Steve Erickson's novels are disorienting to say the least, and his "[r]eaders...frequently find themselves lost in time" in a "disjointed dream sequence" ("Steve Erickson"). His landscapes represent contradictory spaces that both give life to

and “betray” the American Dream (McCaffery and Tatsumi 396) and that paint America as “as a psychological country stocked with extremes of beauty and terror” (Murphy 453). Moreover, Amy Elias notes the author’s exploration of “an alternative to history in the form of the aesthetic or historical sublime” (qtd. in Klinkowitz 370), and Paul Aster detects a “Jungian tonality” to *Rubicon Beach*, Erickson’s second novel, which he reviewed for the *New York Times Book Review* (qtd. in “Steve Erickson”). Finally, McCaffery and Tatsumi note Erickson’s use of magical realism to “[exaggerate] the familiar” and his Faulknerian sensibility with regard to his treatment of time and space (395).

Some of these same things can be said about *Amnesiascope*, a novel that has been described as both “foggy” and “metafictional” (Jackson 60). According to Melanie Jackson, the narrator quests for “love and redemption,” on one hand, but finds himself “trapped in a kind of psychological mobius strip of the city itself, the fires that consume it and the people who walk its streets appear to be nothing more than projections of his own musings on entropy and lost identity” (60). In addition, *Amnesiascope* is considered to be one of Erickson’s more personal works, containing “passages far more emotionally intimate – and in some cases, far more engaging – than anything [Erickson] has written before” according to Michiko Kakutani (qtd. in “Steve Erickson”). Nothing is more personal than the main character’s confrontation of his painful past, one filled with his struggles to overcome a speech impediment, embarrassment, and alienation. Thus, while the narrator stands more generally for the loss of identity, he is also an individual to whom readers can relate – lost, traumatized, imperfect but essentially good, and human.

Thus, Erickson, in his development of characters like the protagonist of *Amnesiascope*, strikes that critical balance between abstraction and humanity, a particular genius he admires in Faulkner's writing (McCaffery and Tatsumi 415).

While natural disaster represents a constant in *Amnesiascope*, disaster reflects more than social breakdown, offering some degree of possibility for the Erickson character as it does in *Rubicon Beach* and *Our Ecstatic Days*, two of his earlier novels. *Amnesiascope* has a more hopeful message about the potential for humanity than the more tempered message in *Tortilla Curtain*: Although Candido's daughter is born blind and ultimately drowns in the flood, he still pulls Delaney out of the flood to safety. Likewise in Erickson's apocalyptic tale, L.A. may be depicted as a gritty and real doomsday but such a landscape does not necessarily negate all hope. "Navigating catastrophes is our stock in trade in California. . . . The very occupation of California—a fractured, partially liquefied terrain of arid deserts, hostile mountains, dense woods and craggy seashores—is an act of recklessness; and like all acts of recklessness, it's motivated by both the hubris of transcendence and the rapture of self-annihilation. . . . Take our apocalypse from us and we are nothing," explains the author (qtd. in Sturken 46). Thus, the narrator of *Amnesiascope* interprets his post-Quake environs as a place of possibility, echoing Davis's characterization of the city as the golden ruins of Los Angeles's future" (280). The narrator comments, "Those of us who are still here...are already driving around with dead streets and dead alleys inside us, dead buildings and dead windows and dead gutters, dead intersections and dead shops, *not the urban corpse of the present but the dead city of the future*" (my emphasis, 29). While L.A. may be dead, in its current ruined state, the

city is still positioned toward the future as a place of hope, promise, and meaningfulness. For this reason, the narrator, staring out over the cliffs of Malibu one evening, revels, “[I]t’s at night...that my Los Angeles, the dead city inside me, is especially beautiful in the light of the moon” (32). This dead city is a site of promising beauty.

Post Quake Revelations

Serving a revelatory function, the post-Quake setting of *Amnesiascope*, Erickson’s most autobiographical work to date, is still a site of beauty in the narrator’s opinion and more importantly, actually represents a particular emotion. Described by Melanie Jackson as “[a] postmodern flaneur in a spectral, futuristic L.A” (60), the narrator navigates the city’s ruins until he finally recalls his childhood stuttering condition, an especially painful past experience. In fact, the earthquake, as a violent shifting of the earth’s tectonic plates, is a metaphor for the narrator’s stutter, a condition that subjects spoken words to a similar violence. During the course of the novel, the narrator happens upon his former “stutter” school, where, as a child, he had undergone intense therapy to correct a speech impediment once the source of much shame; from a Freudian perspective, having completely blocked this experience from his memory as the title of the novel suggests, his conscious had “surrounded [him] in amnesiascope” in an effort to shield him from this painful memory (124). Explaining in an interview how the “[t]he main character wants to transcend the memory that seems to have overwhelmed or paralyzed him,” Erickson states that the character “looks at Los Angeles as a wide screen

empty of memory and all its meaning, and he strives to forget the unforgettable, in order to go on” (qtd. in McCaffery and Tatsumi 414). Once the narrator finally recalls his past stuttering condition, the relevance in his life is restored, and the very same stutter that once tormented him becomes a meaningful “scope” or lens through which he might understand his past, though his oftentimes emotion-wrenching memories do not come without a price.

This idea of the stutter as a meaningful perspective represents the focus of my inquiry into Erickson’s novel: the author’s conception of the “stutter” signifies a means of recapturing those lost memories and of finally identifying those previously unstated moments or intervals of time for the narrator; specifically, the stutter disrupts those memories the narrator does remember, causing a violent rupture which then enables a point of contact with an alternate sphere of knowledge where time and memory are not constrained by conventional notions of the same. This alternate sphere, in turn, functions as a larger metaphor for the unique manner in which L.A. creates history.

The narrator of *Amnesiascope* is a struggling novelist turned movie critic and journalist for the local newspaper, a description that to some extent is autobiographical, reflecting Erickson’s own efforts at publication. Readers are introduced to the narrator after he and Sally, the love of his life, have already parted ways. Though he has yet to heal from the emotional wounds of his previous relationship, wounds which painfully reopen when he learns Sally has recently remarried, the narrator tries to rocket past his emotions by engaging in a hypersexual lifestyle that curbs some of his more immediate desires. In one particular scene in the novel, readers follow the narrator as he races from

one sexual tryst to the next, three in a single evening, none of which includes his current girlfriend Viv: on the beach, when Ylana “unbuckles...[his] pants and [slips] her mouth onto [him],” she [giggles] because she could [still] smell Sam on [him]” (73). Twenty minutes later, the narrator is “back in [his] car, speeding through the Palisades down Sunset Boulevard” on his way to Dory, who had earlier invited him to a night of pleasure (74). The theme of sex seems to permeate other areas of his life as well: an equally hypersexed Viv, a lover turned friend, convinces him to write a 15-minute pornographic short entitled *White Whisper* for the local station Network V, and scenes from this film can be seen splashed across the city’s outdoor televisions.

However, the narrator lacks purpose in his life, failing to derive anything meaningful from this constant sexual stimulation, and despite what might seem like an otherwise electrifying lifestyle, the narrator finds his life rather anti-climactic, and a nagging sense of loss haunts his conscious. Even during the sexual act itself, this sense of loss pervades his thoughts: “[A]s I fucked [Sam], there was that same old feeling in me of memory going up in smoke, of the future going up in smoke, of nothing to be remembered that had come before or would come yet, that feeling of being lost to myself and the past and the future” (70). Comparing these elusive memories, his amnesia, to “smoke...from a fire that’s gone out,” the narrator still senses the significance of these memories though he cannot locate the memories themselves (25).

Beyond the Continuum of the Known

His inability to securely grasp his own memories must be understood in terms of the representation of time and memory: those moments of representation versus moments of non-representation, yet unknown moments. In the narrator's eyes, these two categories of memories are contained on a continuum of the same, a continuum that he necessarily visualizes as a broken line. While the represented moments, those memories readily accessible to the narrator, correspond to the continuum's visible segments (its dashes), the interstices, on the other hand, represent, for him, those memories that have been lost, otherwise unrepresented or unknown moments. The narrator fails to access these moments of non-representation because access to them lies not *between* represented moments and *on* this continuum as he mistakenly believes but rather *outside* the continuum of the known altogether. In contrast to his initial failure to capture moments of non-representation, the narrator succeeds in capturing the represented moment, most visibly reinforcing this representation via the palpability and corporeality of his sexual escapades through which readers at first must slog, wondering what point the author is trying to make in detailing so many of them. Tellingly, these represented moments are most closely tied to the present as his relationship with Viv intimates: he observes, "[O]ur relationship felt oddly durable, as though having for the time being set aside the past and the future, we could go on forever in the present" (38). The very physicality of his relationship as well as of other trysts suggests that these moments are real and graspable unlike the more elusive moments of non-representation or unknown memories

that the sex, in turn, seems to sometimes inspire. However, in emphasizing only the present moment, his hypersexed lifestyle prevents him from perceiving and finally acknowledging a past that might lend some sort of meaningful shape to his future.

Wishing to prevent further loss of potential memories, the narrator erroneously believes that by inundating his life with additional stimuli, by “using up” time, he could eliminate the potential for gaps of non-representation between those moments of representation. As Mary Ann Doane suggests in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, “the possibility of complete obliteration of the passing moment, the degradation of meaning...also elicits a desire for its opposite – the possibility of structure” (140). Accordingly, driven by the objective to consume time, the narrator of *Amnesiascope* spends his days driving from woman to woman, from tryst to tryst, from time zone to time zone. Erickson’s L.A. is “alive with time,” having been subdivided into smaller and smaller time zones - Mulholland, Hollywood, Ocean, Compton, Downtown, Daybreak, Oblivion Time, and Zed Time – that suggest the malleability and subjectivity of time, envisioning one way in which man attempts to take ownership of time. The narrator does his best to cram more “time” into the day by manipulating L.A.’s multiple time zones to keep himself in “net plus time,” so that if ...[he] hit all the green lights driving out on San Vicente Boulevard,...[he could] arrive...[at his destination] twenty-three minutes before [he] left” (125).

In addition to his attempts to control time, the narrator also endeavors to organize the excess of information that bombards him, the details so unmanageable that he must

subconsciously reduce each person and place he has known to a numerical value, no longer able to recall the specific names of persons and places:

[I]n the L.A. of Numbers, I am Memory Central just as in the L.A. of Names, I am Memory Void...at the same time that I've cut myself loose of memories of people and events, the memories of dates and times and phone numbers attach themselves to my brain like gnats to fly paper. At the same time that I'm the deep well into which you can drop a bad love affair, a death, a childhood trauma and never see it again,...I remember not only my own dates and times and phone numbers but yours, too. I'm a walking Filofax for everyone's appointments and vital statistics (16-7).

All he can do is record more numbers into his subconscious, an act that does little to meaningfully organize, make sense of this information, and which only further alienates him from his own memories, those concrete recollections of people and places significant to him at one point in his life.

Inundating these intervals of non-representation with more faces, places, sex, and numbers has undesirable results, additional intervals of non-representation that become infinitely divisible like Zeno's paradox⁴⁷ (Doane 173). Implicit in these additional intervals is a reflexive response on the part of the narrator to protect himself from an additional deluge of detail that overwhelms him. Thus if memory is that which the narrator of *Amnesiascope* does remember and that which can be represented, then time for him (these intervals) is what Mary Ann Doane, referring to the discontinuity inherent in the cinematic medium, identifies as the "inconceivability" of representation that signifies man's reflexive response to protect himself (45). In some respects, the intervals of unknown, unrepresented time from which the narrator suffers might be likened to the

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Doane discusses Zeno's multiple paradoxes, among them the one in which an individual's attempts to reach the far end of a stadium is frustrated when he or she must first reach the halfway mark between the origin and the goal, then the halfway mark of that halfway mark, *ad infinitum* (173).

intervals that occur between the still frames of a cinematic recording since any film is really just a series of separately shot still frames, divesting the cinematic medium of any true sense of continuity. Observing that “much of the movement or the time allegedly recorded by the camera is simply not there, lost in the interstices between frames,” (172) Doane asserts that the sort of cinematic discontinuity represents just another way man uses time to combat the potential over-stimulation inherent in the condition of modernity (3-4). She further suggests that these discontinuous and periodic moments form the basis of the origin of the concept of time: each of these moments suggests a failed attempt at representation, and thus time, in this sense, is defined as that particular interval of discontinuity which *eludes* recordation. Comparing Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of discontinuity and periodicity and physiologist Jules-Etienne Marey’s interest in those intervals of “lost time”⁴⁸ effected by bodily movement to the discontinuities implicit in cinematic representation, Doane argues that time presented both the problem of storage/representation and of legibility in cinema. The issue of storage/representation and legibility, she further argues, provided the framework “within which cinema

⁴⁸ According to Doane, Marey identified lost time as periods of discontinuity between “the reception of the nervous shock or impulse by the muscle and the muscle’s [actual] contraction” (47). Using chronophotography to “[record] successive positions of a single subject in the same frame” as the medium for his study, Marey sought to “shatter” what he saw as the false unity of time and space exemplified in the research of fellow physiologist Eadweard Muybridge (49). Marey felt that Muybridge failed to accurately and adequately represent time since each frame in his photograph suggested a “single instant in time” and at the same time “a single instant in space” (50). What Marey recognized, according to Doane, were the moments between these still photographs, similar to the moments between the still frames of a film, which failed to be recorded.

developed as a specific mode of organizing and regulating time,” a desire consistent with the modernist impulse⁴⁹ (Doane 4).

Navigating a Postmodern World

Yet, *Amnesiascope* reveals more than just a modernist desire to control time and manage information but more importantly points to the absence of a grand narrative to give meaning to all of this information, one question posed by postmodernism. Simon Malpas provides three definitions of the postmodern, one of which is a “loss of faith in progress and a splintering of [modernism’s] universal projects of speculation and emancipation into a vast field of competing projects and narratives” (43). However, Malpas also acknowledges a key problem with this “loss of faith” and “splintering” is that this definition of postmodernism is rather defeatist, offering little “space...for critique and transformation, as, without rules or the possibility of consensus, what grounds are there...to challenge the values of the culture we inhabit” (43). Perhaps in this respect, Erickson’s novel is also a critique of the postmodern, one that affirms Malpas’s assertion that we cannot rely on a single definition of postmodern alone but must simultaneously consider the postmodern as “another step in the grand narratives of modernity” (42). Thus, while the narrator’s over-consumption of time and his amnesia may be symptomatic of a “loss of faith in progress,” *Amnesiascope* also embraces

⁴⁹According to Doane, Freud used the metaphor of the mystic writing pad to suggest that each time the top two layers of the pad (representative of the conscious) are separated from its wax base (the unconscious) and discarded, a moment of discontinuity and periodicity occurs; these moments of discontinuity and periodicity are what Freud defined as the “flickering up and passing away” of consciousness (46).

transformation, the healing and reinvigorating of the narrator's life with meaning to affirm the unity of his existence. Moreover, we must also consider the postmodern as "a continual rereading and critique of modern values and projects" despite any conflicts that might arise between these three definitions (Malpas 44). Erickson's novel reflects such a postmodern "rereading and critique of modern values and projects" as Spinks suggests. Referring to Erickson's fiction in general, Lee Spinks points to key elements that posit the author's work as reexaminations of modernity:

Erickson's promiscuous interchange of genres and relentless interrogation of the relationship between history and textuality, [is] both assimilable to, and critically engaged with, those models of postmodern thought that preoccupy current intellectual debate. The multiplying narrative levels and interpenetrating discursive planes of Erickson's texts certainly frustrate a cursory reading, but they do so because his work continually puts into question the *telos* of a certain Enlightenment reading of history. (214-5).

In this respect, Spinks may read Erickson's fiction as a rereading and critique of the notion of a grand narrative just as Elias' assertion that *Arc D'X* questions the value of the Enlightenment" (Elias 534).

Amnesiascope, on the other hand, rereads and critiques modernism's preoccupation with grand narratives and unity of existence in favor of a multiplicity that is often contradictory. Whereas the modernists aim "to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality," (Harvey 41), the spaces of L.A. are as disjointed for the narrator as is time in Erickson's novel. Such multiplicity and contradiction invite a comparison of Erickson's novel to noir films, which for Edward Dimendberg in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, "[invoke] the past while anxiously imagining the future [and] reveal multiple spatialities, no less than multiple

temporalities” (3). Dimendberg further asserts that these multiple spatialities and temporalities in film noir are symptomatic of anxieties toward a shifting society:

The nonsynchronous character of film noir is best apprehended as a tension between a residual American culture and urbanism of the 1920s and 1930s and its liquidation by the technological and social innovations accompanying World War II, as well as the simultaneous dissolution of this new social compact of the 1940s and 1950s by the society emerging in the 1960s, in which the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary postmodern culture are clearly visible in retrospect.
(3)

However, at the same time, we must also acknowledge the grand narrative to which perhaps *Amnesiascope* does allude in its project of restoring gaps in the narrator’s memory. These missing moments in the narrator’s memory evoke a certain cinematic quality, cinema’s “camera’s eye” perspective or perhaps the “mind’s eye or the mind’s version of the camera’s eye” (McCaffery and Tatsumi 404). Erickson tries to distinguish the camera’s potential to objectively record events in cinema from the limited ability of the conscious mind to selectively sample from an objective reality; however, the technical feature of film as a series of separate, discontinuous still shots is arguably comparable to the lapses of non-representation that exist for the narrator of *Amnesiascope*. In both examples of the camera and the conscious mind, not everything can be recorded. Failing to access these elusive memories between the interstices of the known, the narrator must look elsewhere, and this is where the function of the stutter with respect to his amnesia slowly begins to take form. While the interstices paradoxically represent, for the narrator, his missing memories, their *representation* is an entirely separate issue from their *location*. Because the specter of his dreams, representative of the more elusive memories, can be detected in his conscious, lingering in smoke-like

existence, he incorrectly assumes that he can locate them on the same continuum he imagines to contain the represented moments of his life; however, his conscious merely captures hints of these missing moments, not the missing moments themselves, obliging him to look elsewhere.

Spectral dreams are but one “uncanny” experience of the narrator. In his explanation of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud uses *das Heimliche* and *das Unheimliche* interchangeably, arguing that while *das Unheimliche* refers to that which is eerie and uncanny, *das Heimliche* can imply the same, a familiarity that is discomfiting.

“[A]nxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs,” according to Freud. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect” (Freud 166).

Remarkably, despite the narrator’s inability to remember the majority of names and faces, Justine is one whose name and face he can never forget; in this way, she represents the familiar for the narrator. An allusion to L.A.’s real-life “Angelyne,” Justine is an urban icon whose “eruption of flesh, sprawled across silk sheets in barely existent red panties and tassels that match her red hair,” splashes across billboards advertising her services, which to date no one has been able to identify with any certainty (16). The narrator notes that Justine first appeared on a similar billboard twenty years ago and then again ten years later before her latest resurfacing. When he finally musters up the nerve to call the number listed on the advertisement, a pleasant voice, presumably belonging to Justine, directs him to meet her at a specified address in the Hollywood Hills. On the day of the appointment, he fails to locate this address but several weeks later, inadvertently stumbles

upon the place only to discover that Justine has sent him to his former speech therapy school, the place that helped him correct his stutter in his youth.

If Justine reopens a wound in sending him to this painful place from his past, she also effects a healing for him. “Repeating” herself to the narrator via the city’s numerous billboards, Justine proves to be the “Red Angel” who hovers above him, protects him, and aids him in unlocking a “memory [he] had long forgotten” (123); she is the very catalyst he needs in his life. For this reason, the same fault line that splits the narrator’s psyche runs as a deep fissure from his home to Justine’s billboard in a way that “[binds] private desire and mass public dream spaces” according to Mark Seltzer, writing about “wound culture” (15). As the haze from his memory dissipates, the narrator’s memory reassembles itself “not in a flash or sudden rush but rather in bits and pieces that gradually arranged themselves in...[his] head—at which point the chasm between...memory [and him] [vanishes] altogether” (122). The narrator finds the school uncanny, both familiar and unfamiliar, strangely discomfiting but at the same time liberating. The question then becomes why does Justine remind him of this particular painful memory, the stutter school?

Accessing the Unknown through the Stutter

A form of repetition, the stutter is the revisiting of words already uttered, an act that serves to disturb the original expression. Although on a literal level, the stutter is the speech impediment from which the narrator suffered during his youth, readers, however,

should also pay special attention to the figurative meaning Erickson envisions for the stutter: the original expression that has been stuttered might also be interpreted as the past, while the stutter itself then is a revisiting of this past, a recollecting of former events. Yet the stutter must be understood as more than the simple and literal recollection of a memory, instead tendering the more meaningful device of a lens through which the narrator might begin to understand these memories. In effect, in using the stutter as this meaningful lens to revisit the past, the narrator of *Amnesiascope* uses time to combat the meaningless passage of time, a sentiment that echoes T.S. Eliot's delineation of time in *Four Quartets*.⁵⁰ Eliot implies that an individual seeking the significance of a particular moment can only recollect from an unconscious state, and thus to conquer this memory, to recall it and its significance, time must have passed; furthermore, a memory can have no significance without the past and future to shape it. The stutter, in this sense, is what Erickson imagines as a tool to combat and conquer time, to ultimately extract its significance. When the stutter revisits previous utterances, it scans and rescans for those unrepresented moments that are not there, each repetition of a syllable only emphasizing their absence; at the same time, in its attempts to locate these unrepresented moments, the stutter effectively frames what the narrator assumes is a segment on the continuum of his memories (of both represented and unrepresented moments). In this respect, the memoryscope is a signification of the stutter, both of which aim to visually isolate those previously unknown moments.

⁵⁰ To be conscious is not to be in time/But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,/The moment in the arbour where the rain beat./Be remembered; involved with past and future./Only through time time is conquered (qtd. in Harvey 24).

However, this simple framing of memories is insufficient because the unknown moment the stutter seeks to frame is not represented on the continuum the narrator imagines; the only moments the scanning, rescanning, and stuttering detect are those of which the narrator already knows. Though the continuum that he imagines does not contain the moments of non-representation he seeks despite his belief otherwise, the stutter, through its repeated and rapid rescanning of a segment of represented moments, disturbs the original expression/segment of memory and in so doing, effects a violent rupture, disrupting what the narrator *knows*, this imagined continuum: the narrator says, “I can’t be sure it was really the Memoryscope that started the fire. I can’t be sure it was the first ray of dawn, coming over the eastern hills, that cracked the mirrored length of the Memoryscope and ignited the fire at its cross hairs, in the hills of the distant ravine at the flashpoint where memory meets amnesia” (214). In the novel, Viv’s sculpture, which overlooks Chavez Ravine, a site that grieves for its own lost memories,⁵¹ stands as some epic monument to memory, or more accurately, to amnesia, that which the narrator has lost to the fog of the past. Though the narrator is at Jasper’s house, situated just ten yards from the Memoryscope when the sculpture’s mirrored elements ignite a fire that destroys the hillside, he miraculously survives by boarding the bathysphere, a “large module,” which sits in the middle of Jasper’s pool and is capable of being submerged like a submarine (112). And though the obscure purpose of this roomy bathysphere, with its “ventricles and aortas like a huge mechanical heart,” previously eluded the narrator, it

⁵¹ Chavez Ravine once housed a community of working-class, mostly Latino individuals; though Los Angeles condemned the site for supposed public use, in a cloud of controversy, it was eventually razed to make way for private enterprise: Dodger Stadium.

now protects him from flames and smoke, allowing him to sidestep apocalyptic demise (214); it is as if the bathysphere, unbeknownst to the narrator, had been there all along for this specific purpose, to keep him alive as the human heart keeps a person alive, submerging him into the protection of the metaphorical amniotic fluid.

More significantly, however, the bathysphere functions as a metaphor for the sphere of the unknown that contains all the missing memories for which the narrator searches. Accordingly, if the bathysphere is the Dream or unrepresented memory the narrator refers to when he states “[i]n the stutter was born the Dream,” then the stutter which ultimately becomes the catalyst for enlightenment when it effects a violent rupture, permitting a point of contact with this alternate sphere (147). Forced to climb into the odd contraption, the narrator sees “streak across the sky not the light of fire, not the light of electricity, not the light of combustion, but the light of the last memory Viv’s sculpture ever broadcast” and specifically, the very first word he ever stuttered as a toddler – hello (214). Suddenly, though only momentarily, the fog that clouds his memory is lifted to reveal the

memory that explained everything. It was a memory from so far back in...[his] life as to have been seemingly beyond remembering; but there it was, through the glass hatch of the bathysphere in the red sky above...[him]: the first word...[he] ever stuttered. When...[he] saw it, just before...[his] eyes closed...[he] murmured, “Of course,” and...[he was] almost sure...[he] heard Jasper whisper back, G-G-Goodbye. (214)

Though the narrator forgets this revelation by the time he regains consciousness after having passed out from smoke inhalation, it does not matter, because the stuttered “hello,” a greeting that suggests human connection (a structure of feeling, if you will), from his past has now been reenacted in his life, and everything that follows will now

necessarily be illuminated in the special light of his memory. Significantly, the salutation “hello” marks the inception of the rest of his life, restores purpose to his life, and symbolizes his recent access to this alternate sphere of his known and unknown past.

While the first earthquake rendered the narrator stutterless and his life devoid of meaning, the second earthquake, one of words, implies a more curative property. The first earthquake rendered him speechless, “though by choice,” as it altered the lives of everyone else, too: “[I]n the weird silver light expelled by the earth when it ripped open, the switch of the soul was flipped, autistic teenagers suddenly taking cool commands of crises as corporation presidents and retired Marine colonels went completely mute with paralysis” (33). At that time, he “lost [his] stutter, and had nothing to say until [he] found it again. [He]...[had been]...a looter, not of stores, or businesses but [of his]...memory: [He had]...rushed into its shadows and stripped it bare, leaving nothing but vandalism and random destruction behind [him] (33). The Quake represents the first stutter or rupture in the narrator’s life and a means of self-defense from modernity’s excessive bombardment of details, demonstrating man’s use of time to fight off over-stimulation. Doane argues that this over-stimulation was spawned by capitalist modernity and its urge to control time; thus, the narrator loots from his own memory to shield himself from painful excess, the resulting amnesia an example of modern man’s impulse to manage time. If stuttering is, as McCaffery and Tatsumi suggest, a “dark and troubling abyss whose personal and metaphorical dimensions are simultaneously projected outward and inward,” then the first earthquake signifies the first outward projection of the stutter (397). Yet as Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi suggest, “[A]pproaching this

abyss proves to be a liberating rather than paralyzing experience for Erickson and for his novels” (397). This second rupture suggests something a little different, since in agreeing to revisit the past through the stutter, the narrator effectively agrees to forego at least some degree of control over time, potentially setting himself up to revisit those memories that effected the original schism of his past in the first place. In letting go of the reins of time, the narrator enables the stutter to snag and as a result, moves beyond the vague sense of loss that has previously haunted him to access the lost memories themselves in this alternate realm.

The narrator is stuck in uncanny terrain because he is unfamiliar with his environment, an environment that necessarily requires him to remember past experiences, even traumatic ones, in order that he move toward a future of possibility. The stutter then becomes the medium through which the narrator is reacquainted with his past and subsequently liberated. Thus, the stutter, with its rescanning function that triggers violent ruptures for the narrator and ultimately, enables access to a sphere of higher understanding. On the other hand, amnesia, “that feeling of being lost to...the past and the future,” represents a failure to recognize the significance of memories or dreams and to transcend the traumas of the past (70). Thus, while the narrator suffers from the condition of amnesia, evading both the past and the future, he finds himself perpetually stuck in the present time, without the past (or the future) to provide some sense of focus and significance to the present moment. This paralysis in the present is most evident in his inability to emotionally move past Sally. Grieving his loss of her, the narrator bids farewell to their mutual past and to “whatever dubious future might have once been

attached to it, and compares the various possibilities of their future to the silver balls that adorn his shelves, and to which collection “[e]very once in a while someone tries to slip one in that rattles with a false promise like a petrified dead bug trapped inside (77).

In this respect, the narrator evades the future and refuses to posit his present existence in such a way that acknowledges the future; instead, he prefers to be “back to the present, the one true living moment in a continuum of death –dead pasts, dead futures, dead memories, dead expectations” (77). This does not mean, however, that he is not aware of the disappointing and meaningless stasis that characterizes his current existence, fluid speech representing for him, paralysis in the present, “an ooze...[he] didn’t trust, ...of someone just a single step in the past or a single step in the future, skipping or pausing to catch up with the staccato of the present” (33). There are real reasons his conscious blocks him from certain memories, but once his amnesic condition subsides, he re-experiences his past, his memories, and his dreams with agonizing clarity, briefly prompting him to long for his former ignorance:

[W]hen amnesia broke, through its gate marched every person I ever hurt, one after another...I cried for Viv. I cried for Sally, I cried for the women I hurt before Viv and after Sally, I cried because my father was dead, I cried because someday my mother would be dead, I cried for my conscience and my faith. I cried for my dreams. I was quite a basket case that day, when amnesia broke and I remembered again; I cried for all my failures, and for that moment’s failure in particular the failure to transcend memory. (143)

The significance of his past finally illuminated, the narrator realizes that his conscious previously shielded him from the pain that remembering entails.

Apocalypse and Redemption

Erickson's conception of the stutter also suggests that the author was influenced by Frank Kermode's theory of "apocalyptic narrative structure," particularly Dominick LaCapra's understanding of it; La Capra states, "Narrative provides—in a displaced way—on the level of story and events what speculative dialectics provides on the level of theory and concept. In related but non-identical fashion... both traditional narrative and speculative dialectics seek a redemptive revelatory unity, totalization or closure—a making whole again" (122). This apocalyptic narrative structure involves a circular journey, which ultimately "recapitulates" the story's beginning, and allows the sojourner to achieve a higher level of understanding this second time around. In this respect, the narrator's revisiting of the past is more than simple recollection but rather suggests a similar recapitulation that offers him a newly found enlightenment. For instance, the narrator recalls Sally and is able to finally acknowledge the unbearable demands he had at one time placed on their relationship: "Tonight, before I fall to sleep, looking at the city's scattered lights and gapes of blackness outside my window, thoughts of Sally return... With the strange, hallucinatory clarity of fatigue, I suddenly understand how the burden of my romantic expectations was unendurable to anyone but me" (75). The visiting and revisiting of memories suggests his circular journey (and perhaps even multiple circular journeys) to and from these memories until their significance is finally illuminated for the narrator during this particular moment. Not only does the stutter allow him to successfully recapture those moments of non-representation, he also finally

identifies the reasons that impeded their representation in the first place. In this sense, Erickson's conception of the stutter is consistent with LaCapra's argument that the apocalyptic narrative structure does not necessarily envision the fall (or deviation from a unitary origin) as necessarily undesirable (124). Rather, the narrator's reversion to his stuttering condition represents the condition of possibility, and the difference or otherness that the stutter represents is something to be desired: alterity is hope in *Amnesiascope*.

In fact, one consequent revelation of the stutter is a new understanding of temporal order as defined in this alternate realm; in this new realm, the experiences of one's life are not governed by a linear structure. By welcoming the stutter back into his life, the narrator radically breaks with traditional temporality in which the impulse is always to move forward in uniform, linear fashion. Writing about time in narrative structure, Bastiaan van Fraassen identifies this impulse as a subjective task in which the "reader" of events "orders the events in a text or in the world based on clues that he or she interprets (19). In this respect, the narrator of *Amnesiascope*, as a reader of the narrative of his own life, translates temporal cues, thereby subjectively ordering the events in his life. By stuttering, revisiting his past, the narrator frustrates narrative continuity and its demand to propel forward, and as a result, effects a violent rupture that permits a point of contact with a less restrictive realm, prompting him to consider whether this demand to consistently move forward is really subjectively constructed and thus a personal fiction at best. Hal Foster notes how several contemporary filmmakers and novelists, among them Erickson, elaborate upon this fiction:

[E]xperience that is not experienced, at least not punctually, that comes too early or too late, that must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact,

almost analytically. Often in these novels and films narrative runs in reverse or moves very erratically, and the peripeteia is an event that happened long ago or not at all (per the logic of trauma this is sometimes ambiguous).⁵² (123)

Doane, too, discusses a similar fiction in the medium of cinema, arguing that though a film suggests irreversibility, the tendency to “relentlessly [reproduce] the familiar directionality of movements with regularity,” film is actually capable of doing exactly the opposite, “either by playing the reel in reverse and possibly through editing which allows for unique ordering” (112).

Stopping to pause, acknowledge, and reexamine his past by allowing his memories to be stuttered is not a disastrous and painful recollection of memories that the narrator needs to forget; instead, this pause encourages him to question whether forward movement and progress are necessarily equivalents. For example, when he finally reexamines his failure as a novelist, he exclaims to himself in a moment of epiphany,

I was going to rewrite all my books into one huge book except with the stutter – from beginning to end, one colossal, sprawling, staggering, epic of manic stammering, stunned gasping, throttled gulping and violent hiccupping that would sum up all of our lives, the times in which we live, the age behind us and the one to come. (152)

Finally realizing that the 15 years he spent as a struggling novelist were not in vain, the narrator now understands the past as a source of untapped wisdom, not as a source of paralysis, and his outlook improves from that of only dubious futures to a more hopeful one. And having seen what promises the stutter suggests, the narrator begins to

⁵² In addition to Erickson, Foster discusses novelists Paul Auster, Dennis Cooper, Denis Johnson, Ian McEwan, and Tim O'Brien as well as filmmakers Atom Egoyan in *Exotica*, Terry Gilliam in *12 Monkeys*, the Monty Python version of *LaJetee*.

understand what his future could hold if only he would stutter the past despite the implicit risks:

Most of the best things I've ever said, the most fluid, stutterless, *sonorous* things, were to myself, and now I'm going to try one more time to say everything I can find in me that might be worth saying, and hope that whatever I find in me is only the road, and not the place to where the road is going And when I'm finished, perhaps I'll be finished for good. There's always the off chance that, from another bluff, I'll actually be able to see the place to where the road is going and that, having seen it, I'll find that nothing else needs to be said. (225)

In the narrator's opinion, the risk is worth taking, however, because of the possibilities it suggests: "But there's also the chance that, having seen it, I'll find something entirely new that needs to be said, something I never knew before that I could say. And then, having tried one last time, perhaps I will try once more" (225). The narrator accepts the fact that he runs the risk of a dead-end, but at the same time, the possibility of enlightenment, of unearthing previously unrepresented moments is enough to motivate him to embark on this journey. In this respect, repetition of memories through the stutter offers the hope of transcendence, of infinite possibility and multiplicity, as opposed to the only finite possibilities offered by the narrator's previous linear conception of time.

Through various means, Erickson posits radically different realities that sometimes happily coexist, often contradict, and usually freely permeate one another in order to enrich the narrator's life with a particular purpose that cannot be identified otherwise through some singular reality, echoing Harvey's assertion about the postmodern novel inclination toward multiplicity. For example, in *Amnesiascope*, the narrator's conscious/imagined continuum of represented moments and unconscious/sphere containing both represented and unrepresented moments suggest two

such realities which interpenetrate one another through the vehicle of memory; though both moments of representation and those of non-representation may be found in the narrator's unconscious, this alternate sphere to which the stutter allows access, only hints of the unrepresented moment that materializes on the continuum imagined by the narrator. Thus, these moments collide but at the same time collaborate in order to enrich the narrator's life with a particular purpose that cannot be identified otherwise through some singular reality. Furthermore, memory itself represents yet another contradictory reality in the novel, since in Erickson's formulation, it refers to both the past and future. This condition of possibility and multiplicity is a question the author explores in his other works as well.⁵³

The stutter effects these notions of possibility and multiplicity, suggesting a certain sense of contingency that might be compared to the issue of contingency in cinema, a medium that Doane observes possesses the ability to capture unpredictable events. Drawing upon Lyotard's assertion that "modernity shapes a sequence of moments in a way that accepts a high rate of contingency," Doane defines the "event" in cinema as the "cusp between contingency and structure" and further asserts that the event is simultaneously contingent and desirous of structure in that the "finitude of a film reel" induces the desire for predictable limits to be placed upon the unpredictable (141). Using this definition of the event, readers might better understand the conceptions of memory

⁵³ For instance, in Erickson's *Rubicon Beach*, the author imagines multiplicity as a specific, never before discovered number between nine and ten, wholly independent of either of these numbers. And in *Leap Year*, alternate possibilities manifest themselves on that extra day in February every four years; on the other hand, an alternate world of possibilities emerges from the other side of an underwater portal in *Our Ecstatic Days*. Finally, possibility and multiplicity in *Arc d'X* are what Jim Murphy describes as the novel's "gray areas, where love infringes on freedom, and where the personal encroaches on the public, the entire gamut of documentable and undocumentable Jefferson lore...present at key moments" (461).

and amnesia Erickson presents in *Amnesiascope*. Given modernity's tendency to inundate man with excessive information, "forgetting" or the amnesic condition becomes the narrator's blasé defense, a means of managing the burden of excessive stimuli, since contingency has the potential to disappoint the narrator as much as it does the potential to benefit him. Thus while the represented moment might be understood as the securing of a contingent event, conversely, moments of non-representation also evidence structure, the subjective editing that occurs in an individual's conscious when the conscious becomes overwhelmed by excess information and experiences the very real limits of its capacity to record memories. This same anxiety is exemplified throughout the novel: Viv, for instance, "[exploding] with ideas and visions," turns into a "five-foot-two memo to herself" by transcribing reminders directly onto the surface of her body (38). However, like the limited length of a reel of film, the surface of Viv's body demonstrates a similar unreliability, so that when she bathes, "she emerges a blue blur," her valuable memories now compromised (38). Her body proves to be a limited medium for memories at best. Incidents like this in *Amnesiascope* only serve to highlight the anxieties of representation and legibility that thread themselves through Erickson's fiction.

The Stutter as a Radical Breach of Time

In addition to the consideration of contingency prompted by these notions of possibility and multiplicity in the novel, this stuttering that disrupts the narrator's understanding of time in the traditional sense, suggests that the apocalyptic L.A. envisioned by Erickson represents a Foucauldian heterotopia in the sense that it is both the end of the world and at the same time, it is not (354). However, more important to Erickson's imagination of L.A. as apocalyptic ruins is Foucault's related concept of "heterochronism, which he identifies as a "total breach of...traditional time" (354). One example Foucault uses to illustrate his idea of heterotopia and heterochronism is the cemetery in which "loss of life" paradoxically coexists with "quasi-eternity in which [a human being] does not cease to dissolve and be erased" (354); thus the cemetery is simultaneously a place that houses individuals who have died and a place where the memories of them might be kept "alive" through memorialization.⁵⁴ Erickson's depiction of Black Clock Park, an L.A. cemetery where the time capsules of various decades have been laid to rest, alludes to Foucault's notions of heterotopia and heterochronism: In burying time capsules and later uncovering them, L.A. ironically buries time, implying that time is "dead" but at the same time, keeps it alive through memorialization and periodic resuscitation, effected by scheduled unearthings. In this respect, Black Clock Park seems to suggest that a traditional understanding of time is dead but memory is not. Erickson's disruption of traditional time in the novel is a tribute to Faulkner, an author

⁵⁴ Incidentally, Harvey's argument regarding the multiplicity of radically different realities resonates with Foucault's own ideas of heterochronisms.

who reminds him that “reality ticks not to the clock of time but [to] the clock of memory” (qtd. in McCaffery and Tatsumi 415). Accordingly, in this manner, Erickson privileges memory over time (or the passage of time) in the novel, suggesting that while time might be dead with respect to its passage, evoking memories of past decades promises to continue to imbue the future with particular significance.

In these respects, the Los Angeles of Erickson’s imagination represents a heterochronism because the novel radically breaks with traditional time, the fiction of narrative continuity, which, in its imperative to continually move forward, implies that once an event has passed in time, so has its significance. The author attributes his disjointed narratives in part to the mind-boggling pace at which the L.A. landscape transformed over the second half of the twentieth-century; for instance, he witnessed the horse ranches and orchards of 1950s San Fernando Valley give way to suburban tracts and finally to the freeway that literally replaced his childhood home (McCaffery and Tatsumi 414-5). In this sense, perhaps the destruction of the landscape in *Amnesiascope* alludes to film noir, a genre marked by a nostalgia that Dimendberg suggests reveals itself in “[t]he loss of public space, the homogenization of everyday life, the intensification of surveillance, and the eradication of older neighborhoods by urban renewal and redevelopment projects [that] are seldom absent from these films” (7). Unlike the characters of westerns who are feel at home in on the frontier, the characters in noir films find the city alienating, and “the movement...from urban center to periphery is a pervasive spatial trope” (Dimendberg 7). Yet, unlike noir films, the protagonist of Erickson’s novel is drawn to the center not to the periphery, and while he cannot be freed

from the center, he does not want to be freed from it; in fact, amidst the rubble, he locates the tools with which he can rebuild his life. Perhaps, L.A.'s perpetual cycle of bulldozing and rebuilding lends to Erickson's "[tendency] to destroy and reconstruct L.A. in his novels" ("Steve Erickson"); like the L.A. cityscape itself, the memories of Angelenos are continually destroyed and reconstructed, ruptured and reformulated. As a city that has only suffered the cataclysmic force of nature in *Amnesiascope*, L.A. suggests a ruinous end, but at the same time, violent rupture, the narrator's reliving a second quake this time in the form of the stutter, also confirms a continued, meaningful and remembered existence. Another reason heterochronism is an appropriate characterization of Erickson's L.A. is that L.A. subverts the traditional understanding of time by divorcing time from a spatial dimension, an aspect that is necessarily tied to the fiction of narrative linearity. As Harvey claims, any system of representation "automatically freezes the flow of experience and in so doing distorts what it strives to represent" (206). Though in this instance, he is specifically referring to the works produced by artists, writers, and poets, his principle might also be applied to the conventional representation of experience and memory.

The narrator's attempts to recall those unrepresented moments and their significance are thwarted by his mistaken belief that these lost moments can be found within the interstices of represented moments which he imagines to be contained on a continuum of represented moments. However, he mistakenly assumes that both represented and unrepresented moments are naturally ordered in some recognizable sequence, namely in the traditional temporal order of first to last. Henri Bergson would

further argue that that narrator erroneously believes that time is homogeneous like space and as a result, its “contents co-exist,” (98) thereby “abstracting conscious states” of which memories are a part, form duration, which in pure form is the ego letting itself go without “separating its present state from its former states” (100). On a similar note, Gaston Bachelard also notes memory’s inability to reproduce duration, which in turn, encourages man to think of memory “in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness” (89). Homogeneity may also suggest that conscious states “follow one another” (98) like material objects whose exteriority allows the insertion of intervals between conscious states and “sets off their outlines” (100); he quashes this view when he points out that “states of consciousness, even when successive, permeate one another” (98).

Erickson, however, takes Bergson’s ideas one step further in his novel; not only do conscious states flow into each other, dispelling the myth of time-space unity with respect to memory, but they also flow into each other in no particular sequence. Thus the stutter, in refusing to adhere to such a temporal logic, allows access to a higher understanding of memory not constrained by a desire to sequence and as a result, permits the narrator to utilize whatever memory he needs, whenever he needs it. For this very reason, the narrator’s recollection of his childhood stutter is a memory that until now, his life did not require but now that he needs it, remarkably illuminates the current circumstances of his life. Accordingly, the narrator’s “re-remembering” of his memories exhibits an organic quality consistent with Bergson’s conception of time (101). Moreover, such re-remembering on a need-to-know basis is what Erickson refers to as a

“nuclear imagination” (McCaffery and Tatsumi 409). In *Amnesiascope*, the number and shape of L.A.’s time zones also suggest a similar false unity of time and space, only proving the inadequacy of its residents desire to manage time by slicing the space of the city. The space of the narrator’s apartment becomes a metaphor for his inadequate understanding of time. Though to the untrained eye, his apartment appears to have four walls, it actually contains a secret room, signifying the false unity of time/memory and space, a “dream that has four walls” (138). Tellingly, when he or others occupy this secret room, he cannot be entirely in the present and begins to dream or remember of past events.

This breakdown of the traditional notions of temporal order and unity implicit with respect to the continuum of memory imagined by the narrator discredits certain myths of temporality, like that of the cause and effect projection, for example. In this sense, Erickson continues his previous efforts to “[liberate] memory from chronology” as Jim Murphy observes of *Arc D’X* (453). If conscious states freely flow into one another and moreover, are able to flow into each other “out of order,” then Erickson questions the sequence inferred by such conscious states. For example, the narrator receives from a fan a letter which is written on a series of postcards numbered using odd numbers only (136); despite the missing even numbers and despite the narrator’s receipt of the postcards out of sequence, some starting and others ending mid-sentence, the letter nonetheless proves meaningful for the narrator. This meaningfulness, despite an obvious lack of sequencing only illustrates the idea that the sequencing of events must be thought of as entirely separate from the ordering of memories, again echoing van Fraassen’s break with

traditional temporality. Additionally, if one conscious state flows into the next and possibly back again, how can it accurately be argued that the first one affects another?

This precise point is also illustrated by the narrator's review of the *Death of Marat*, a nonexistent film that he fabricates. Not only does he make up the film's title, but he also fabricates the film's director Adolphe Sarre, both existing not in reality but in the narrator's imagination. When his editor Shale calls to congratulate him on a well-written piece and a fact-checker from the office calls to tell him that his facts check out⁵⁵, the narrator believes he is the target of a bad joke and that his reprimand is only a matter of time (54-5). But when he picks up the following issue of the paper, much to his horror, it contains his review, and though he waits for everyone to discover his fraud, no one does. In fact, his review is a hit with the public, sparking a renewed interest in this alleged long-forgotten classic, the catalyst for a Sarre revival: he hears "endless discussions of spectacular tracking shots[...],the revolutionary triptych effects[,] and the exciting montage" as well as talk of the lead actress' superb performance, kudos for the lighting, set design and costumes" (134-5). He even overhears one woman criticize his review, suggesting that the narrator has missed the film's true significance. For Erickson, the cause-effect order is a fiction, and *Marat* need not have existed before it could be reviewed or reviews of it critiqued; he need only critique *Marat* for *Marat* to exist, thus refuting the logic that "I exist, therefore I am." At the novel's conclusion, the narrator even attends a screening of *Marat* at a film festival in the Nevada desert and meets the director whom he once believed to be fictional.

⁵⁵ According to the newspaper's fact-checker, Sarre was in fact 24-years old when he made *Marat*.

Both the postcard and *Death of Marat* incidents illustrate “synchronistic phenomena,” which Carl Gustav Jung defines as “‘acausal’ correspondences between mutually independent psychic and physical events” (333). The postcards should not make sense, and *Adolphe Sarre* and *Death of Marat* should not exist because the narrator has made them up. However, the unified message of the postcards despite the lack of chronology and the existence of the film and director *because* the narrator imagines them are examples of “qualitative statements [manifesting] themselves in *a priori* patterns of order” (Jung 332). Significantly, writing the review of *Marat* prompts the narrator to begin thinking about working on his fiction again after his review appears in the paper, and at the film festival, the made-up Sarre advises him to go ahead and reinsert the stutter back into his life, literally advising him to “embarrass himself” (223). These revelations would not have been possible had the narrator adhered to the cause-effect logic, reading the postcards chronologically (or as chronologically as possible) and reviewing films that he knew existed rather than taking a chance at exploring the unknown. Thus, the Jungian synchronicity he experiences points to the existence of *unus mundus*, some larger universal code of meaning that transcends assumed truths like cause-effect, and in turn, contributing to the postmodern sensibility of Erickson’s novel.

Ultimately, what this disruption of notions of narrative linearity and continuity seems to imply is an understanding of history that is specific to Los Angeles. Often accused of lacking a history, L.A. is constantly being reinvented, since as the narrator suggests, everyone in L.A. is a tourist with no real roots in the city. Because L.A. lacks a historical past in this sense, and is a “wide screen empty of memory and all its meaning”

as Erickson suggests, Angelenos are free to narrate their own history using unconventional means though sometimes they do not recognize this freedom immediately (McCaffery and Tatsumi 414). Because L.A. history, like memory, knows no limits and defies traditional understandings of sequence, “[h]istory recedes into the *future*” for the narrator of *Amnesiascope* (my emphasis, 79). In other words, an L.A. history already exists in the future, explaining why, “in L.A. you think you’re making something up, but [rather history is]...making you up” as the narrator remarks (28). And in the same way that the narrator must access this alternate sphere of previously unknown memories, moments of non-representation, L.A.’s residents can only access history by subverting traditional notions of history and time; access requires an equally violent rupture such as the stutter. Thus the alternate realm to which the narrator gains access is merely a larger metaphor for L.A.’s history, which also defies traditional notions of narrative continuity and linearity and which also cannot simply be located in the interstices of what Angelenos already know; history, for Angelenos, requires that they seek transcendence to this sphere of the unknown. L.A., in this sense, is a metropolis of multiple histories, all of which are relevant and meaningful.

Therapeutic Quakes: Nina Revoyr’s *Southland*

Nina Revoyr, another author whose fiction is mostly set in L.A., interprets Los Angeles as a metropolis of multiple histories. Some of the criticism and reviews on Nina Revoyr’s fiction examine its place within Asian American canon and the larger American

canon (Kuo); certainly, *Southland* takes its place among other internment narratives like Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and John Okada's *No-No Boy*. Yet, the theme of cross-cultural identification (Sennett 1378) and the setting distinguishes *Southland* from other internment narratives. Diane C. Fujino notes how the story takes place in the Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District and thus speaks to the burgeoning "oppositional consciousness" that developed as a result of cross-cultural identification between that L.A. community's Japanese American and African American residents.

Other critics examine her contribution to gay literature; prose, structure, and character development; her exploration of the oft-overlooked L.A. community of the Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District; the city's complex history of racial strife, on one hand, and cross-cultural identification between ethnic communities, on the other (Sennett 1378); and themes of racial disconnection and self-loathing (del Rosario 10). As Monica Pareles writes for the *Lambda Book Report*, *Southland* prominently figures a gay character in Jackie Ishida and thus explores "contemporary gay identity" though not as thoroughly as does Revoyr's first novel *The Necessary Hunger*. Moreover, describing the novel as "a meditation on race, cultural beliefs, opportunity, prejudice, and family obligation" in her review, Lisa Nussbaum also comments on the author's use of language: "beautiful, precise, but never pretentious" though occasionally "stilted" (126). With respect to structure, *Southland's* plot has been described as "cluttered with Revoyr's ambitious attempts to tackle history, love, race, and gender in one fell swoop" (Long 43+), and while some critics see her characters as "multifaceted" (Long 43+) and "fully realized" (Nussbaum 126), others wonder if the characters are too developed to engage

the reader's imagination (del Rosario 10). These characters live separate lives that nonetheless entwine to "shape each other and, together over time, shape their community," their lives "honed by racism, love and memories" (del Rosario 10). Finally, Carina del Rosario interprets *Southland* as a larger metaphor for L.A. history: the novel is "crowded with characters and offers a dense, intricate texture of lives and history" (10).

Using similar themes of apocalypse, natural disaster, and human disaster as *Amnesiascope*, Nina Revoyr's *Southland* explores a slightly different form of amnesia than that of *Amnesiascope*'s narrator: a social and cultural amnesia. The events of Revoyr's novel take place in L.A. (the "Southland") during the weeks following the Northridge earthquake, an event that unsettled the lives and security of many Angelenos and considered by many to be the most catastrophic U.S. national disaster until Hurricane Katrina over a decade later. Jackie Ishida, a law school student turned reluctant detective and *Southland*'s protagonist, attempts to locate Curtis Martindale, the mystery heir of \$38,000 in cash found in a shoebox hidden in her grandfather's closet. Jackie later discovers that Curtis was Frank's child, a fact Frank kept secret even from Curtis; additionally, she learns that Curtis worked at Frank's corner market and was murdered during the Watts riot by Robert Thomas, one of a handful of black L.A.P.D. officers at the time. Thomas had locked Curtis and three other young African American boys, in the freezer of Frank's store, purposefully leaving them there to die. Uncovering Curtis's story becomes the key to unlocking the mysteries of her family's larger history, a history that includes two particular narratives previously unknown to Jackie – her grandfather Frank Sakai's Japanese American internment experience at Manzanar and combat

experience in the 442nd Battalion during WWII as well as his experience during the Watts riot of 1965. In this sense, she, like the narrator of Erickson's novel, suffers from memory loss though her memory loss is equally cultural as it is personal, her amnesia also signifies the larger Japanese American community's loss of heritage.

Like *Amnesiascope*, *Southland* paints L.A. simultaneously as a landscape of ruins and as the site of promise, and natural disaster – the earthquake in particular – becomes a metaphor for man-made social disasters such as the internment of Japanese Americans, the Watts riot of 1965, the L.A. riots, and other examples of social injustice past and present that Angelenos seem to forget. The sheer magnitude of the Northridge earthquake signifies the severe and enduring consequences of these social disasters, the tremors and aftershocks forcing Jackie to tap into her grandfather's forgotten past when he dies from a heart attack induced by the quake. If L.A. has become the site of forgetting, the aftershocks of the earthquake serve to rupture the complacency that characterizes Jackie, destabilizing the world as she knows it, compelling her to seek answers to questions she has surrounding her family's past. At first, Jackie embarks on a quest to identify Curtis Martindale, the mystery African American heir (later determined to be Frank's son and thus her half-Japanese uncle) to her grandfather's holographic will; however, her search soon turns into a quest to find Curtis's murderer. The earthquake provides the ideal setting for revelation, growth, new knowledge, and historical multiplicity, for its tremors shock Jackie into social and cultural consciousness, giving Jackie a glimpse into the community that shaped her grandfather, restoring meaning to

her life and her identity as both a Japanese American and gay individual, thus serving as a medium for healing her broken character in different capacities.

Welcome to Jackie's World

Jackie Ishida is an individual uncomfortable in her own skin, and because she does not like who she is, she always feels out of place in her world. Wound very tightly, Jackie never reveals her true self to anyone, including her significant other Laura, and always “[listens] to herself cut, edit, censor, distort her own stories” for reasons unbeknownst to her (149). Moreover, Jackie is unable to feel strong emotion, a deficiency to which she readily admits; as a result, her relationships with people are decidedly strained. Unable to emotionally connect with anyone, Jackie keeps even Laura at a safe, emotional distance; is noticeably uncomfortable with even the simplest displays of affection (Laura's hugs, for example); and immediately shuts down in response to emotional conflict (149). For this reason, she unconsciously puts off moving into an apartment with Laura.

Jackie's response to the death of her grandfather, someone who was once very close to Jackie, is the best example of her emotionally broken condition. When Frank Sakai dies, Jackie is oddly cold. Her aunt Lois is broken up over Frank's passing as are many of his friends and former neighbors in the Crenshaw District. At Frank's funeral, Jackie's frozen silence sharply contrasts the sobs and wails of others. Later, when Jackie visits Lois at her aunt's gated apartment complex, Jackie even finds herself comforting

the complex's security guard, whose grief is disproportionately greater than Jackie's response: "And Jackie thought, not for the first time, that her ability to comfort others revealed a deficiency on her part, not a virtue. It is only those who aren't totally shattered by a loss who can comfort the others, who are" (16). Those who are emotionally connected immediately recognize Jackie's emotional deficiency. For example, James Lanier, Curtis's younger cousin who joins Jackie in her quest to solve the murder, senses her stunted emotions, accusing her of only pursuing the matter of the will, not in loving memory of her grandfather and not in an effort to be a good granddaughter, but because she is a "good lawyer" (77). Lois, on the other hand, insists that finding the rightful heir to the \$38,000 is the only course of action as a means of honoring Frank's last wishes.

If Jackie finds such elements of her current world troubling, she also dreams of her ideal world, a sterile one that involves working as an associate attorney at Turner, Blake, and Weinberg, moving into "big, plush offices" in a downtown L.A. high-rise, and wearing pricey suits: a world that she is sure is right around the corner from her. To her, this ideal landscape would signify that "she'd finally become someone, like she had finally arrived" (186). However, unbeknownst to Jackie, this "flat and textureless" existence she imagines for herself, bland "as a starched white shirt," is incomplete (146). The life to which she aspires thwarts the possibility for individual identity, doing nothing to celebrate the complexity of her character – neither her Japanese American heritage nor her sexuality. Interestingly enough, these very restrictions are what appeal to this young lawyer-to-be, who looks forward to blending into the background among the other white

collars at her future firm. In this respect, the life of conformity Jackie desires represents her blasé defense, a defense against the sorts of challenges that can characterize the lives of L.A.'s minority populations: being ethnic in a dominant white culture, being gay in a society where straight is the norm. Thus, for Jackie, the world of starched white shirts promises a peaceful, albeit undercover, coexistence with the urban mainstream.

Unfortunately for Jackie, the narrative that she thinks she is a part of is not really her narrative – entirely, that is. It is but one narrative that she must negotiate in expressing her identity. Moreover, buried in the rubble of her forgotten past are the memories or narratives that really count, memories that reflect the identity of her family and the complex cultural communities to which her family once belonged and more importantly, memories that illuminate her own personal identity. In the sense that her life lacks any substance, any true meaning, Jackie resembles the narrator of *Amnesiascope* whose emotional numbness is symptomatic of deeper narratives yet to be unearthed; just as he moves numbly from one sexual tryst to the next, Jackie, too, functions under a subtle haze of anesthesia and is inappropriately underwhelmed in otherwise emotionally intense situations. As a result, her reactions appear insensitive and sometimes perfunctory to those she meets. Because she cannot know her true self without first unearthing her grandfather's story, she must strip away the superficial narratives to which she is convinced she belongs in an effort to expose her true histories. Like the protagonist of Erickson's novel, Jackie, too, ultimately finds her impenetrable exterior – in other words, her blasé defense – the source of her deficiencies.

Jackie's behavior stems from an inherited condition passed down from previous generations of Japanese Americans whose history is stained with the injustice of internment. Forced to give up their lives, their livelihood, their possessions, and in essence, their identity, many Japanese American internees submitted peacefully though not without silent protest to Executive Order 9066⁵⁶ in hopes that their cooperation would be recognized as patriotism and loyalty to the United States. Driven by the cultural trait of unquestioning obedience to authority and *gaman*, a Japanese word that loosely translates to "that's okay," most Japanese Americans opted to comply (Takezawa 83). *Gaman*, however, does not imply a passive acceptance but rather an endurance borne of strength: perseverance, patience, tolerance, and self-restraint ("*Gaman*"). Thus, a person who is *gaman zuyoi* (the adjective form of *gaman*), may remain silent, but such silence should not be interpreted as *akirame*, "surrender" or "resignation," but rather as fortitude.

Perhaps *shikata ga nai* and *shikata nashi ni*, respectively translated as "it cannot be helped" (Takaki 211) and "to reluctantly do" ("*Shikata ga nai*") might also shed light on the attitude, choices, and actions of Japanese Americans facing internment. Because Executive Order 9066 implied that to be Japanese American was criminal in itself, many Japanese Americans burned any evidence of their heritage (family photos, heirlooms, and Japanese language school primers), their silence an example of their ability to persevere and belying the anguish and protest in their hearts. Given the racially hostile climate of the era, *shikata ga nai* might be understood as a wartime survival strategy; yet, at the

⁵⁶ Executive Order 9066 "enabled the military, in the absence of martial law, to immediately circumvent the constitutional safeguards of over 70,000 American citizens and to treat the Nisei like aliens" (Weglyn 69).

same time, in the context of a different time period, this same attitude may imply a more passive response. As David Yoo asserts, World War II remained “a blank page in [the] albums of family and community history” of Japanese Americans until participants in the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, many of them the children of internees, began to protest against the government’s decision to intern Japanese Americans and to learn about and “make sense of the internment experience” through “annual pilgrimages to the camps, Day of Remembrance commemorations and the efforts to designate internment sites as historical landmarks” (682-3). Furthermore, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese American Redress movement⁵⁷ “worked against the attitude of *shikataganai*...a phrase that often surfaced when internees discussed their incarceration” because many felt that it was a different era for Japanese Americans, one that now required a different strategy: active resistance (Yoo 684). Such resistance included protests against official interpretations of history and demands for reinterpretations of history and acknowledgement of the injustice of the camps; in this respect, resistance reveals the living nature of history, how history is not static but rather dialogical, allowing persons in the present to interact with it. For example, “internment continues to shape and re-shape the ways that Japanese Americans individually and collectively understand their place in America” (Yoo 681).

⁵⁷ In the early 90s, Japanese Americans sought redress and acknowledgement from the government that internment amounted to wholesale imprisonment without due process, not the euphemistic evacuation for “safety” (Weglyn 39). The redress movement also allowed Japanese Americans to acknowledge the damage internment did to Japanese Americans, effectively dividing the community, a wound that never healed for many (44).

Jackie's blasé defense stems from her the silence that characterizes her family and the blank pages of their history. The experience of internment and fighting in the 442nd traumatized Frank, and though he did not passively accept the injustice he experienced, he also "didn't air his grief" but rather silently endured his pain and exhibited *gaman*, "[bearing] his cross alone" (283). Later, when a 6-year old Jackie, to her delight, discovers that Frank served in the war after rummaging through a box of his old things, her grandfather tells her that "it didn't make any difference" (207); rather than communally commemorate his wartime participation like the Japanese American soldiers who march in the Nisei Parade every year, Frank, haunted by the loss of close comrades in war, keeps these memories boxed up in the garage. Frank is also plagued by guilt, finding Alma, the young woman who will become his secret girlfriend, attractive in part because of her "not-Japanese" African American heritage, for deep inside, he saw in the "small, folded-in young [Japanese American] women who were so constrained and accepting of him," his own sister and mother, "women he had failed to protect" during the war (his sister dies in camp during childbirth and his mother is widowed when Frank's father is killed during his incarceration). Here, Frank's refusal to speak amounts to a *shikata ga nai* attitude and perpetuates a cultural and familial silence that would eventually be passed down to Jackie. However, the silence is misinterpreted even as it is passed down in Jackie's family. After internment came to an end, many Japanese Americans of Frank Sakai's generation attempting to erase traces of the culture that got them branded as alien citizens during the war ashamed to have been singled out based on their ethnicity. Thus, the internment experience became an intergenerational wound

among Japanese Americans, an inherited condition of racial amnesia, a wound that would prove difficult for future generations of Japanese Americans to locate. Jackie is vaguely aware of this cultural wound, her lack of access to her family history and the collective experience of Japanese Americans during WWII:

[H]er family didn't talk. None of them, including her grandfather. No words laced together into a chain of intertwined stories that connected her to anyone's past. More than gaps in the narrative; there was no narrative. Whole years, like the years of World War II, dropped cleanly from their collective history. (64-5)

How can Jackie possibly emote when generations before her tried to forget their own feelings, shoving the pain aside and refusing to deal with it? While his silence might have been the consequence of his guilt rather than a lack of cultural pride, the silence of their family is misconstrued by Jackie as such a lack. Sent out without "nourishment of her family history," Jackie is wholly unprepared to deal with her world (67).

So Jackie's characterization of her life as "flat and textureless as a starched white shirt" is nothing less than a loaded statement (146). Her family history is pocked with misfortune and tragedy but the family's amnesic condition, symbolized by the white shirt, continues the intergenerational suppression of the grieving process. Yet, when Jackie finally opens up the box of memories shoved aside by her grandfather, not only does she begin to remember her collective cultural and familial history, but she also learns how the experience of internment has shaped and continues to shape her identity in the present time. These important elements of her cultural and family history restore the "texture" to existence.

Tapping into a Collective Memory

However, it is not only the injustice of internment that the Japanese American community forgets; Jackie and others like Jackie lose many more narratives, some that pertain to the Japanese American community and others that demonstrate cross-cultural bonds. Jackie struggles to access stories even further back in her family history like that of her great-grandparents' immigration to an America whose reception of them was often hostile. She will also never know the true extent of Frank's deep ties to the Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District community and the unbearable pain his life must have represented. Moreover, Jackie's amnesic condition also prevents her from truly understanding the social magnitude of the Watts riot, much less its social significance for Angelenos and its personal significance in her family's narrative. To her, the Watts riot was nothing more than a few paragraphs of facts and statistics from a textbook, perhaps a one-point question on a multiple choice history exam. What she fails to grasp is that all of these narratives are more than just historical fact but more importantly, stories: evidence of real relationships and real emotions. Jackie also fails to grasp the relationship of these multiple narratives to one another in some ways, how they interpenetrate and affect each other, including her own current narrative. Hence, as she unearths, these stories of real people and real feelings, realities previously unknown to her, she responds in the only way she knows how, with detachment and discomfort.

Because these other realities disrupt her notion of a singular reality and upset the nondescript but in her opinion, perfect life she once imagined for herself, Jackie reacts in

this way. However, Jackie's imagined world gradually gives way to a budding identification with her Japanese American heritage vis-à-vis her emotional awakening to previously untapped narratives. Initially, Jackie just solves the various mysteries in her family history without getting emotionally involved; for this reason, Jackie's aunt Lois describes Jackie's attitude as that of a "good lawyer." Thus, early on in the novel, Jackie does not yet see herself as a participant in those discovered narratives. Gradually, however, Jackie's motives change, and she begins to pursue Curtis Martindale's murderer to be a "good granddaughter" to Frank. Her change in attitude and personal investment in these other narratives marks progress, signaling emotional and cultural growth; Jackie finally realizes how important these stories are to her complex identity as a Sakai, as a Japanese American, as a gay individual, and as a person. Like the narrator of *Amnesiascope*, who must look outside the life he knows to locate the more meaningful narratives from his past to restore significance to his life, Jackie needs to shed the blasé norm and the comfortable narrative she has imagined for herself to reconnect with the histories of her grandfather and his Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District community.

Jackie also taps into the collective amnesia that pervades Los Angeles, particularly the myth that the city was a racial and economic heaven for America's ethnic minorities. If the internment of Japanese Americans did not prove this point, the Watts riot of 1965 and later the 1992 riots surely underscored the city's racial divide. The Watts riot, the most destructive race riot since the 1943 Detroit riots, surprised black and white residents alike, many of whom thought of L.A. as a place of relatively peaceful race relations (Cohen and Murphy 8). However, such a characterization was far from

reality; as historian Josh Sides reminds us, from a historical perspective, L.A.'s racial climate has been "less heated" than that of other American cities though not necessarily better despite popular perception⁵⁸ (169). Racial tensions experienced in other metropolises were experienced in L.A., too. These tensions, coupled with the fact that Watts represented a "forgotten archipelago" in L.A.– a black community bounded by white communities on all sides, its voice unheard and desperate needs dismissed– would fuel this violent eruption (Cohen and Murphy 8). Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy describe L.A. as a "microcosm of America, good and bad, promising and frustrating," (9) and at best, L.A. and the larger Southern California region was as "a great laboratory of experimentation, a forcing ground, a place where ideas, practices, and customs must prove their worth or be discarded" as Carey McWilliams asserts (qtd. in Cohen and Murphy 9).

As a teenager, Curtis initially buys into this L.A. myth but eventually rejects it as his racial consciousness grows. One hot summer day, Curtis watches T.V. footage of police brutality against Birmingham civil rights marchers and at first, feels removed from the racial hostility experienced by African Americans in the South; he does not yet realize that their struggles are relevant to his own experience as an African American in L.A. His stepfather, however, explains to him that the "Southland" alludes to the racism felt by Southern blacks. As in other American cities, L.A.'s African Americans and other minorities were relegated to the status of second-class citizenship and experienced

⁵⁸ Josh Sides states, "Having weathered racial disturbances in New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Paterson and Elizabeth in New Jersey, and Philadelphia in 1964, Americans had become familiar with racial violence in cities" (169).

discrimination in the workplace, lived in segregated neighborhoods, and were subject to Jim Crow laws. For example, during the 60s, black LAPD officers like Robert Thomas, could only work in the Southwest division, patrolling African American neighborhoods. After a newly enlightened Curtis is “benched” for defending himself during a racially motivated attack at a track meet hosted by a predominantly white high school, he refuses to stay in his place, subversively venturing into lily-white suburbs like El Segundo and their whites-only establishments (though no signs advertise the same). Curtis’s lesson about the limited physical and social space afforded African Americans illustrates the ways in which landscape can be “an ideologically-charged and very complex cultural product” as Denis Cosgrove suggests (11).

Robert Thomas and Curtis Martindale’s experiences with racism paint a more accurate picture of L.A.’s racial climate and reveal symptoms of the Watts riot, a history to which Jackie is ignorant. While the immediate cause of the Watts riot might be traced to the Marquette Frye incident,⁵⁹ ultimately, the riot was more accurately was a “storm, inflamed by history”⁶⁰ (Sides 303). Sides also attributes the riot in part to “fragmentation of the black community,” an ideological shift between the Great Migration⁶¹ generation

⁵⁹ According to the rumor, LAPD officers attacked Frye’s mother. The rumor began after onlookers saw her jump on the backs of LAPD officers when they began arresting Frye.

⁶⁰ Due to a battle between two organizations fighting for political control, anti-poverty funds intended to aid L.A.’s poorest communities were tied up for years. Sides also points to rising property taxes that led to tax cuts, cuts which decreased the services provided to working-class and poor Angelenos, particularly those of African American descent. Also, the “widening economic disparities among African Americans and the sharp decline in blue-collar manufacturing jobs disheartened the youth of these communities (171). Additionally, several mini-riots and examples of violence prior to the Watts unrest, including the Griffith Park riot and the LAPD’s “campaign of repression waged against the Nation of Islam,” hinted at the violence to come (173-74).

⁶¹ Historians like Josh Sides consider the migration of African Americans from the South to the North as the “Great Migration” and refer to the influx of African Americans into L.A. during WWII as the “Second Great Migration.” During WWII, thousands of Southern blacks responded to the L.A.’s labor shortage in

and the generation that represented their offspring.⁶² In contrast, the new generation viewed L.A.'s racial climate differently: They saw their opportunities as limited in comparison to the social and economic mobility of their white peers (172). Thus, the history of the rioting youth was a history of "disappointment" with both "the persistence of discrimination but also with their black leaders" (175). Fueled like a catastrophic wildfire by a rumor of LAPD's racist misconduct, an angry crowd began throwing rocks at the arresting officers and "by the next morning, a vast, violent, and uncontrollable riot was in full swing. For six terrifying days, black rioters and white police officers and National Guard troops battled in an area that ranged over forty-six square miles. Arsonists destroyed 261 buildings, mostly stores" (174).

War on the Civilian Front

Yet, Jackie becomes heir to Frank's repressed rage, and thus her quest becomes a search to recover these lost emotions, a twist on a classic noir tale. She inherits the repressed collective rage of her family and of the interracial community to which Frank belonged: the rage that fueled the Watts riot, the rage that interned Japanese Americans could not express, the rage with which Frank fought German soldiers in WWII, and the

the steel, ship, and plane industries (37), and in 1943, the peak of the Great Migration, over 6,000 African Americans arrived in L.A. from Southern cities each month (37).

⁶² Whereas the Great Migration generation believed in peaceful demonstrations and in faith that the laws would change for the better, members of the younger generation were "impatient with peaceful protest and increasingly skeptical about the possibility – and even the desirability of racial integration" (171). The Great Migration generation were content for the most part with the "tempered inclusion" they experienced in Los Angeles society which they saw as considerable improvement over the "restricted marginality" they experienced in the Southern rural communities and Northern cities from which they fled (172).

rage with which he responds to Curtis's murder. A WWII veteran, Frank returns from the war only to fight himself amidst a second war on the civilian front. At first, Jackie recognizes facts and statistics but not the deeper human shortcomings at which these disasters hint. Thus, as Jackie searches for Curtis's murderer, she is also searching for the truth regarding internment, the 442nd regiment, the Watts riot, and how the wounds of two minority communities in Los Angeles parallel one another. More importantly, however, the real search is her search for a lost identity.

Part of Jackie's larger quest to recover these lost emotions involves getting to know her grandfather and those hardships that shaped him. Frank's WWII experience is necessarily a response to the racism he feels; after all, as a soldier of the segregated Japanese American 442nd Regiment, he tries to prove his loyalty to the United States, his capacity for "Americanness"; furthermore, his fight is a fight against Nazi persecution of Jews. After the war, Frank returns from the warfront to the home front only to discover that his battles against racism are far from over, finding himself in a race war on the civilian front. Not only does Frank experience racism, unable to locate a job even after completing several terms at UCLA, but he also finds the larger Crenshaw community to which he belongs also under siege. Institutional racism and racist public policy abound. Curtis and his friends cannot even use the segregated public pool but one day a week, the day before the water is changed. Additionally, because police brutality is common in African American communities during this time, even the law represents the enemy; the novel refers to black Muslims shot down by police officers in front of Mosque 27, and Frank, seething with the kind of anger and soldier instinct to kill he had only experienced

on the European front, “wonders if he had even recognized the enemy” after a racist white officer beats a Curtis, at the time, a defenseless young teen (155).

Frank’s comparison of the Watts riot to a “war turned inward” (55) and to a “storm” that had been brewing for a long time (218) only highlights the civilian battles this noir hero fights and the frustration he shares with his African American neighbors. In the days before the Watts riot, the racial battles that Southern blacks knew all too well were creeping upon the supposed racial haven of L.A.:

The air outside was heavy and Louisiana-thick. All week, the city was confused. People who hadn’t seen the city in thirty years, woke up expecting to hear the sound of tractors and cotton gins; of cows mooing and roosters proudly announcing the day. But instead, they heard sirens and car engines and far-off factory whistles, and when they opened their eyes, they were in L.A....Everyone was laid low by the heat, but struggling against it. And the Southerners knew the only thing that could break the grip of the heat was an old-fashioned, earth-shaking storm. (302)

After years of police brutality, some African Americans, a minority representing a mere two percent of the city’s black population, decided that they had reached their breaking point; the resulting conflagration began in Watts and spread to other L.A. neighborhoods like Crenshaw. Tanks rolling down Crenshaw Boulevard and National Guardsmen poised for combat complemented this picture of urban warfare, an explosive setting that Nathanael West evokes in *The Day of the Locust*. The fire that consumes L.A. in West’s novel, argues Norman Klein, “stands in for helplessness before a monumental natural disaster, a world that has suddenly lost its monitor, and gone out of control” (82).

Thus, Revoyr’s novel is a cautionary tale about the repetition of history: failing to learn from such social breakdowns can spawn violent re-manifestations of social and political trauma in the current terrain. Some Americans recognize the symptoms; for

example, African American soldiers in Arizona, protested the internment, recognizing the potential ramifications of such a precedent for people of all color in America: “because of principal, and because they knew it could happen to them” (Klein 112). Suffering from a depressed economy, poverty, and shrinking public services, Angelenos were fed up by 1965 (Klein 115-16). If shame and loss of heritage were the products of Japanese American internment, then the explosive eruption that the Watts riots represented were the results of a community’s needs and desires ignored. Inheriting the city’s legacy of racial trauma, residents living in L.A. during the spring of 1992 experienced yet another catastrophic human disaster triggered by some of the same issues that incited the 1965 revolt as well as other new complications. Playwright Anna Deavere Smith explores the correlation between these two riots in *Twilight*, suggesting that the 1992 riots proved to be the social cost of failing to deal with the racism of which L.A. was guilty. Relating the abysmal economic and social conditions for L.A.’s working class minorities in the early 90s, Smith quotes California Congresswoman Maxine Walters, explaining that the 92 riots were sparked by the same factors -- institutionalized racism, police brutality, a dearth of public services, and “lack of government responsiveness to the people” (Smith xix).

Southland’s message that history is doomed to repeat itself is similar to the heterochronism or breach in traditional time Erickson imagines for L.A. Revoyr, too, quashes the fiction of narrative continuity, insisting the past can never remain in the past, and the deeper significance of past events must eventually resurface in the present, sometimes in violent form. In this respect, human disasters (the internment of Japanese

Americans, world wars, and the Watts and '92 L.A. riots) represent more than apocalypse and momentary ruptures of violence; more importantly, they function as memories, opportunities to reflect on the past, reopening painful dialogues from the past. They can, in fact, prove to be the catalyst for a better tomorrow. Just as the sequence of memories is of no consequence to the narrator in *Amnesiascope*, sequence has no bearing on the relevance of events in the L.A. Revoyr depicts. In *Southland*, the Northridge earthquake, in some ways a metaphor for the 1992 riots, serves to shake up Jackie's reality: without the reminders of the earthquake's power, evidenced by the seismic damage to the city's landscape - collapsed freeway overpasses, deep cracks in the pavement, and damaged buildings - Jackie is doomed to participate in the myth of narrative continuity.

Claiming Space in America

The social traumas of L.A.'s broken race relations that manifest themselves in the form of fractures and fragmentation serve to jog the collective memory of Angelenos like Jackie about the limited space afforded ethnic minorities in the social imaginary of the Los Angeles landscape. Space is a particularly cogent trope in *Southland*, highlighting the very limited "social" space or power enjoyed by L.A. residents of color. In *Asian/American*, David Palumbo-Liu, claiming that space signifies power, argues that "Asian America is eminently situated in the politics of space" and explores "[h]ow...Asians [have] been located psychically and physically in what is deemed "American space" (217). For example, Japanese Americans were once confined to the

Little Tokyo community just east of downtown L.A., partly because residential segregation was a common practice in many of the city's white neighborhoods. Not only couldn't first-generation Japanese Americans become naturalized citizens and purchase property in Los Angeles,⁶³ but Nisei were also unable to buy in many more desirable neighborhoods areas due to restrictive covenants.⁶⁴

However, as *Southland* illustrates, WWII served as the greatest reminder of the Japanese American's place in society. While the most popular arguments in favor of internment remain the national security concerns⁶⁵ of Japanese Americans living too close to the coast and fear of sabotage, others cite the desire to restore the economic power balance between the dominant white culture and Japanese Americans as another motive for interning Japanese Americans.⁶⁶ Whatever the motivation for internment, the consequences to Japanese Americans were many. First, they felt pressured to liquidate real and personal property quickly, often selling both well below market value; the Sakai family, who do not sell their home before internment, are not the norm. The sight of

⁶³ Many Issei waited patiently for the birth of American-born children, in whose names they could buy property.

⁶⁴ Even though the Supreme Court had ruled racially restrictive covenants illegal in 1948, many L.A. neighborhoods sought to maintain white homogeneity by refusing to sell to people of color.

⁶⁵ The U.S. government never found evidence of Japanese American disloyalty. Special Representative of the State Department Curtis Munson prepared a special investigative report "to get as precise a picture as possible of the degree of loyalty to be found among residents of Japanese descent, both on the West Coast of the United States and in Hawaii" (qtd. in Weglyn 34). Although Curtis Munson found no disloyalty problem among the Japanese Americans and even "certified a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group," Japanese Americans were still later removed from their homes and taken to camps (Weglyn 34).

⁶⁶ Japanese American growers and wholesalers were resented in the agricultural community for the business acumen and success (Weglyn 36-7). Many perceived the economic space that the Japanese American occupied, especially on the West Coast, as a threat to their own livelihood. Statistics indicate that in 1941, over 6,000 farms were operated by Japanese Americans, and between 30 and 35 percent of all commercial truck crops were grown by Japanese American farmers. Accordingly, the U.S. government was justifiably concerned that interment of Japanese farmers could cripple California's agricultural production, so much so that they began offering risk-free government loans to non-Japanese farmers to ensure continued production.

wholesale yard sales in Japanese American neighborhoods is perplexing to Frank, who says, “It looked like Japanese America was simply moving outside” (107). Second, the Sakai family, like other Japanese American families, are forced to metaphorically sell their Japanese identity, feeling the pressure to minimize their ties to Japan⁶⁷ by destroying “anything with a whiff of Japanese about it” (107); in essence, as punishment for their visibility, Japanese Americans like the Sakais are forced to burn their heritage on the funeral pyre.⁶⁸ Finally, if buying a home suggests that one has arrived and achieved the American Dream, then the evacuation orders signal for Frank and his family just the opposite.

Not only did internment destroy the integrity of the space of the home and thus the family unit, internment also destroyed any notion of home America may have symbolized for the Japanese American. The message was clear: Japanese America was homeless. From the comfort of their homes, Japanese Americans, including children, were sent to relocation centers and camps that would remind them for the rest of their lives, the very limited space America allowed them. More importantly, however, “[t]he fact of dislocation is veiled by a whole redefinition of location,” the U.S. government, in its executive order, effectively asserting its powers of “segmentation and appropriation” (220). Such an order undermined any sense of agency Japanese Americans may have felt prior to the order, clearly conveying the message that Japanese Americans were objects at

⁶⁷ A scholar on the Japanese American experience and author of *Breaking the Silence* Yasuko Takegawa explains that the “Issei started burning Japanese things out of fear that possession of anything connected to Japan would place them in a dangerous position. Family pictures, letters Japanese books, guest books, and other sentimental articles the Issei had cherished for many decades turned to ashes” (76-7).

⁶⁸ Takegawa also asserts that “[s]ome Sansei today regret the loss of many valuable Japanese objects and family mementos during this time, which made tracing their family history more difficult” (76-7).

best, to be shaped, reshaped, moved, and redefined at will. Moreover, in Palumbo-Liu's eyes, internment merely represented the continued history of spacial exclusion of Asian Americans in this country (*Asian/American* 221). Miné Okubo, in her illustrated book *Citizen 13660*, depicts this dramatic spatial transformation of Japanese America. She recounts being taken to Tanforan Race Track, a temporary relocation center where evacuees were forced to live in barracks, barely whitewashed 20x9 ft. horse stall (35), and to line up each day like cattle, waiting for their turn in the mess hall (39). The effects of this living situation were devastating to the Japanese American who suffered mental burdens and the stigma of being singled out on account of race anguish among other types of pain (Takezawa 164-65).

Like Okubo's work, *Southland* also elaborates upon the theme of confinement through the imprisonment and murder of Frank's father. After his loyalty is questioned and he is whisked away by FBI agents, Frank's father is beaten to death in prison. Significantly, Frank finds his father's wrists still bound with rope when his body is shipped back to the family for burial; even after death, his father's movements are still restricted, hinting at the long-lasting effects internment would have on the lives of his progeny. Kenji Hirano, the neighborhood eccentric and internee, is one such character who continues to suffer from the effects of internment long after WWII ends. At one time, Kenji could see Crenshaw Boulevard from his front yard, but now houses fill the once-empty lots of Angeles Mesa, obstructing his view of the boulevard. Thus, Kenji's actions – directing the traffic on Crenshaw Boulevard – no longer makes any sense (73). In this respect, this boxed-in feeling that results from the new construction renders his

efforts to serve his community meaningless. His hands and his desire have nowhere to go. In a similar sense, Frank's emotions have no place in Los Angeles, and he symbolically shoves his feelings aside when he hides the shoebox containing the proceeds from the sale of the store, the business he had originally intended to pass on to Curtis: now that Curtis is dead, "he simply put it away. In the back of the closet. Boxed-up and hidden from sight" (300).

The confinement and homelessness felt by Japanese America parallels the confinement and homelessness felt by black Angelenos, a fact that Jackie gradually learns. In the early 40s, black neighborhoods were already crowded while other areas of L.A. were subject to racial restrictions and thus off-limits (Sides 46). And as Japanese Americans were "evacuated" out of Little Tokyo, many of L.A.'s African Americans were ushered into the same restrictive space that had served to segregated Japanese Americans from L.A.'s larger population in the past. As a result, Little Tokyo was re-dubbed "Bronzeville" and transformed into an overcrowded, slum-ridden environment that spoke to the similar lack of agency black Angelenos shared with their Japanese American counterparts. In the 60s, this lack of agency was most sharply felt by the younger generation of African Americans like Curtis. Thus when Thomas forces Curtis and three other African American boys into the space of freezer in the Corner Mesa Store, the implications of his confinement cannot be ignored; the temperature freezes them out of political participation and full citizenship, arresting the intensity of their spirit. If space is "ideologically-charged" to borrow Cosgrove's term again, then black Los Angeles of this time is stifling, its constituents denied physical space in the city and a

public forum in which to air grievances and assert their agency like their Birmingham counterparts. The civil rights demonstrators who took to the streets of Birmingham to voice injustices were met with violent backlash from the Birmingham police, representatives of the government and official policy. Likewise, racist practice and corruption abound in the Los Angeles Police Department; the fact that Curtis's murderer is a cop implies official endorsement or at least systematic oversight.

However, even more disturbing is the fact that Robert Thomas, later revealed to be Curtis's murderer, is African American, suggesting that Thomas is at once enforcer of the government's racism and a victim of racism himself, illustrating the potential harm that restriction of racial, social, and political space can do to an individual. The space of Los Angeles was not welcoming to Thomas's father who was forced to take a menial job despite his training and expertise. Moreover, Thomas goes to great lengths to live in an all-white neighborhood governed by racial covenants. In order to circumvent this covenant, Thomas devises an elaborate ruse in which he and his wife pose as chauffeur and maid respectively and accompany a white couple, their friends, who pretend to be considering the home for purchase. So willing is he to adhere to the rules of the dominant culture that he attempts to occupy the particular space of the privilege, even though his presence is unwelcome. After years of being told that as a black man, he did not belong in certain neighborhoods (either as a resident or patrolling officer), Thomas himself begins to believe the city's racist ideology, becoming racism's staunchest defender. Thus, when he catches Curtis strolling through the white neighborhood of El Segundo, Thomas feels duty-bound to return Curtis to his designated back seat in society.

He cruelly reminds Curtis that a space in America does not exist for him just as such a space does not exist for Thomas.

Reimagining a Space of Fewer and Heartier People

However, the disheartening history of race, space, and lack of social and political power in Los Angeles is not the only history erased from the collective memory of Angelenos like Jackie. Also wiped clean from this collective memory are examples of vibrant interethnic niches like the Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District community that relied on cooperation between Japanese Americans and African Americans. The dominant powers may have restricted the movements of both populations in the city, but these interethnic social bonds undermined racial oppression. As Jackie probes into her grandfather's past, she revisits particular memories of a more cohesive Japanese American community and interracial bonds between different ethnic groups. Before its spaces were filled with tract homes, Angeles Mesa was a rural place characterized by strong society, exemplifying the "structure of feeling" of which Raymond Williams writes.⁶⁹ Angeles Mesa was place of emotions and human connections: "a neighborhood of huge, open spaces; of fewer and heartier people" (35). After the Sakai family moves

⁶⁹ Raymond Williams identifies in English literature and poetry, the desire for "an earlier and happier rural England," a desire which he can find no specific historical evidence to support. According to Williams, this "structure of feeling" is not so much an attitude that can be historically documented but rather a response to England's changing society and adoption of capitalist economic structure. People idealized and longed for a "Golden Age," the kind of society they imagined to exist in earlier times, a rural collectivity that championed human relationships over economic profit and that valued generosity, mutual responsibility, and general humanity. The rural ideal stood for personal connections and community while the city represented greed and inhumanity.

from crowded Little Tokyo to Angeles Mesa, a young Frank comes to cherish his neighborhood, its “space...the greenery, the view of the mountains, the huge expanse of clear blue sky there was a scattering of houses...set wide apart, with strawberry fields and walnut groves and marshy lots between them” (93-4). Angeles Mesa is a place where Frank can hunt ducks and wild pigs with his friends, a place that starkly contrasted the restricted space of the Little Tokyo apartment where he spent the first eight years of his life.⁷⁰

There in Angeles Mesa, Frank forms strong friendships in high school with Japanese Americans, African Americans, and Caucasians, often spending Sundays playing football or otherwise horsing around with them (95). Unlike his parents, who spend their time with other Issei or first-generation Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo, a teenage Frank prefers and identifies with the culturally rich and diverse Angeles Mesa community; moreover, he begins to identify not as just a Japanese American but part of his larger interracial community. For instance, on an excursion with some African American friends, Frank finds himself having to choose between the white and “colored” sections of a segregated Santa Monica beach; not surprisingly, he chooses the “colored” section, embracing not only his own ethnicity but also aligning himself with African Americans, acknowledging their shared lack of social power. In some ways, Frank’s choice contrasts the class of “white shirts” to which Jackie hopes to one day belong.

The days before and after internment become an opportunity for the Angeles Mesa community to express solidarity with their Japanese Americans neighbors. Old

⁷⁰ For many years, Japanese Americans were restricted to certain districts like Little Tokyo much as their Chinese American counterparts were restricted to Chinatowns.

Man Larabie for whom Frank works at the Mesa Corner Market, along with Frank's other friends, gather at the Sakai family home for a farewell, offering knit socks, food, and other necessities to aid the family in their evacuation first to the Santa Anita detention center and then to Manzanar. One particular friend Victor watches over the Sakai home while they are away, protecting it from vandals. Furthermore, like a father figure, Larabie looks after Frank after the war, giving him his old job back, well aware that Frank needs the distraction to keep his mind off of the many losses he endured during the war. Then when Old Man Larabie sells Frank the business store for a sum considerably below market value, in a sense, Frank inherits a family business. In turn, in father-son fashion, Frank later decides to pass on the store to Curtis for the same reason Larabie gave him the store: Frank knows that Curtis, too, needs a distraction given the racially hostile environment of L.A. in the 60s. Even in Curtis's short life, Frank's nurture is evident as Curtis, too, assumes a mentor role to his younger brother Cory and cousin James ("Jimmy") Lanier, passing on a community – family – tradition.

Even after Angeles Mesa transforms into the more urban environs of the Crenshaw District, the strong bonds between people of differing races allows the rural ideal to persist. Lois, Jackie's aunt and Frank's daughter, recalls fond memories of the first part of her childhood in Crenshaw; to this day, Lois cherishes the interracial friendships she developed there, the closeness of her father to his daughters, her grandparents' colorful stories of running a business in Little Tokyo, and the "easy way her father laughed when they sat on the stoop of [his childhood friend] Victor's house" (37). These examples and Frank's "down to earth" nature reflect the values of a rural

society (67). Furthermore, the racial diversity of the Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw also contributes to strong community ties, even cross-cultural bonds between Japanese Americans and African Americans, who are no strangers to racism; Frank's experiences illustrate how members of the community develop a mutual empathy for each other's experiences with racism though these experiences may be different as Southland points out. Jackie, however, is unaware that such a community could exist. Just as she is surprised at the large number of African American mourners at her grandfather's funeral, Jackie is surprised to see the "equal numbers" of Japanese American and black patrons at the Family Bowl (157).

In her search for the truth, Jackie not only begins to re-member the collective past, but she also uncovers various secrets of her family history, the L.A. to which Frank once belonged, and the power of cross-cultural identification. She discovers Frank and Alma's romance; the identity of Curtis, the product of their union; a wealth of the city's history previously unknown to her; and more importantly, compelling examples of urban community spirit, relationships based on human connection and shared oppression rather than on social norms. Jackie discovers how an interethnic community could foster a pan-ethnic "oppositional consciousness," banding together to combat similar, though not necessarily identical, oppression. The Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District Japanese-black community was the ideal setting to "[nurture]...oppositional consciousness" among some Asian Americans in the 1950s, according to Diane C. Fujino. Furthermore, such connections previewed the sort of impact the Black Power movement would have on Japanese Americans and other ethnic Americans, a social and racial awakening that led to

coalitions between Asian ethnicities that shed the “largely accommodationist orientations” of existing organizations within the various Asian American communities (Nakanishi 62-3).

Comparable, though never entirely similar, private experiences with racism bring Frank and Alma together, both characters emotionally scarred. Frank meets Alma Sams, who is African American, shortly after he returns from the war, his wounds symbolic of his diminished spirit and his compromised foothold in society: a partly missing finger and a few inches of his foot, the effect of gangrene. Alma and her family, former sharecroppers in Texas, have had their share of disappointments and tragedy; Alma’s older brother had been in the army and stationed in Mississippi when he suffered a complete mental breakdown, opening fire on his fellow soldiers with a rifle, killing five and wounding many others before killing himself. Frank and Alma find comfort in each other. Frank is drawn to her youth, albeit “serious” and “burdened” youth, which to some degree, undid some of the horrors he experienced on the European front as a soldier, the “carnage, blood, and sorrow” (333-34). Alma, on the other hand, is particularly drawn to his injured finger, his emotional pain; she likes the fact that Frank, unlike the boys she previously dated, is a man, mature with the hardships of life (279-80). Both individuals also understand the scars that racism and grief leave behind: “It would be wrong to think their need for each other had nothing to do with race” (284). While the courtship renews in each individual a sense of self and purpose, on a deeper level, their interracial relationship is a metaphor for potential interethnic coalitions between communities that can emerge as a result of shared struggle.

Because a public language through which they can relate their shared experiences of injustice does not yet exist for them, they turn to one another for emotional support. Significantly, several chapters are narrated with just pronouns and no actual names, symbolically speaking to the absence of a language to address African American and Asian American relations, the very issue Traise Yamamoto examines in her analysis of *The Necessary Hunger*, Revoyr's first novel. Yamamoto asserts that in the absence of a "public language about African Americans and Asian Americans," Nancy, the Japanese American protagonist, must substitute a private discourse to comprehend how racist terrain makes the journey for her African American friends exceedingly more treacherous than her own journey; a newly conscious "Nancy, who has identified with and emulated the social style of her African American friends, finally shifts her angle of vision and in doing so wonders what her identification with those friends has cost them" (19-20). While the motivation for and benefits of cross-cultural identification might be evident enough, Yamamoto also warns that such ideological caregiving between differently oppressed racial and ethnic groups can be complicated and costly business, and the cost of this caregiving is precisely the lesson Nancy learns: "The hallmark of scenes of ideological caregiving is a mawkish, though not always obvious, sentimentality that insists upon reciprocity while denying the social realities of racial inequality"; the costs of such a relationship is precisely the lesson Nancy learns (18-9). Likewise, in *Southland*, this interracial language remains private; Frank and Alma meet in secret, and neither their friends nor family know about their romance. When Frank hesitates after Alma asks him if he would marry her, he later admits that he hesitated out of fear despite

his love for Alma. The couple would, after all, be breaking existing social norms that would in turn, make their journeys, especially Frank's as he realizes in the two seconds that he pauses before answering Alma with a "yes," that much more treacherous. Again, here we have an instance of the costs of the "ideological caregiving," this time the cost borne by Alma, who relocates to Northern California once she becomes pregnant by Frank.

At the same time, their secret relationship, also metaphorically suggests the costs of failing to remember the potential power of such cross-cultural bonds: part of Jackie's quest, then, is to rediscover this power. She learns about local history, how many of Crenshaw's longtime Japanese American residents opted to move to safer, more racially homogeneous neighborhoods in L.A.'s South Bay following the Watts riot. In contrast to Angeles Mesa/the Crenshaw District, the Gardena suburb to which the Sakais later move reflects the colder attitudes of the city – social status and wealth over personal connections – as Lois's memories of the place suggest. As teens, Rose, Lois's sister who later becomes Jackie's mother, loves loved playing tennis in the Gardena Japanese Tennis League while for Lois, tennis epitomizes all that was wrong with Gardena:

[Lois] didn't care much for tennis. She hated the bright white skirts, the pressed blouses, the scrubbed-clean quality of all the girls who played. And she hated leaving Crenshaw to come down to Gardena, where everyone lived in big, bland houses; where all the boys her age were already talking about college and becoming doctors, and all the girls spoke of make-up tips and Barbie dolls. (34).

To the dismay of her mother, Lois does not make friends from the right kind of families but rather with those of working class backgrounds (35). This world is the "gilded, tree-lined world" in which an adult Rose chooses to raise Jackie, and for this reason, Frank

and Lois often bring Jackie to the Crenshaw District to expose her to something different, the value of such human bonds (34). Not surprisingly, just as Rose gravitated towards hobnobbing on the tennis court in “bright white” tennis skirts, Jackie, too, gravitates toward the “starched white” world of privilege in adulthood. Her search for the truth takes her further away from a life of complacency and brings her closer to Frank and Lois’s world.

Jackie’s search takes her far away from “the gilded, tree-lined world” of her childhood but closer to the particular secrets and hidden histories of her family’s collective past, a journey that even allows her to experience intimate human relationships and the power of cross-cultural bonds first hand. In her quest to track down Curtis’s murderer, Jackie enlists the help of James Lanier, Curtis’s younger cousin and now a respected community leader. As the after-school program coordinator for the Marcus Garvey Community Center, Lanier continues the tradition of mentorship begun by Larabie, Frank, and Curtis years ago: “Lanier, like Sakai, was an insider,” an insider in the community who exhibited a “oneness with the neighborhood” (61). Jackie is “invigorated” at Marcus Garvey, which is “swarming with life” in stark contrast to the subdued personality of downtown L.A (57). In awakening Jackie, Lanier and his work at Marcus Garvey *reawakens* a long-dormant sense of community in her family’s collective past; eventually, she begins to recognize a real sense of community in places like her grandfather’s neighborhood market; Leimert Park,⁷¹ and the “barbeque church;” a local institution frequented by Lanier and once frequented by Frank, a real sense of community

⁷¹ Leimert Park is a predominately African American outdoor shopping and gathering district in Los Angeles.

in Angeles Mesa and Crenshaw (78). Thus, Jackie realizes that though Crenshaw is no longer rural in anyone's estimation, the rural ideal of relationships and mutuality continue to persist within the spirit of many of its community members and leaders.

The Ugly Effects of Internment: Identity Loss, Amnesia, and Racial Self-Loathing

Beyond the persistence of rural ideals in L.A.'s ethnic communities, however, Jackie's inquiries into and discoveries with respect to her family's past amount to an act of grievance, Japanese America's refusal to forget a past characterized by racism, a demand for long-deserved justice and a means of healing inter-generational social wounds for the Japanese American. Internment did violence to the identity of Japanese Americans, a violence whose effects would be felt for generations to come like the aftershocks of the Northridge earthquake Jackie experiences. The traumatic uprooting of Japanese Americans from their homes during WWII represented a bitter pill that many Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) swallowed, internalizing the pain of being singled out for one's ethnicity. Pearl Harbor exposed Japanese Americans to public scrutiny and retribution, and their ethnicity, a visible trait, became the very definition of disloyalty. The humiliation of being singled out for their Japanese heritage, internment, and the loyalty questionnaire⁷² contributed to the lasting wounds suffered by the Japanese American community. The loss of homes, freedom, and movement and the lack of

⁷² The two most famous questions on the loyalty questionnaire were questions 27 and 28, which respectively asked whether the questioned was willing to serve in the U.S. armed forces and whether he or she would "swear unqualified allegiance" to America, implying a previous allegiance to Japan (qtd. in Takegawa 98).

acceptance in society are obvious wounds that Japanese Americans like Frank Sakai continue to experience after the war: loss of heritage, constitutional rights, cultural pride, and above all, a sense of self.

Several events in the novel serve as metaphors for this loss. Fighting for the 442nd Regiment during WWII, Frank loses close friends like Kenny Miura, another soldier, whose body cannot be located after an explosion: “The nothingness where once there was someone” (118). On a deeper level, his words refer to the emotional damage this loss inflicts on him as an individual as well as internment’s damage to the Japanese America’s collective identity. Additionally, Frank’s sister Kumiko dies while giving birth to a child in the camps, “the baby stuck and smothered between her small, unyielding hips” (114). Kenji also endures a similar experience when his wife Yuki and his child die during childbirth due to the reckless behavior of a camp doctor who, intoxicated, performs a C-section with just local anesthesia and crushes the baby’s head with a pair of forceps as he yanked the child like a “stubborn tooth” from her womb (168). Although birth usually implies a new beginning and progress, the loss of both Kenji and Kumiko’s babies instead imply an arrested development, the figurative stunting of a Japanese American identity that Kenji, Frank, and future generations of the Sakai family continue to experience. Kenji later regrets not having strangled the doctor but at that moment, lacking social power, he does nothing when the doctor calls him a “yellow belly” and carelessly attends to his wife. As a result, because his hands can do nothing to protect Yuki, they begin to tremble uncontrollably in rage. For this reason, as a soldier, Kenji later attempts to calm his trembling hands by fighting and killing German soldiers

whose faces remind him of the doctor. Even some 50 years later, the only way Kenji can calm his hands is by gardening, smoking, bowling at the local bowling alley, and directing traffic. In contrast, rather than outwardly deal with his emotions as does Kenji, Frank maintains a stoic silence that is apparent in the missing pages of Jackie's family's history, a silence that effectively resulting in a familial, cultural, and historical amnesia for Jackie.

Such amnesia subjects Jackie to a particular blindness. Notably, the fact that the 1992 L.A. riots barely register in Jackie's memory though her story takes place in 1994 suggests the serious extent to which she is blind; again, because she is underwhelmed, she is unable to make connections between segregation, internment, the Watts riot, and the most recent L.A. riot. The experiences of characters like Frank, Kenji, Curtis, and Victor (whose wife is raped in an effort to intimidate him), internment, and the Watts riot, imply that failing to recognize the interconnectedness of racial experience dooms L.A. to a cycle of racial wounding and arrested development. Anna Deveare conveys a similar message about the interconnectedness of racial experience in *Twilight*, noting the increasingly crucial recognition that in L.A., "relationships among peoples of color and within racial groups are getting more and more complicated" (xxi). At the beginning of her quest to solve the family mystery, the prospects of Jackie's breaking the intergenerational cycle of injury appear dim, given her uneasiness with racial visibility, either that of others or her own. Unlike a teenage Frank who chose to "race" himself when he and black friends learned that the beach was segregated, and Lois, who embraced the diversity of the Crenshaw District of her childhood, Jackie feels entirely out

of place at Marcus Garvey, uncomfortably aware that” [h]ers was the only face that wasn’t black or Latino. Out of place here. A stranger. A foreigner” (56). Whereas Frank chose to “race” himself, aligning himself with African American friends, Jackie, on the other hand, resists a similar alliance; at times, she resists identifying herself as a person of color. For example, when Lanier likens his family to Jackie’s own, telling her that he, like Jackie, also came from a long line of domestics, Jackie is uncomfortable with this connection, “surprised and a bit uncomfortable that someone from her family could be lumped together with someone from Lanier’s family” (88). Nor can Jackie imagine her family being a part of the multi-racial, working class and even poor (in her eyes, “shabbier”) Crenshaw community in the same way Lanier’s family has been. No, Jackie can only picture, not just for herself, but also for the previous generations of her family, the tree-lined neighborhood where she grew up as home, her family’s “stay [in Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw]...only an accident, a fluke. They’d been interlopers, visitors, and now they were gone” (88). This tree-lined suburban identity also speaks to the bland, undercover existence Jackie hopes for herself, and blankets her memory in amnesia like Erickson’s protagonist.

Yet, if Jackie cannot relate to other people of color, she experiences the most discomfort amongst Japanese American faces, hinting at the intergenerational racial amnesia and deep-seated self-loathing from which she suffers. In *Little Tokyo* one day, for example, Jackie feels out of place, worrying that she is “more conspicuous on this street” (187). Because the protagonist forgets that she is Japanese American (clearly, she knows of her Japanese heritage but does not fully identify with it), she fails to see her

resemblance to the faces she sees on the street. For this reason, the Japanese faces are unsettling and uncanny to her, the whole experience of Little Tokyo disorienting from a Freudian perspective.

Jackie's failure to identify with other Japanese Americans speaks to a certain racial self-loathing, a common theme in Asian American literature. Asian American literary critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes about the Asian American subject's self-loathing as a response to the humiliation and the pain of racism, noting that the Asian American subject "[gets] caught in a cruel bind: to become acceptable to a racist society [she] must first reject an integral part of [herself]" (77). *Southland* employs the literary device of the "double," pairing the protagonist with Rebecca Nakanishi, a bisexual Japanese American character, to illustrate yet another way in which Jackie suffers from self-loathing and racial blindness and rejects a Japanese American identity. Jackie has mixed feelings toward Rebecca, a law school classmate and friend: Though she is drawn to Rebecca's self-assured nature and easy-going personality, Jackie is repulsed to some degree by her friend's visibly Asian characteristics. Even though Rebecca is half-Japanese with green eyes and wavy brown hair, "she looked Asian enough to turn Jackie off; to make Jackie think of her as a mirror she didn't want to look into" (105). Freud elaborates upon this theme of the "double," persons who resemble one another because they

[Transfer] mental processes from the one person to the other –what we should call telepathy –so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own – in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of

fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations. (162)

Unknowingly, Jackie suggests that Rebecca is a reflection of the protagonist's Japanese American self, a mirrored image that Jackie cannot stomach; Rebecca and the Japanese faces that make Jackie uncomfortable in Little Tokyo are effectively Jackie's doubles. *Das Heimliche*, the German word for uncanny, can refer to "belonging to the house" but also "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know about it, withheld from others" (Sanders, qtd. in Freud 155). In this sense, while the "knowledge, feeling and experience" of these other Japanese Americans may be transferred onto Jackie, because these things have also been "concealed," the sight of them is also uncanny, making her "uneasy," one definition of *Das Unheimliche* (Sanders, qtd. in Freud 155).

What Jackie sees is her own race, a reflection that she has denied and that to some extent Japanese America, through its silence, has denied. The uncanny for Jackie then, manifests in the form of racial self-loathing. If her environment has been one of assimilation, then do mirrored images of her Japanese American self disrupt what the environment she knows only to introduce the uncanny? A popular trope in Asian American fiction, the double figuratively represents the racial self-loathing of Jackie, as the Asian American subject:

[A] highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent. The racial shadow draws out mixed feelings of revulsion and sympathy from the protagonist, usually compelling a painful reassessment of the behavioral code, which has thus far appeared to augur full acceptance into American society. (Wong 92)

However, because the Asian American subject cannot "[render] alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable," a racial shadow continues to haunt the subject (Wong 77-78).

Wong illustrates her argument through an analysis of the torture scene in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. In the novel, the protagonist Maxine bullies a girl, whom Maxine finds too "Chinese," submissive and thus unlikable. However, the audience is unable to clearly distinguish Maxine from the victim she torments for the characters closely resemble one another in many key ways: the tormented individual's inability to assimilate infuriates Maxine, who "[seeks] confirmation that her own meager, fragile achievements in assimilation would guarantee a hopeful future. A recent and insecure convert to Americanization, she cannot tolerate counterexamples" (90). Both the protagonist and her victim suffer from painful shyness, unpopularity on the playground (both are often picked last for playground sports). Moreover, the protagonist often follows the girl's sister around, and other children assumed they were even friends. Accordingly, Wong argues that the tormented represents the tormentor's double, the tormentor having disassociated her Asianness from herself in a peculiar case of racial self-loathing, the double "[acting] Chinese in a society where acceptability is synonymous with assimilation to white standards" (86). However, as Wong points out, assimilation "only exposes the impossibility of the agenda set for Asian Americans: that they are expected at once to lose their offensive 'Asianness' and to remain permanently foreign" (91). Assimilation demands that the assimilating Asian American subject eradicate her Asian characteristics but never allows for full participation in mainstream society. If assimilation is understood as a type of racism, assimilation supports Anne Anlin Cheng's argument that racism is rarely a "clear rejection" of the racialized subject, for racist institutions prefer to "maintain that other within existing structures,"

demonstrating that “the dominant culture’s relationship to the racial other is a paradoxical one of repulsion and sympathy, fear and desire, repudiation and identification” (12).

Southland makes a similar commentary about the sticky nature of assimilation. Like the attitude of assimilated character in Kingston’s novel, Jackie’s identification with the “white shirt” identity and discomfort around other Asian Americans attest to her assimilationist desires yet paradoxically at the same time, her inability to fully assimilate. Despite the attraction to Rebecca’s magnetic personality, Jackie is also slightly repulsed by her friend, who unapologetically rejects assimilation altogether, her mixed heritage and bisexuality serving as metaphors of this rejection. On the other hand, just as Jackie plays down her Japanese heritage, she also hides her sexuality, having yet to come out to her own parents, much less to new friends like Lanier. For these reasons, looking at Rebecca’s face only serves to painfully remind Jackie of that which she cannot eradicate in herself, her own permanent foreignness, and by rejecting her double then, Jackie effectively rejects herself. Rebecca is the “counterexample” to Jackie’s assimilationist attitude though Jackie’s condition of cultural amnesia prevents her from realizing this connection at first.

Unlike the protagonist in *Woman Warrior*, Jackie does not resort to violent measures to express her racial self-loathing and frustration with assimilation’s impossible demands; instead, Jackie’s friendship with her double suggests hope and potential for Jackie. Robert Thomas, on the other hand, represents Maxine’s more sinister, murderous cousin, who subscribes to the white norm, yet as a black man in the 60s he is barred from many of the rights and privileges such a norm implies. Disenfranchised, Thomas

becomes the staunchest defender of assimilation's racist agenda, punishing young African Americans for their visibility in public and especially those who refuse to assimilate and stay in their designated backseat in society. Thomas sees himself in Curtis, yet because Thomas suffers from an extreme case of racial self-loathing, he projects his self-hatred onto Curtis rather than empathize with him. Thomas harasses Curtis and even beats Curtis up after unfairly accusing him of stealing a guitar; Thomas's murder of Curtis, however, is the most disturbing example of racial self-hatred. Like Kingston's protagonist, who "temporarily becomes a deputy" of the highly-charged racist institution of assimilation and exemplifies American society's potential for "racist violence," according to Wong (90), Thomas, too, assumes the role of racism's enforcer. When Jackie solves Curtis's murder, not only does she ensure that justice is finally served but more importantly, she learns a valuable lesson about the damage the institution of assimilation can inflict upon the individual. Failing to acknowledge the injustice of racism (internment, segregation, the conditions that fueled the Watts riot, the 1992 L.A. riot) only encourages the melancholic subject to continue feeding on the grief and racial wounds to violently fester. Though Thomas is an extreme case, he represents the ugly potential of racial-doubling, illustrating how racism can spawn monsters that resemble their very victims.

A Search for the Self

For these reasons, Jackie's quest to solve Curtis's murder becomes much more than just a pursuit of justice; more importantly, her quest, unbeknownst to her, becomes a search for herself, to piece together her family history, to undo the denial of a Japanese American heritage, to finally realize that assimilation insists that ethnic Americans like herself blend in but at the same time foils their attempts to assimilate, and to recognize how such a racist institution wounds its victims in such insidious ways. Moreover, Jackie cannot reintegrate her identity without rediscovering the past, the cultural and social landscape that so critically figured into her grandfather's life and more importantly, understanding the current relevance of L.A.'s social landscape. Though Jackie does not realize it at first, Rebecca and Lanier are vehicles for this forgotten landscape, carrying on an earlier tradition of human connections that once permeated the space of Angeles Mesa/Crenshaw District, exemplified by Frank and Larabie. In the same spirit and in a vocation comparable to Lanier's role at Marcus Garvey, Rebecca works as a Legal Aid legal advocate, serving the needs of the working poor. Once Jackie is able to find herself, recognize herself in her mirror image Rebecca, Jackie is also able to see what Rebecca sees, including examples of oppression: for example, the Thai garment workers who were found imprisoned in an El Monte, California compound secured by guards, barbed wire, and iron bars, working off the cost of their passage as indentured servants.⁷³ She

⁷³ Department of Labor and INS agents raided the compound on August 2, 1995 and freed 72 Thai women whose slave labor had supplied big-name retailers like Macy's and J.C. Penney with clothing. The organized ring responsible for their illegal passage and worse yet, their illegal bondage kept women as long as seven years (Starr 187-9).

must recognize the shared nature of these experiences, to acknowledge “the historical, cultural, and crossracial consequences of racial wounding and to situate these effects as crucial, formative elements of individual, national, and cultural identities” (Cheng 19). Until she makes this connection, she cannot recover the significance of her family’s lost history nor can recognize her subjectivity as an Asian American and as an ethnic American in L.A. and thereby reintegrate her identity. Frank sought in the past and with which Jackie must reintegrate herself.

As Jackie reconnects with Frank by learning about his experiences, even if only post-mortem, she also gradually recognizes her reflection in the mirror, her own identity in the faces of other Japanese Americans, and these faces no longer unsettle her but rather appear welcoming. Furthermore, Jackie re-members the physical landscape of Frank’s L.A., her family history, the cross-cultural bonds which Frank cherished, and a collective L.A. history, restoring meaning to her life. Jackie’s family history is tied to Frank’s old neighborhood, yet “she had never bothered to visit. Never driven through its streets, taken in the beauty of its trees and house. Let it sit there unexplored just down the road from her” (86-7). For this reason, she feels like a “tourist in her grandfather’s life” at first, the streets of the Crenshaw District unfamiliar enough to make her lock her car doors (85); she is not, as Freud would say, “orientated in [her] environment” and is therefore susceptible to uncanny feelings (154). Now, however, she finds these streets familiar, comforting, and uncanny for the very opposite reason: “And as she looks, certain features of the landscape became clear to her, the uncanny way a stranger’s features may suddenly appear more familiar. Jackie notices the black tiles, the shuttered

windows, the perfectly manicured bushes and bonsai-style trees” (85). Implying a relationship between the landscape and the relationships that characterize this landscape, Jackie compares the features of the houses to the features of real people. Her disconnection gradually gives way to familiarity as she becomes “reacquainted” with Frank’s home, and despite the past few years during which she lost touch with him, Jackie finds herself becoming closer to her grandfather through these visits to his old neighborhood. As she stares out the window, Jackie finally senses “a twinge of loss,” a feeling that suggests a much needed emotional and cultural re-awakening in her. She is finally home.

Accordingly, in contrast to *Holy Land* where L.A. can offer the shield of the blasé and the apocalyptic L.A. of *Tortilla Curtain* which functions as a unwelcome stimulant, reminding residents of that which they do not wish to remember, the L.A. of *Southland* is a welcomed catalyst to remember the past. The recent Northridge earthquake serves as the catalyst for Jackie’s reawakening and remembering, violently opening up a dialogue between L.A.’s past and present experiences and more importantly, showing Jackie her place in this dialogue. As a result, Jackie is able to tap into a narrative, not of the starched, white shirts she initially hopes for herself but into a narrative that she could never have imagined without the disruptive power of the quake. The earthquake also reveals to Jackie that L.A.’s urbanscape, despite the violence that is often enacted upon it, is ultimately a locale of possibility, not of hopelessness and failure. After the Northridge earthquake, Jackie has an epiphany, finally realizing this possibility and hope: “There for the first time in all her years in L.A., she saw stars spread out all over the sky” (141).

Metaphorically, her identity as a Japanese American, her identity and role as a member of a larger interethnic community (characterized both by shared and different experiences), her family history, and the power of cross-cultural efforts were elements of her life that for so many years were out-of-focus.

As a member of a larger humanity, Jackie, in many ways, finally begins to participate in the shaping of her social landscape, “the external world mediated through subjective human experience in a way that neither region nor area immediately suggest” (Cosgrove 13). The earthquake disrupts the pattern of emotional disconnection that characterizes Jackie’s life. She takes greater notice of human connection; for instance, while at the nightclub with Rebecca, Jackie notices people hugging and carrying on and “[wonders] if this was still the euphoria she’d seen in the mot since the earthquake, the complicated relief of being alive” (102). Additionally, the earthquake provides Jackie with an opportunity finally to emote, not just for her own loss, but for the losses endured by her family and the larger Japanese American community. For instance, after her interview with Kenji Hirano, Jackie finds herself standing in front of the now abandoned Mesa Corner Store where “whole chunks of concrete [stuck] out of the earth” (248). Significantly, at the same time, she finally feels “the sinking sensation of loss –not just for Frank, but for this neighborhood, and for the boys who’d lived and perished in the store” (249). She can finally empathize with the struggles of others like the Thai indentured servants. She also recognizes the poverty of the South Asian immigrants implied by their threadbare clothing, who remind her of her great-grandparents and the struggles they must have endured as sojourners in a new world. While her experience

may be different from these immigrants, she recognizes her connection to them as members of a larger humanity. Jackie's increasing awareness of current injustices experienced by various peoples of color in L.A. and the collective nature of some of these wounds, in turn, helps awaken in Jackie her family's forgotten past.

An anger awakens in Jackie, on behalf of not just her grandfather but also on behalf of her great-grandparents, the Japanese American community, and other disenfranchised communities in L.A. Resentful of her mother's silence, Jackie wonders how much family history her mother kept from her, a common reaction among offspring of internees (Takezawa 155). When Jackie's anesthesia finally wears off, she is able to reawaken what many Japanese Americans had not allowed themselves previously, political determination, transforming herself from Cheng's definition of a subject of grief to a subject of grievance, a politically determined subject. This reawakening and uncovering of the past enables her to become a subject of grievance and to finally acknowledge and release Frank's repressed emotions – those that he buried back at Manzanar, those that were frozen with the murder of Curtis: “Something loosen[s] in her, something ancient and glacial started to creak and break free” (337). Finally willing to take a risk on herself – in other words, risk acknowledging a narrative previously submerged in the collective Japanese American conscious– Jackie is also able to admit that she is attracted to Rebecca and in effect, to embrace her Japanese American heritage. Her epiphany only suggests that the various narratives that affect her - her personal narrative, her family narrative, Japanese America's narrative, ethnic L.A.'s narrative, and the larger narrative of L.A. are not merely linear and fold upon each other, visiting and

revisiting the past, not in nostalgic longing, but rather to imbue significance on the future. Armed with knowledge of past injustices but also a better appreciation of community, Jackie makes future plans to volunteer at the Marcus Garvey to further cement her friendship with Lanier “and to honor her grandfather...to get out of herself and give to somebody” (337).

Conclusion

Both *Southland* and *Amnesiascope* disrupt a linear narrative that their protagonists initially accept as incontrovertible truth. Jackie ultimately finds the “starched, white shirt” narrative she once imagined for herself grossly deficient, for such a narrative does not allow her to be actor in her own life; rather, the narrative is a story that has already been told, the predetermined narrative of assimilation to which she is a mere puppet. For this reason, Jackie’s experience is marked by emotional numbness that she knows is abnormal and symptomatic of a greater underlying issue. The narrator of Erickson’s novel experiences a similar numbness and inability to emote, and also like Jackie, he wonders what is missing from his life. At first, he relentlessly propels himself forward, living an existence of over-stimulation, crossing from one time zone to the next in the city and from one sexual partner to another. Because his condition of “amnesiascope” allows him to see nothing from his past and gives him no insight into the future, however, the narrator feels incomplete and emotionally empty; instead, his “scope” or vision is restricted to the present, and as a result, his memories continue to haunt his conscious and

elude him like a cloud of smoke that can be seen but not grasped. Accordingly, subscribing to this fiction of linear progression is problematic for it erroneously implies progress.

This notion of progress assumes that the past should be understood as a body of historical documents rather than as a meaningful lens in today's context, and this assumption is precisely what these two novels argue is a fiction. Contesting the notion of narrative linearity, Revoyr and Erickson's novels suggest the existence of alternate, multiple realities, all of which are relevant to the characters. *Southland* suggests alternatives to Jackie's assimilation narrative as well as the significance of multiple narratives in her life: current and past, Japanese American and mainstream, and Asian American and interethnic. *Amnesiascope*, on the other hand, radically breaches time not to disorient the narrator but rather to better orient him to the future; moreover, he, like Jackie, learns that the past, even a painful past, holds answers to his future and thus cannot be ignored without serious consequences. Moreover, both novels employ the "uncanny" to disrupt linear narratives by questioning the familiar and unfamiliar in the characters' lives and to discourage both protagonists from relying on outside forces to define their respective memories. Memory should be personal, not socially constructed.

If both novels disrupt the notion of a linear narrative that implies progress, then, to revisit the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, what kind of city does *Amnesiascope* and *Southland* imagine an ideal Los Angeles to be? Both works contain apocalyptic structures, juxtaposing calamity with optimism, implying a rebirth from the end of the world: the end is not the end but rather a new beginning. Yet, though their

protagonists forget, experiencing amnesia (cultural amnesia in Jackie's case) and arrested development, they eventually remember their pasts that allow them to finally become whole again. Jackie, for instance, lacks moral substance when we first meet her, concerned not with doing the right thing as much as she is concerned with performing due diligence and fulfilling her legal obligations. As an extension of Frank, she has repressed painful experiences as does the narrator of Erickson's novel, yet these experiences are very much a part of their identities and without them, they are incomplete. And though revisiting the past reopens some of these wounds, they also restore the ability to emote for both characters, an ability that in turn, restores other important elements to each character's life: creativity for *Amnesiascope's* narrator and a Japanese American identity and stronger sense of community for Jackie. Thus, both characters emerge from catastrophe a better individual. The image of Erickson's protagonist emerging from the bathysphere after the firestorm like a phoenix's rebirth most vividly illustrates the kind of renewal both characters experience.

Chapter Three

Los Angeles as the New World (B)order: *The Tropic of Orange* and *People of Paper*⁷⁴

Introduction

Like the works examined in the previous two chapters - *Holy Land*, *Tortilla Curtain*, *Amnesiascope*, and *Southland* - Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Salvador Plascencia's *People of Paper* (2005) are also set in Los Angeles. Drawing upon several literary traditions, both Yamashita and Plascencia's works border on the fantastic, employing magical realism⁷⁵ to explore their respective versions of a fragmented Los Angeles. No other city is as celebrated for its fragmented layout, its concentrations of neighborhoods spread out in centrifugal fashion, each only loosely connected to one another through a complex arterial network of freeways. Commenting on how the postmodern geography of L.A. eludes easy definition and is "peculiarly resistant to conventional description," geographer Edward Soja compares L.A. to the

⁷⁴ I wrote an early draft of this chapter in 2006 after attending the Western Literature Association's Annual Conference in 2005 where Yamashita and Plascencia both spoke. Kevin Cooney's essay "Metafictional Geographies: Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Salvador Plascencia's *People of Paper*" came to my attention after I completed this chapter. Cooney pairs Yamashita and Plascencia's novels as I do throughout my dissertation, employs some of the same methods I do, and arrives at some of the same conclusions.

⁷⁵ Sadowski-Smith notes how "magical realism became a pan-Latin American aesthetic label in the 1920s and 1940s, and particularly in the 1960s through the fictional and critical work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez" (10).

Aleph, that fictional, single point in space that contains all other points⁷⁶ (*Postmodern Geographies* 222). Such fragmentation does more than affirm a flexible definition of L.A. as a city, however; depicting L.A. as disjointed, both Yamashita and Plascencia also negate the existence of an underlying coherence for L.A.'s city-self, an urban portrait that combats the notion of coherence. In doing so, these novels push multiplicity, beckoning readers to interrogate the notion of a grand narrative that conveys a single perspective, postmodernism's "reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality" according to Linda Hutcheon. For this reason, seven different characters share the narrative spotlight in *Tropic*, and authorial omniscience or dominance is prominently featured in *People*, a text which borrows heavily from the genre of metafiction as does *Tropic* though to a lesser degree). In these respects, *Tropic* and *People* contest the prior existence of a coherent, unified world and multiplicity and fragmentation are a constructive, welcomed condition, a locus for the generation of new meanings, not the graveyard of defunct knowledge.

While *Tropic* and *People* benefit from a postmodern "rereading and critique of modern values and projects" to use one of Simon Malpas's definitions of postmodernism (44), these novels also acknowledge the limits of a postmodern reading that fail to take into account other identifications and differences such as race, ethnicity, diaspora, colonialism, and gender and affirm what Phillip Brian Harper identifies as an

⁷⁶ In Jose Luis Borges's novel by the same name, the Aleph is described as that single point in space that contains all other points. Edward Soja defines the Aleph as "[t]he space where all points are capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear, but also a secret and conjectured object filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood an unimaginable universe" (56).

oversight in the postmodern condition. The decenteredness experienced by “socially marginalized groups,” argues Harper, “is itself a largely unacknowledged factor in the ‘general’ postmodern condition” (4) and can be traced to earlier American novels that address the “socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised status of the populations” (3). Although the critical lens of postmodernism is useful in understanding both Yamashita and Plascencia’s novels, both works seem to interrogate the limits and sidestep the pitfalls of a strict postmodern reading. Notably, fragmentation is a theme in *Tropic* and *People*, yet these works avoid the pitfalls of a strict postmodern reading and connect decenteredness to specific forms of social and political marginalization, affirming Harper’s argument: *Tropic* refuses to reduce the existence of various populations of the city to multiculturalism, a view that has been criticized for its failure to account for the specific ways in which such groups are *differently* marginalized, and both novels warn about colonized populations mimicking and promoting colonial oppressions in puppet fashion.

One way in which *Tropic* and *People* simultaneously affirm and question the usefulness of a postmodern lens is through the transnational spaces they imagine. Both novels further complicate the fragmented and centrifugal layout of L.A. by expanding and otherwise erasing the city’s existing boundaries to include other nations, moving beyond a national understanding of space toward a more transnational imaginary. Questioning the fixity of borders, these novels echo Mary Pat Brady’s assertion that the “border is a system, not merely a site, a place, an image, or a fantasy” (52). Expanding L.A. to include Mexico and even the Asian continent, *Tropic* imagines a Pacific Rim

transnation, one that distinguishes natural, geographic boundaries between nations from economic, political, and social ones. While a border checkpoint might imply a political boundary between nations and an ocean or river might geographically divide nations, such boundaries cannot necessarily deny the economic reach of one nation into another.

In erasing and redrawing national boundaries, these two novels reveal the fiction of borders that imply political, social, and economic boundaries of the U.S. but that really conceal America's imperialistic endeavors abroad and the ways in which its domination metaphorically expand the area we know as the United States. And in erasing and redrawing the boundaries of the city, both authors affirm Homi Bhabha's assertion that "[t]he postcolonial space is now 'supplementary' to the metropolitan center; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn't aggrandize the presence of the West but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, agonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double" (241). In *Tropic and People*, L.A. is more than just a city but also a postcolonialism in a new form. Tellingly, Yamashita's novel culminates in a *lucha libre* match between *El Gran Mojido* and SUPERNAFTA at the Pacific Rim Stadium in Tijuana, the site of the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, the story includes the diasporic character Bobby Ngu, a victim of American *maquiladora* capitalism in Singapore posing as a victim of a different sort, a Vietnamese refugee, to gain entry to the U.S. *El Gran Mojido*, the wrestler persona of Arcangel, is a mythic figure evocative of pre-colonial Mexico and

an allusion to a Gabriel García Márquez story.⁷⁷ Arcangel has a dream during his northbound journey to Los Angeles, a dream which hints at the transnation *Tropic* imagines - baja and alta California as well as Asia included - that, despite fragmentation, proves to be complete: “when [Arcangel]... awoke he could still see the dream like a miniature Aleph reflected from his mind to an indefinable point on his visual horizon” (51). Similarly, in *People*, the novel imagines El Monte as a town mutually united with their counterparts in Mexico in an epic battle against colonial oppression, which in the novel is expressed as the commodification of sadness. Plascencia’s characters migrate from Mexican towns to the North in an effort to escape such sadness and poverty resulting from crumbling local economies that exemplify the ways in which weaker nations are exploited economically and politically.

Yet, Yamashita and Plascencia also share with Waldie, Boyle, Erickson, and Revoyr a vision of disaster and redemption, the apocalyptic tension of which Lois Parkinson Zamora writes. In a city where highway closures are compared to disasters (this past July, for instance, Angelenos waited in anticipatory dread of the 405 Freeway’s partial closure during “Carmageddon” or “Carpocalypse” weekend), the permanent halt of traffic on L.A.’s iconic freeways in *Tropic* amounts to the end of the world. The freeway disaster is symptomatic of other human disasters in Yamashita’s novel: a failure to help the city’s homeless population, illegal organ-trafficking, economic exploitation both domestically and abroad, human smuggling, the literal and figurative poisoned fruit of international free trade agreements; international drug trade,

⁷⁷ Arcangel is an allusion to a character in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” a short story by Gabriel García Márquez.

and labor law violations, among other tragedies. Like *Tropic*, *People* also tells a story about human disaster; set in El Monte, a working class city in the San Gabriel Valley, this fantastical tale details the residents' battle with Saturn, an omniscient force whose prying eyes attempt to shape and control their identity as a community.

While the characters in Yamashita and Plascencia's novels are poised for the apocalypse, at the same time, they are poised for "radical transformation," "transcendence," and a new world that grapples with such colonial oppressions, the fiction of national borders, and the uneven distribution of power (Zamora 98). If history and current events only expose the marginalization of various groups within the nation-state and the more sinister motivations for international free trade agreements and the like, then both *Tropic* and *People* offer a new transnational awareness that necessarily exposes ugly truths, on one hand, but at the same time extends a redemptive vision. In *Tropic*, hybridity is one critical lens through which to see the new world Yamashita imagines. Alternatively, in *People*, El Monte's denizens use civil disobedience as a means of seeking justice, refusing outright to conform to Saturn's demands as a means of affirming the new vision; the novel also speaks to the constant threat of new colonialisms, the vulnerability of a colonized people assuming the role of colonizer in puppet fashion. These works push for a new transnational consciousness and understanding of culture that does not attempt to subsume minority voices across the globe, and the kind of transnational ethics that Mary Louise Pratt argues is a "[process] of decolonization [that] [opens] the meaning-making powers of empire to scrutiny, as part of a large-scale effort to decolonize knowledge, history and human relations"

(*Imperial 3*). This new transnational consciousness acknowledges the world people's various stories of oppression, identifies the imperial motives of economic agreements between countries, recognizes the struggles of the economically colonized people of the world, and grapples with such unequal power relations. Both novels warn that if we do not adopt this new transnational outlook, we risk complicity with even greater injustices and face even more serious consequences. Thus, though the L.A. imagined in *Tropic of Orange* and *People of Paper* is devastated by human conflict and disaster, both novels also suggest hope through these particular visions and are thus future-tending to borrow Zamora's term.

Tropic of Orange

Karen Tei Yamashita has uniquely contributed to the existing body of Asian American literature through the various settings of her novels, most of them set outside the political boundaries of the United States. Two of her earlier novels *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) and *Brazil-Marú* (1992) are set in Brazil, *Tropic of Orange* (1997) is set in the "Pacific Rim," *Circle-K Cycles* (2001) tells the story of Japanese Brazilians emigrating to Japan to work, and her latest work *I Hotel* (2010) is set in San Francisco. According to Kandice Chuh, because of the geography of her writings "that has tended to look north-south as opposed to east west, "Asian Americanist literary discourse has only loosely become a home for Yamashita's work," and reception of her work as an Asian American text has thus been mixed (620). Moreover, this reception of

her work owes in part to the lack of a “prima facie case for connecting the expressive cultures of Asian Americans with Asians elsewhere (Chuh 618). Rachel Lee asserts that Asian American literature such as Yamashita’s contributions “anticipate global frameworks, enunciating precisely the formation of hybrid Asian cultures in scattered sites across the Pacific due to labor migrations, colonial invasions, the flow of transnational capital, and the hyperlinks of satellite communications” (“Asian” 233). In this respect, Yamashita’s literature updates the Asian American imaginary by going beyond railroad and internment narratives (*Americas* 114) though the author certainly acknowledges such narrative, alluding to Asian American railroad laborers in *Through the Arc*. Lee further argues that the author “grapples with both new and old imaginative formations of community and coalition enabled and transformed by spatial convergences particular to postmodernity or late capitalism” (*Americas* 116). Helena Grice comments that the author has been received more readily as a postmodern writer than as an ethnic writer though her works contain the recurrent themes of ethnicity, . . . mapping, migrancy, the search for home and an identity, landscape and geography, and the role of politics and the media in everyday life.” Finally, some have even examined Yamashita’s writing in the context of Brazilian nation building (Espadas).

One distinguishing feature of Yamashita’s writing is the transnational world she imagines in most of her works. Rachel Lee comments upon the “compression of the world” characteristic of Yamashita’s writing, her depiction of cross-racial coalitions between characters who meet to “counter, expose, or merely survive transcontinental

market and media forces” (“Asian” 251). Chuh argues that Yamashita’s works propose a version of hemispheric studies that “articulated through Asian American literary studies underscores the need to look within and among but also *beyond* the Americas and specifically to Asia in critical efforts to challenge the discursive centrality of the US. (619). Furthermore, Edward J. Mallot claims that the author’s use of magical realism “offers her a context to critique modes of production and consumption in global markets.” Other critics like Ursula K. Heise write about Yamashita’s close examination of “international ecology and economy, cross-cultural migration, and the transformation of local landscapes...[to] critique...certain forms of economic globalization” (“Local” 127). Heise also cites “environmental literature and ecocriticism’s need to engage more fully with the insights of recent theories of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism” (“Ecocriticism” 383). Aimee Bahng takes just such an approach, writing about “the historical amnesia that often accompanies progress narratives” in her analysis of *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*; she argues that this novel critiques the dangerous potentiality of neocolonialisms in alluding to “Fordlandia,” the 2.5 million acres of Brazilian rainforest Henry Ford purchased in 1927 for his rubber plantation.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita continues to develop some of these same themes of neocolonialism and the uneven power relations between parties within a particular transnational imaginary. As Sue-Im Lee asserts, *Tropic* contests the “We Are the World” sort of “global village celebration,” pushing instead for a global model that exemplifies “a nonimperialist, nonparticular, absolutely total universalism” (505). This novel has been variously described as an “apocalyptic and satirical...[exploration of]

the relationships between north and south, rich and poor, delving into the spaces behind the illusions of everyday life in Los Angeles (“Karen”); “a heavy-handed work of social satire influenced by magical realism” (“*Tropic*” 66); and an “ironic yet mystical story line is an ingenious interpretation of social woes, and her characters shine” (Seaman 62). Hande Tekdemir sees Yamashita’s use of magical realism in this novel “as a fictional survival tactic employed to describe the real-life experience of the underrepresented in the city.” *Tropic* borrows from the noir genre, and like the protagonists of *Southland* and *Amnesiascope*, the characters of Yamashita’s novel – Gabe, Emi, Rafaela, and Buzzworm – do the work of detectives, seeking out injustices and truths, some even self-reflecting in nature. Not only do their quests uncover the real boundaries of a transnational L.A. – there are none for those in power – but they also give voice to L.A.’s disenfranchised populations including struggling working class and homeless persons; remind readers of this country’s legacy of constitutional violations and exclusionary immigration practices. Ultimately, *Tropic* envisions a hybridized space, a “New World Border” according to Arcangel, one of the main characters: a space that questions national lines, takes into account the unstable construction of the “international” and “national” categories, and is cognizant of U.S. imperialism’s reach into other countries like Mexico and Asia. (198).

Grand Narratives of Assimilation, Unity, and Linearity: Not My Story

By exposing these various truths and injustices, by giving voice to these minority populations in L.A., by blurring the boundaries of nation, and by expanding the limits of what is popularly understood to be L.A. proper, Yamashita interrogates the limits of what Malpas, drawing on Lyotard's theorizations, identifies as "speculative grand narrative" that "charts the progress and development of knowledge towards a systematic truth," or "a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood" (37-8). One way that the novel frustrates the notion of a grand narrative is by narrating the story from multiple points of view; perspective in *Tropic* is centripetal, for no one character narrates the entire story. Another fiction which *Tropic* dismantles is the fiction of time's linear progression.⁷⁸ Yamashita's work reveals the ways in which the production of history does not always take a linear course: and represents according to David Palumbo-Liu, "multiple temporalities, modern or not, and multiple locations, not arranged side by side...but overlaid co-habitants of the contemporary, late capitalist world. Literary history can thus be produced both in a unilinear form and in not only parallel but intersecting and braided lines of reading and interpreting" ("Occupation" 832-33). The style of the novel also contributes to its theme: in a nod to the metafiction genre, Yamashita includes both a traditional table of contents arranged linearly by the days of the week. Then the alternative "Hypercontexts," arranges the narrative not by the days of the week but by an alternative organizing principle. Explaining the "Hypercontexts" as a map for the text, Yamashita says, "You have your map. You're in LA and you have to

⁷⁸ According to Foucault, while modernists, like Eliot, were obsessed with time and linear notions of history, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space [...] simultaneity [...] juxtaposition [...] of the near and far [...] of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (350).

drive. Now what's the entertainment represented? There is literary entertainment – magical realism, noir; performance, dramatic and musical; the media –television, radio, and news; the newest toy of entertainment –the internet; and, finally the movies - kung fu, Bruce Lee, and Jackie Chan” (qtd. in Murashige 339).

Moreover, the characters and their backgrounds and stories vary as well: the unmet desires of its citizens as expressed by Buzzworm; the nostalgic imaginings of Mexican American Gabe; the disconnection between Emi and her three generations-removed Japanese heritage; Bobby's rather complex ethnic identification that escapes easy categorization; his wife Rafaela's transformation into the a heroine in the novel; Arcangel's northward migration which advances notions of the mythic Chicano homeland Aztlán when he drags the tropic of cancer up to L.A.'s border, physically bringing Mexico with it; and Manzanar,⁷⁹ whose freeway symphonies speak to the multiple perspective or rhythms of L.A. Significantly, as Yamashita once acknowledged, because there are no white characters in *Tropic*, “someone else gets to tell the story for a change” (qtd. in Murashige 341). Additionally, unlike many works of Asian American fiction, she does not simply “center” the novel around prominent Asian American characters, perhaps thereby refusing potentially glib labels built in with their own set of ideological preconceptions; nor, does Yamashita present stereotypical ethnic characters. Yamashita might thus be considered an “Asian American [writer]...in the process of challenging old myths and stereotypes by defining Asian American humanity as part of a the composite American person which, like the Asian American identity is still being

⁷⁹ Manzanar, located near Lone Pine, California, approximately 230 miles northeast of Los Angeles, was the site of an Japanese American internment camp during WWII.

shaped and defined” (Kim 279). At the same time, however, Yamashita, in presenting a heterogeneous understanding of L.A. seems to take a critical stance against *any* sort of euphemistic unity that fails to account for difference. As such, the author advocates the sort of “critical postmodernism” that Henry Giroux says offers “a more complex and insightful view of the relationship between culture, power and knowledge (469). Giroux further asserts that “[w]hen linked with the language of democratic public life, the notions of difference, power, and specificity can be understood as part of a public discourse that broadens and deepens individual liberties and rights *through rather than against* a radical notion of democracy” (469).

In the noir tradition and like *Amnesiascope* and *Southland*, *Tropic* exposes the fictions of narrative unity, continuity, and origin through Gabe’s sleuthing, and the novel’s refusal to acknowledge a single perspective depicts history as an unstable, ever-shifting body of knowledge. As an investigative journalist, Gabe follows the footsteps of Rubén Salazar⁸⁰ and is guided by his social conscience Buzzworm, pursuing stories about L.A.’s neglected and abused, stories that disrupt the notions of narrative unity, progress, linear time, and origin implied in traditional understandings of history. In this respect, Yamashita insists upon the currency of history, imagining it to be dynamic and forever in-flux with events from the past continuing to interact with the present. Despite his girlfriend Emi’s skepticism about his “dated” pursuit of the “LA net of crime theme,” Gabe’s historical detective work is relevant, and he finds himself in the midst of a war on the civilian front like the protagonist of a black and white noir (247).

⁸⁰ Ruben Salazar was a Mexican American journalist who was killed while covering the story of the 1970 National Chicano Moratorium March in East Los Angeles.

Yet, to some extent, Emi is right about his pursuit needing updating: the more he probes L.A.'s urban underbelly for the truth, the further away his search takes him from the city and enmeshes him in a broader, transnational net of crime that resonates with the uneven social, political, and economic ties of today's transnational world.

Furthermore, though Emi does not know it at first, her experience ultimately confirms the potentially tragic consequences of failing to recognize the currency of history, including one's cultural and familial history. Although Emi does not exhibit the same self-loathing that Jackie Ishida does in *Southland*, nonetheless, she proves to be disconnected from her Japanese American heritage and does not seem to identify as a Japanese American or as a person of color. As the narrator says of Emi, "[I]t was questionable if she even had an identity" (19). Moreover, with respect to cultural sensitivity, Emi borders on the insensitive and is prone to stereotyping if only to get a rise out of Gabe; for example, she jokes that she finds his Latino background, his membership to "that hot colorful race" exotic (19). Tragically, so disconnected is she from her own family's history that she does not even know that Manzanar Murakami – an eccentric, homeless Japanese American man who, perched atop a freeway overpass, conducts symphonies only he can hear – is her grandfather. His identity and eccentricity has been kept a secret all these years, and only in adulthood does Emi learn about their blood relation. Like Jackie Ishida, Emi uncovers a whole family history hidden from her, yet she refuses the knowledge.

Instead, she becomes addicted to technology, and her replacement of face-to-face interactions with the virtual stimulation of cyber sex hints at her emotional and

more importantly, cultural disconnection. Like the protagonists of Erickson and Revoyr's novels, Emi shields herself from a painful collective past though instead of hyper-sexual stimulation or a bland corporate identity, Emi's defense is an addiction to technology, her obsession symptomatic of a more serious condition, a refusal to acknowledge the collective traumas that comprise her own Japanese American heritage. The relentless pace at which she experiences life might be understood as a melancholic feeding of the grief similar to Jackie's own emotional numbness (Cheng 9).

Commenting on Emi's alienation from her own kin, Ruth Hsu argues that Emi's rejection of her grandfather, says something about the way in which racism can isolate members of a family from one another (88). In this respect, if Emi's family is a metaphor for a larger Japanese American identity, then the trauma of exclusion and persecution has contributed to the fracturing of this identity. While Emi inherits a fractured identity from her immediate family, her grandfather, in contrast, renames himself Manzanar in protest against the injustice he endured and to assert, in his own eccentric manner, his commitment to humanity. Moreover, if Manzanar's name symbolizes a Japanese American past fraught with trauma, then Emi's refusal to visit her grandfather, in turn, symbolizes her refusal to revisit her cultural and family's pasts as well as her denial of an essential, though painful, aspect of her Japanese American identity; just as Jackie does at first, Emi chooses to numb that part of her identity and insists that Gabe respect her family's privacy and cease probing into their past (222). Accordingly, in refusing to "know" Manzanar, Emi refuses to acknowledge, mourn, work through, and embrace her past as a source of empowerment. As a result, her lost

heritage and past become a source of melancholic feeding, a feeding that manifests as her addiction to technology and culminates in her tragic death, speaking to the tragedy of lost knowledge, an unacknowledged past, and missed opportunities for empowerment.

Yet for Emi, such a narrative only proves fatal, her shunning of Manzanar symbolic of a cold, detached world that forgets the oppression and injustices of the past. Through Emi and other characters like Bobby, Yamashita's novel most clearly critiques the tendency of assimilationist narratives of progress to imagine a blank slate imagined for its ethnic subject. Such narratives require the "amnesiac condition of the 'new American,' a *tabula rasa* on whom is inscribed an ethnic-cleansed national identity" (Lim 296). Bobby, for example, is guided by a Horatio Alger up-by-the-bootstraps mentality and attempts to make himself over as a "Ngu" American, dangerously buying into an assimilationist narrative, the "linear narrative of immigration, assimilation, and nationhood" that ignores the "multifaceted [nature of] migrations across borders" (1). Like Emi, Bobby is also caught up in a race against time from one bill payment to the next in his case, and the perks that he enjoys from self-employment give him a false sense of progress.

Rafaela, Bobby's spouse, critically questions the validity of such narratives of progress, urging him not to be lured by a false sense of security that obscures the very real oppressions that they, as working class immigrants, endure. Despite what he sees are "benefits," Bobby is still a member of L.A.'s underclass as his wife Rafaela points out; significantly, although Bobby works in the same offices as his mainstream

counterparts, he works in the margins of those spaces: at night. Aware of her own marginalized position, Rafaela becomes a social activist, joining “Justice for Janitors,” an organization whose goals include unionizing and securing a living wage for janitors working for large, oftentimes oppressive, cleaning companies (17). She complains to Bobby that immigrants of color like themselves are not appreciated for their contributions to the economy: “Nobody respects our work. Says we cost money. Live on welfare. It’s a lie. We pay taxes” (80). When Bobby disagrees with Rafaela, she leaves him in protest, taking their son Sol with her; her actions complicate his world, but eventually force him to acknowledge some of the social injustices that Rafaela tries to combat in her activism. Unwilling to turn her back on past and current wrongs, Rafaela refuses the myth of progress and recognizes the shared oppression among working class Americans, especially immigrants like Bobby and herself.

In this respect, *Tropic* continues the project Yamashita began in *Through the Arc*, “[refraining] from triumphally hailing Asian American capitalist ownership as the natural and just ending to prior narratives of toiling, dispossessed labor,” Asian American narratives such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (Lee, *Americas* 118). Questions the accessibility of the American Dream, Bulosan’s narrative, for example, reveals the American Dream to be a myth for many and despite his “declaration of undying faith in America,” Sau-ling Cynthia Wong argues, the events leading up to it are a confusing blur that is virtually impossible to chart” (133) and “the succession of place names almost serves as a covert countertext to the content-driven narrative; they keep leveling and casting into doubt whatever redeeming bildungsroman

features the author advances in the form of announced resolutions” (135). Michael Denning likewise asserts that if as Bulosan says, his motivation for becoming a writer was to convey the experience of Filipino immigrants in America, then the narrative’s roller coaster structure reveals the true nature of their life in this country: “every turning point and intellectual awakening is followed by a retreat into despair and aimless movement; every moment of political struggle is juxtaposed with incidents of petty crime and brutal violence” (274). Comparatively, *Tropic* also demonstrates the ways in which linear narratives of progress are fictions, for Emi anesthetizes herself by racing into the future to avoid dealing with her collective Japanese American past and Bobby’s preoccupation with a complicated schedule of bill payments.

The narrative of progress also fails to consider the ways in which the identities and experiences of many immigrants are uniquely shaped by U.S. economic and political imperatives even before they arrive on American soil. Thus, one fiction that such narratives promote is the idea that when immigrants arrive in America, they necessarily find themselves in new territory. Many immigrants are no strangers to the imperialist reach of America as Rafaela insightfully points out, making the connection between America’s economic oppression she and Bobby experience both before and after coming to the U.S. Having first worked in *maquiladoras* on the U.S.-Mexico border and then as a nonunion office cleaner in the U.S. after Bobby sponsors her emigration, Rafaela is aware of these “scarred” histories and moreover, the interconnectedness of these scarred histories. Bobby initially refuses to acknowledge this connection though his own experience speaks to America’s destructive economic

reach. Born Li Kwan Yu, Bobby is not Vietnamese as his surname Ngu implies, but rather Chinese Singaporean; as a young boy in Singapore around the time of the Vietnam War, Bobby once had a comfortable life as the son of a bicycle factory owner until an American bicycle company set up shop and squeezed out the local competition by paying higher wages than his family's outfit could afford. Their family no longer able to support them, Bobby and his younger brother pose as Vietnamese refugees and sneak into a refugee camp every day until they secure entrance to the U.S. As economic refugees masquerading as political refugees, Bobby and his younger sibling illustrate both the contradictions between U.S. imperatives – both economic and political – and U.S. citizenship defined, conflating the two refugee identities. On the one hand, the U.S. capitalizes on *maquiladora* economies in Mexico and Asia to circumvent wage and other labor laws in the U.S. and disregard how such operations abroad might destroy the domestic economy of the host country; on the other hand, concerned with maintaining a particular political climate, the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam conflict illustrates its political motivations abroad. Because the experience of Asian Americans has been shaped by specific political, social, and economic forces, history and nonfiction informs the fictional worlds imagined in Asian American literature:

For Asian Americanists, the line between fiction and nonfiction (or even history) has consistently been hazy, and certainly the critical models the field has generally followed demonstrate the importance of reference and verifiability to the fictional world. Whether it is the representation of Filipino American migrant laborers in Carlos Bulosan's autobiographical novel, *America Is in the Heart*, or even complex Los Angeleno landscape contained in the magical realist work of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, social contexts remain of great importance to the field. (Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht 9)

Tropic insists upon such “reference and verifiability to the fictional world, for despite ways in which the U.S. pushes many people out of their own homelands, many immigrants already within the physical boundaries of the U.S. may still have difficulty gaining entry to the nation that promises representation and full-participation. Bobby, who does have papers, he is still denied citizenship in a figurative sense, unable to fully enjoy all the rights of a citizen enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. Rafaela, in contrast, recognizes the similar undertones of economic oppression that underlie her story, Bobby’s story, and the stories of other office cleaners even if Bobby cannot; for this reason, she encourages Bobby to also join “Justice for Janitors,” advocating “solidarity” among workers of different ethnicities united by similar marginalizations (17).

Tropic insists that such narratives elide the fact that the U.S. has always been racialized, its national borders thus unstable boundaries at best. The shifting of national borders and corresponding immigration laws have reflected the political, social, and economic needs of the nation as Lisa Lowe asserts. In “The International within the National,” she explores the persisting tension between race and citizenship in this country, highlighting the ways in which “immigration has been historically a *locus* of racialization and a primary site for the policing of political, cultural, and economic membership in the U.S. nation-state” (43). Lowe further argues in *Immigrant Acts* that the U.S. has tried “to resolve the contradictions between its economic and political imperatives” through exclusionary laws and has [failed]...to guarantee truly equal rights to all the nation’s citizenry....a condition exacerbated since World War II by the

contradiction between U.S. national institutions and the imperatives of the global economy” (ix). Accordingly, *Tropic* reveals the ways in which these imperatives have defined, shaped, and policed the spaces of this transnation, affirming Lowe’s argument. Indeed, Manzanar epitomizes the economic and political imperatives Lowe points out, for the space of the internment camp where he was born most readily posited him not as citizen but as foreign other despite his birth of American soil. Furthermore, although Lowe speaks of the Asian American subject, her argument can be extended to other ethnic American subjects, taking into account the specificity of their experiences, of course. For example, the 1930s repatriation of nearly 1 million persons of Mexican descent, the majority of whom were citizens or of legal status, and the 1942 Bracero Program clearly demonstrate how the definitions of national and international shift in response to booms and downturns in the U.S. economy, immigrants welcomed as ready sources of labor in good times but scapegoated in bad times.

By recalling the earliest form of colonial oppression on the American continents, Hsu shows how the economic, political, and otherwise imperialist endeavors of the U.S. as a Western nation are nothing new; we have always been transnational. Hsu reminds readers that the so-called “Western map of superiority” reflects such domestic and international incursions:

For each battle we are able to recall and redraw the mappings of conquest advanced in the grand history many battles by groups or individuals have been permanently erased by the dominant narrative of the West. As *Tropic of Orange* asserts, colonizers have pulled across that western portion of the North American continent nets of narrative that seek to erase the multiple ways that people of color have predated white settlers and the ways that indigenous peoples continue to play crucial roles on that continent. (86-87)

For instance, Arcangel's *lucha libre* match illustrates a history of U.S. imperialism, what he terms "[a] symbolic travesty at best" (183). Under the guise of *El Gran Mojido* (pejorative for the Big Wetback"), Arcangel addresses a crowd of spectators who have gathered to see him wrestle in "*El Contrato con America*" (translated as "the contract with America"), a match against SUPERNAFTA:

Have you forgotten 1848 and the
Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo?
With a stroke of the pen,
Mexico gave California to the gringos.
The following year,
1849,
everyone rushed to get the gold in California,
and all of you *Californianos* who were already there
and all of you *indigenas* who crossed
and still cross the new border for a piece of the gold have become
wetbacks (133).

His speech highlights what Claudia Sadowski-Smith says in *Border Fictions*: "The imperialist absorption of Mexican territory by the United States turned native and Hispanic populations into minorities overnight" (2) and Lowe's discussion of the ways which minority groups in America "have been racialized in the founding of the United States" (ix). Arcangel reminds his audience not only of the historic social, political, and economic ties between the U.S. and Mexico but also about the mobility of national borders.

Gabe's vacation home in Mexico critically revisits California's dubious birth as a U.S. territory, metaphorically questioning the notion of national borders. Gabe, who is Mexican American, pours his life savings into the construction of a "spacious hacienda, maybe a kind of old style rancho, circa 1800, with rustic touches, thick

adobe-like walls and beams” – in a small town near Mazatlan (6). Gabe’s vision is misguided, exemplifying what geographer Doreen Massey, in her discussion of “time-space compressions,” refers to as “[a]n (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities is set against the current fragmentation and disruption” (146). As such, the fragmentation and disruption in the postmodern era erodes Gabe’s nostalgic vision, his house refuses to cooperate, figuratively reminding him that we have always been colonial. As a result, Gabe, whose construction plans “expanded, then diminished; swelled with possibility, then shrank with reality,” has to constantly revise these plans due to unforeseen circumstances, a critical commentary of his vision of history as static (6). For example, after Gabe finally constructs a major portion of the house, it demands a second coat of paint, and the brick foundation of the fence mutates (63). Additionally, each morning Rafaela, temporarily house-sitting for Gabe, sweeps “both dead and living things from over and under beds, from behind doors and shutters, through archways, along the veranda – sweeping them all across the deep shadows and luminous sunlight carpeting the cool tile floors” (3). His dilemma is evidence of more than just poor planning or a good contractor: his ideas are “old-fashioned, but beautiful,” outmoded and failing to respond to *current* experience (6). Following David Harvey’s conception of architecture, Gabe’s architectural vision fails in two respects: while the *hacienda* is rooted in tradition, it is not able to keep up with a society that continually experiences change (*Condition* 83). As a result, Gabe does not succeed in reestablishing his Mexican heritage via his Californio *ranchero* because his efforts seem to suggest an

attempt to replace current experience with a static existence from the past, a temporally fixed image of the past, pre-American usurpation. The problem is that Gabe's imagination of home intimates his wish to *return* to such an era, rather than consider the past in a more meaningful context by critically engaging the past with current experience. In this respect, Gabe's understanding of space, as it relates to time, is fixed, dead, and undialectical as Soja laments of modernist conceptions of space in *Postmodern Geographies* (11).

By imposing the fiction of a particular identity on his home, Gabe is guilty of imagining his property in Mexico as a new frontier, exoticizing the landscape and the Mexican people through the eyes of a colonizer. Notably, Gabe mentions to Rafael that he hopes to use the hacienda as a "quite place to write" (5). His home refuses to conform to his desires for a quiet setting where he can write and impose further fictions upon his surroundings. To allow that to take place would be to allow Gabe to "produce" Mexico, Mexican heritage, and Mexican history in the way that Pratt argues travel writers do, "shaping it for the domestic subject's consumption" (*Imperial* 4). He assumes what Saldívar, drawing upon Renato Rosaldo's ideas, identifies as a misguided anthropological perspective that defines culture as "self-contained, bounded, homogeneous, and unchanging," rather than "postmodernist and postcolonial" (21). In *Routes*, James Clifford arrives at a similar conclusion, examines works of literature that "critique...[the] classic quest – exoticist, anthropological, orientalist – for pure traditions and discrete cultural differences" (5). If Emi races relentlessly forward into the future, then Gabe longs to relive some imagined past. Indeed, Gabe desires

“authentic” features and “[strives] for [some] sense of eternity in the midst of flux” (Yamashita 206), but his crumbling home represents resistance to such a static definition of culture and history, his brick wall purposefully disorienting and revising his misguided vision. As Caroline Rody observes, “[h]is attempt to build, furnish, and landscape the perfect getaway home in his ancestral Mexico is satirized as hopeless ethnic nostalgia, and is thwarted by cultural differences and natural forces alike” (133). Gabe’s colonizing vision posits the Mexican subject as a permanent Other; if the hacienda symbolizes the Mexican/Mexican American subject in Gabe’s eyes, then it is necessarily a debilitating one that marks the subjects as resistant to progress, and moreover, confines the subject to the “other side of the border.” The resistance of the hacienda to remain intact (and later, the actual re-placement of the hacienda nearer to L.A.) might represent the marginalized subject’s critical stance against colonization. The comment he jokingly makes to Emi, the suggestion that she likes the Rose Parade for its “Pasadena senoras...playing Castilian Ramonas⁸¹ in black lace shawls on rows of prancing Palominos,” (124) further warns of the danger of replicating old colonialisms or producing new ones. By portraying Mexico and Mexican culture for the “domestic subject’s consumption” (Pratt, *Imperial* 4), Gabe is dangerously close to marketing a similar romance.

⁸¹ *Ramona* helped promote the romantic myth of “Old California” ranchero life, according to William McClung in *Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles* (94). The narrator in *Ramona* describes Senora Moreno’s house as “half-barbaric, half-elegant,” a description consistent with the perspective of travel writers who is equally drawn to and repulsed by the rustic simplicity of the foreign life they depict (qtd. in McClung 95). This romanticized ranchero existence of *Ramona* is celebrated even today at the annual Ramona Pageant that takes place in Hemet, California (94).

This disorientation, however, equips Rafaela (and eventually Gabe) with a new lens that allows them to perceive the dialogical nature of culture and history: “the rain – a thick wet lens through which she perceived this wet world. She was not sure, but the fence was somehow curved, or maybe even longer, or stretched. That was it. The fence stretched south in a funny way, like those concave mirrors in drug stores and 7-11’s in the States (70). In a sense, Gabe’s hacienda begins to speak, shifting in communication, demanding his attention, but most importantly, demonstrating the ways in which culture and history on either side of the border is necessarily connected. Though he is thousands of miles away in a trendy Westside sushi bar, “Gabe [misses] chomping into his sushi roll. For some reason, the entire sushi bar seemed to tilt and sag with an indescribable elasticity. Gabe’s elbow lost its surface, and that seaweed, rice, crab, and avocado delicacy tumbled and tumbled” (129). The tug and pull of the border that affects Gabe while he is still in L.A. represents the dialogue between two cultures and their two histories. Whereas Gabe imagines the lives on either side of the border as two distinct existences, the shifting and twisting of his wall says otherwise. Drawing on Foucault, Soja asserts that the human subject [lives] and [produces] heterogeneous spaces of sites and relations” which cannot be neatly and succinctly “reduced” or “superimposed” on another (17). In this regard, the fixed identities “contained” on either side of the border or imposed based on a traditional view of time - 1847 vs. 1997 – do not represent the only defining aspect of a particular culture, but rather participate in a continuing dialogue between the past and the present and between cultural identities. In this manner, *Tropic* affirms Clifford’s critique of the desire for

such “pure traditions and discrete cultural differences” (5). Accordingly, the landscape bends in defiance to Gabe’s myopic understandings of the past and of culture, responding to current needs and twisting to question the boundary – the U.S.-Mexico border – that Gabe has unconsciously placed between his past and his present as well as between his Mexican and American identities.

Notably, Gabe’s attempts to transplant a bit of his Southern Californian heritage on his Mexican homestead with an orange tree functions as another example of a new colonialism, but like his house, the orange refuses to adhere to the nostalgic narrative he imagines and exposes the arbitrary fiction of the border. Fascinated with historic detail, Gabe imagines the navel orange tree he brings from Riverside to be a “descendent of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbetts” (11). Gabe uses this orange tree to mark the tropic of cancer, which he discovers much to his delight, runs right through his property, an act symbolic of his desire for permanence and stability. As far as orange groves go, Gabe’s stabs at a citrus-inspired Eden are a failure: a sorry, single orange clings to one of the branches of his tree. However, his symbolic attempts to mark a permanent boundary paradoxically give birth to an unstable border area around this tropic of cancer that ultimately functions as the site of contact between two cultures. Significantly, Rafaela detects the “peculiar, very supple strength” of the microscopic thread that passes through this orange, across and beyond the boundaries of Gabe’s property, “in both directions, east and west, east across the highway and west, toward the ocean and beyond,” a prophesy of something greater to come (12). In a dream that foretells the future, Arcangel

envisions a nopales vendor who comes across this very orange (it had shaken free from the tree) on her way to the marketplace, and when she picks it up, she pulls with it the almost invisible thread; later, Arcangel meets up with this vendor and buys the orange from her, again dragging the tropic of cancer and Mexico with him when he throws the fruit into his briefcase and boards a motor coach headed for the Mexico-U.S. border. It is in this way that this Mazatlan town literally becomes Los Angeles' new neighbor.

Rafaela's insight into a U.S.-Mexico history of exploitation, Bobby's immigration experiences, Gabe's failed hacienda project, and Arcangel's body as living history all complicate the notion of national borders. Clifford suggests that a nation's borders are not those boundaries designated on a map but rather signified by any culture's farthest range of "travel," a term that he uses in relation to an imperial power's infiltration into another country, and which includes sites traversed by tourists, pipelines, and commodities (28). The organ trafficking ring and Rafaela's battle with a sinister figure in dark, expensive sunglasses are both symbolic of U.S. imperialistic incursions into other countries. Having accidentally stumbled upon a infant organ trafficking ring, Rafaela becomes his object of pursuit when she flees with a cooler containing a baby's heart. The infant victims suggest the vulnerability of a colonized population whose life and labor is metaphorically priced by the colonizer, in this case hemispheric free-trade agreements. Such exploitation illustrates how imperialism is a "process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people" (Parenti 1). In another more light-hearted example, the toilet Gabe sends from L.A. to

Mexico for his vacation home is originally made in Mexico yet paradoxically cheaper in the U.S. for an American market than in Mexico for Mexico's domestic consumers. Thus, *Tropic* depicts NAFTA not as a mutually beneficial exchange but rather another example of uneven power relations.

When Rafaela boards the same bus as Arcangel, the sinister figure tails her in his sleek, black Jaguar, intent on curtailing her movement north. This battle figuratively highlights the contradictory nature of U.S. empire, which, as Hsu suggests, is at once inclusionary and exclusionary, uniting the two nations economically through NAFTA but at the same time, “[formulating] labor as the Other” (88) and revealing how such “[c]onsensus building is not power sharing” (96). To be sure, NAFTA, as *Tropic* implies, is euphemistically labeled as modernity rather than neocolonialism, echoing Mary Louise Pratt's argument:

While modernity imagines a progressive process that will eventually make all nations equally modern, neocolonialism acts to limit a state's ability to develop itself. The fruits of productivity flow outward, toward the pockets of investors abroad. Culturally, something analogous happens. To be modern is to subscribe to the values of the metropole and to seek to fulfill them. To be neocolonial is to be unable to do so, yet unable to exit system and chart a separate course. (*Imperial* 226)

While the U.S. enjoys the fruits of NAFTA, Mexico and its domestic economy do not, nor is membership to this larger transnational community enlarged to include the Mexican national who is “forced to be a second-class member of a club in which membership is not optional” to use Pratt's comparison (*Imperial* 226).

Accordingly, this pursuit and the battle that ensues between the two figuratively illustrates the limited mobility of colonized populations. Movement is meant to be

unidirectional, and while the colonizer is free to travel within a colonized space, the colonized, despite their contribution to a global economy, is not free to do the same, implying the unilateral permeability of national borders, both literally and figuratively. While the U.S. has historically reached beyond these drawn borders to serve particular economic and political objectives, conversely, the nation's borders can prove unyielding to outsiders attempting to gain entry. Restricted mobility, in this sense, illustrate Doreen Massey's point that "[d]ifferent social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (149). Thus, if the U.S. represents freedom and safety for Rafaela, her predator thwarts her efforts to reach her destination. Rafaela eventually transforms into a snake and struggles in a bloody contest with the man who morphs into a predatory jaguar, both animal figures symbolic in Native American mythology. The serpent represents the South (consistent with Rafaela's return to Baja California), knowledge and healing; on the other hand, the jaguar is the West's archetypal animal and "stands for sudden transformation, life and death" (Villoldo 140-41). If the jaguar represents NAFTA, a border guard who polices Rafaela's entry into the U.S. membership, it also represents the border's continuous state of flux. The battle Rafaela engages with the jaguar and hence, with the border, in is a story told again and again in history. Though Rafaela ultimately triumphs against this border guard, her victory comes at a hefty price, symbolized by the violent rape she endures. Accordingly, NAFTA is willing to exploit her body – her labor – it

symbolically denies her citizenship the larger transnation implied by hemispheric free trade agreements, thereby exposing more sinister colonial imperatives.

Multiculturalism's Deficiencies

Given the U.S.'s tradition of exploitation domestically and internationally, the diasporic identity of many immigrants, and the uneven power relations implicit in these colonialisms, *Tropic* demonstrates the various ways in which a label such as multiculturalism, a popular buzzword in the 1990s, is deficient. Just as U.S. Empire seeks to obfuscate the true predatory nature of free trade agreements through the illusion of consensus, multiculturalism, as Lowe stresses, promotes a similar fiction that belies unequal power relations:

Multiculturalism" as Lowe stresses, "levels the important differences within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion. (86)

Therefore, multiculturalism requires the erasure of specificity in favor of the myth of equality: we may all look different from one another but are really the same. Emi, despite being out of touch with her own Japanese American heritage, is tired of definitions of multiculturalism that focus on foods and ornamentation rather than people, failing to take into account the specificity of experience. Critics like Caroline Rody are wary of how "the mass commodification and exploitation of ethnic and racial heterogeneity in commerce and popular culture has made us justly suspicious of any

easy celebration of the multicultural and of the globalization of culture” (x). Similarly, Sue-Im Lee notes that in *Tropic*, “[c]ontact is entirely reduced to consumption” in the popular understanding of multiculturalism, a definition that suggests that eating ethnic foods, spotting ethnic individuals, and traveling to ethnic communities (in America and abroad) becomes the equivalent of contact (507). Such an understanding of multiculturalism does not require interaction with persons of different cultures and more importantly, his or her story. At Hiro’s Sushi, Emi tells Gabe and the sushi chef how much such consumerist interpretations of “cultural diversity” irritate her; her comments, in turn, irritate the woman next to her at the sushi bar, who calls L.A. a “true celebration of an international world” but only mentions her adoration of different cultures, her world travels, and the ability to enjoy different cuisines in L.A. (129). Yet, as Emi tells the Japanese sushi chef, she is invisible to this woman: “You’re invisible. I’m invisible. We’re all invisible. [Multiculturalism] is just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card” (128). The woman refuses an opportunity to get to know a real person of Japanese descent. So what does Emi do? She turns around and faces the woman for a true inter-ethnic encounter, one that ends in an exchange of nasty words, reminding us that contact between ethnic groups often includes conflict, the tension and contradiction that both Rody and Lowe attribute to more accurate understanding of cultural diversity.

Multiculturalism, in this respect, is largely tied to narratives of progress, such injustices not accounted for in “U.S. *Bildung* of assimilation, acculturation, and the polyethnic state” (Saldívar 19). At the same time, multiculturalism employs a “conquer and divide” strategy, suggesting that race and ethnicity are the only organizing

principles of identity and community. Both Rody and Lowe also point out that multiculturalism often fails to acknowledge the social invisibility of many members of America's ethnic minority, persons such as Bobby and Rafaela, for example (508). While Rody applauds multiculturalism for "[breaking] down barriers and allows, even amidst mass fear and its manifestations, unexpected new fruition. Yet, she also asserts, "In the face of both commodification and extremist identitarianism, the contemporary literary imagination seems all the more attracted to the possibilities of shifting, multitudinous identities," a notion that multiculturalism fails to capture (xi). If the current definition of multiculturalism suggests that we (people of varying races and ethnicities) are all different but essentially the same, then as Rody says, affirming Lisa Lowe's commentary, multiculturalism "fails to consider the differing material burdens borne by various groups," refuses to acknowledge the specificity of experience between respective groups much less within specific races and ethnicities (xi). For instance, while Gabe and Rafaela may both identify as Mexican Americans, their economic and social statuses are radically different; Manzanar and Emi face different challenges despite their shared Japanese American heritage and blood relations; and Bobby's experience as a refugee is markedly different from that of Emi though both are considered Asian Americans. Thus, even an Asian American "cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness" risks ignoring important differences among and within Asian ethnicities as Lowe argues in "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" (28). Such a perspective ignores the possibility of interethnic coalitions (like those relations depicted in *Southland's* Crenshaw District) formed on the basis of common

experience, shared oppression, economic status, and diasporic identities rather than on just race and ethnicity. Gabe and Emi, for example, share are of socio-economic backgrounds, American-born, and equally disconnected from the heritage. Likewise, Bobby and Rafaela share comparable immigration stories (both pushed out of their countries because of the domestic economies of their respective home countries were ruined by American enterprise); furthermore, Rafaela's unionizing unites members of the working class. We must also look into the pasts of these various cultural groups for other common denominators that might speak to a larger injustice.

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Transforming the Freeway: From Plains of Id to the New *Zócalo*

This marginalization abroad is reflected in the marginalization that takes place on the domestic front. To figuratively illustrate this imperialist exploitation abroad and its very real ties to the domestic front, *Tropic* employs the metaphors of the freeway and gentrification, two metaphors that it ultimately explodes. Buzzworm provides insight into the freeway's significance, comparing the motives of gentrification to the motives of neocolonial endeavors. He recalls that as his own childhood neighborhood declined in economic significance, city planners began to discuss freeway widening plans that

catered to more profitable communities, plans that would eventually ruin his “hood’s” local business core (like his grandmother’s seamstress business) and at the same time, foster poverty and invite crime. As a child, Buzzworm remembers being “taken for a ride on the freeway,” where he “[got] to pass over the Harbor Freeway, speed over [his] hood like the freeway was a giant bridge. He realized you could just skip out over his house, his streets, and his part of town. Or never have to see it ever” (33). The conception of his entire world shattered, Buzzworm realizes that most of L.A.’s commuters probably do not even know about his neighborhood, overshadowed by the giant that is L.A.’s tangled network of freeways, which David Brodsky⁸² argues “offers a continued shelter from engagement with...ghetto areas” (39). His community dwarfed by the freeway, Buzzworm realizes that only his neighborhood’s lack of physical, social, and political representation, a lack that mirrors the uneven power relations at the heart of the transnational community resulting from America’s colonizing reach into other nations. Buzzworm learns a hard lesson about his community, lamenting, “I’ve seen the David Hockney retrospective. He don’t come to my part of town” where “jacaranda, climbing roses, topiary, sidewalk bistros, tanning parlors, pillowed weenie-dogs, golf courses, or decaf espressos” are absent from the landscape (175). Even architectural historian Reyner Banham, who despite his keen insights in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, overlooks the significance

⁸² Brodsky argues that that one’s conception of L.A. is “always dependent on the individual’s personal connection with place. He also writes of one cognitive mapping study in which residents of working class, minority Boyle Heights and of middle-class Northridge were asked to draw maps of their city. As expected, the “Boyle Heights composite map covers a very small area and contains only local landmarks” while the Northridge version “covers much of the county and shows distant place-names and, predictably, the main routes of travel, that is, the freeways and a few major surface streets (26).

of neighborhoods like Buzzworm's; urban studies critic Dolores Hayden, for example, criticizes Banham's dismissal of the Central L.A. (downtown to Watts) as the "Plains of Id."⁸³ Commenting on Banham's statement that "like earlier generations of English intellectual who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, [he] learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original," Hayden argues that such an understanding of L.A. is oppressively limited in perspective (5). She responds, "It never occurred to him that Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese might unlock parts of the city, or that South Central, East LA, Chinatown, and Little Tokyo might demonstrate cultural differences expressed in urban form" (87). The Plains of Id effectively erases the specific identities subsumed under this category much in the same way that some might argue that "Great Britain" fails to account for specific cultures. Maps like the one Banham imagines never fully reveal the real picture or history of L.A., one that does not privilege wealth, commodities, property, and economic domination as Hayden would argue (83).

Buzzworm's neighborhood is an example of what Mike Davis sees as the city's two-tiered system of citizenship that divides Angelenos into haves and have-nots⁸⁴ (*Quartz* 300). Attributing the gang violence in his neighborhood in part to the visible lack of basics such as "major supermarkets, department stores, pharmacies, medical and dental clinics, hospitals, banks, factories, and industry" (175), Buzzworm commiserates, "Was

⁸³ Banham identifies three other L.A. ecologies: Surfurbia, the Foothills and Autopia.

⁸⁴ Referring to the surprisingly "eloquent and coherent set of demands" articulated by the angry and frustrated gang youth who rallied at the L.A.'s 1972 Human Relations Conference, Davis notes that gang members were acutely aware of their status as the "children of deferred dreams and defeated equality," and desired empowerment: in their own words, they demanded "better housing better schools, recreating facilities and community control of local institutions" (300).

no wonder homies tagging their territory. They wanted it all back. Claim it for the hood (83).

However, as an activist, Buzzworm rejects the colonialism imposed by the freeway and refuses to remain silent, demanding what he calls “gente-ification” that recreates public space for the public – forgotten neighborhoods, the homeless, and other marginalized populations (83). Gente-ification, a play on the Spanish word for people, is a gentrification that privileges not buildings but rather people and their “self-made set of standards and respectability ... [a] [d]o-it-yourself gentrification,” a means of empowering the *existing* community (86). The spaces he imagines are spaces for the public, countering traditional notions of gentrification that create the illusion of public space but not real public, community-based space itself.⁸⁵ Buzzworm hopes to give the marginalized a voice, just as the palm trees that line the streets of his neighborhood become the voice of L.A.’s forgotten communities: “That was what the palm trees were for. To make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed” (33). Rising tall above his community, the palm trees insist that commuters on the freeways slow down, pause, acknowledge their presence and the significance of their stories, which Buzzworm refers to as the best of fertilizers: These trees “were fed by...something only the streets of his hood could offer. It was a great fertilizer – the dankest but richest of waters” (33). Characterized by human bonds and lived experience, Buzzworm’s neighborhood, despite its very urban nature, evokes a

⁸⁵ Davis discusses how this other sort of gentrification, the kind that pushes the homeless inhabitants out to ensure “physical separation of the different humanities” includes measures such as defensive “bum-proof benches” and privatized public areas that give an illusion of being a public space but that are otherwise under heavy surveillance” (*Quartz*, 234).

“structure of feeling” to use Williams’s term, a community of people rather than the privilege and colonialism signified by the freeway. Not only does the freeway dwarf and conceal from view neighborhoods like Buzzworms’s, but it also hides from sight L.A.’s homeless population. Published in the late 90s, Yamashita’s novel probes the city’s paradoxes and injustices, referencing the early 90’s phenomenon in which a third of downtown L.A. was unoccupied while thousands of homeless lived on nearby Skid Row, what Mike Davis refers to as an “outdoor poorhouse” (*Quartz* 109). Echoing Davis’s observation, at one point Emi even suggests that Gabe catch a workshop held by John Malpede, a well-known homeless advocate in L.A. In these ways, the spaces of L.A. – its neighborhoods and most significantly its dominating freeway – function as a gauge of social, political, and economic power.

For this reason, the freeway must be transformed from an oppressive, colonizing force in the city to the locus of communal exchange, of social, political, and economic revelation when the homeless flee their besieged community on the periphery for the lanes of the freeway. As in the novels discussed in the preceding chapters, the L.A. of Yamashita’s imagination is haunted by the apocalypse, and thus disaster on the freeway can only represent a catalyst for meaning and an opportunity for “radical transformation” or “transcendence”. In the novel, L.A.’s freeways shut down not when the city’s traffic comes to a halt after the driver of a Porsche consumes a poisoned orange, dies en route, and careens into a mac truck, thereby igniting a devastating fire resulting from the combination of spilt fuel from jackknifed tankers and overgrown brush. As a result, the homeless who live in encampments in the freeway’s shadows

find themselves displaced, Yamashita imaginatively conceiving this wildfire as the city's response to the social needs and desires of its most marginalized residents. If the freeway previously represented oppression of L.A.'s marginalized populations, then the city's elite now feels the very oppression of its closure, the 5 mph pace thwarting any chance of an exhilarating Didion-esque experience of "slouching around L.A."⁸⁶ much to Emi's dismay (58). Moreover, drivers are forced to slow down and acknowledge the existence of neighborhoods like Buzzworm's and the city's homeless crisis.

What this newly transformed freeway signifies is nothing short of revolution: a vibrant, dialectic new *zócalo*, L.A.'s new public square now occupied by the city's most public citizens. This event marks for the characters of *Tropic*, a re-peopling of the spaces of Los Angeles and in turn, becomes a catalyst for a remapping of the city. What would otherwise be labeled a disaster ultimately becomes an avenue for representation when hundreds of squatters are forced from the margins of the freeway to the center lane, fleeing the fiery brush to assemble amidst the mess of stalled vehicles. Eventually, unwilling and unable to cope with the permanent gridlock, the commuters abandon their luxury vehicles and head home on foot, and L.A.'s most marginalized community reclaim what is arguably the most prominent figure in L.A.'s cartography – the freeway – wresting it away from those commuters who once sped past them each day, en route to more privileged sites within the city. "[C]reating a community out of a

⁸⁶ In Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, the narrator observes,

Once [Maria] was on the freeway and had maneuvered her way to a fast lane she turned on the radio at high volume and she drove. She drove the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura. She drove it as a riverman runs a river, pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and making, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour (15).

traffic jam,” L.A.’s homeless move into and redecorate empty cars, set up corner markets out of trucks, establish soup kitchens on freeway shoulders, name lanes like suburban streets, and inspire their own art forms with vocalists belting out tunes atop Maseratis (156). Consistent with Manzanar’s “map of labor,” which was defined not by “inanimate structures/markers but rather living human beings like himself,” the homeless rename the city’s spaces, imagining yet another map (237-8). This new postmodern map acknowledges incongruencies and uneven power relations: whereas modernity might understand a fragmented L.A. and the polarization of its neighborhoods as marginally connected to one another by the freeway, “in postmodernity, we seek ways to understand these new spaces – the texts of an untamed, incongruent urbanism” (Dear 98). The new map reflects personal geography and the sort of “gente-ification” Buzzworm imagines.

The gente-ification of L.A.’s landscape is necessarily connected to time because these previously off-limits spaces now take into account the specificity of people’s stories, their personal rhythms. The personal rhythm is something Buzzworm has always privileged: for example, Buzzworm is obsessed with watches, wearing his secondhand collection all at once. He is not, however, obsessed with the accuracy but rather particularly attuned to a personal sense of rhythm, connected to each watch’s personal story: “Every watch has got a story. Everybody’s got a timepiece and a piece of time. Watch was an outward reflection of your personal time. Had nothing to do with being on time. Had to do with a sense of time. Sense of urgency. Sense of rhythm. Cadence” (86). His observations also refute a linear understanding of time and

highlight the ongoing significance of the past: “Time could heal but it wouldn’t make wrong go away. Time came back like a reminder. Time folded with memory” (86). Gente-ification necessarily includes an appreciation of the sorts of personal rhythms Buzzworm celebrates.

Manzanar provides a more comprehensive vision that incorporates the personal rhythms Buzzworm finds important, and at first, he alone recognizes the existence of the infinite number of perspectives or rhythms of the city. Conducting his one-man orchestra from atop a Harbor Freeway overpass, Manzanar plays the grand facilitator of this vision of Los Angeles as a complicatedly multi-layered cityscape of time, space, and people. He accommodates all of them rather than privileging one over another as has been done throughout history, “[filtering] some, [picking] them out like transparent windows and [placing] them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (57). Like Buzzworm, most citizens could not do this: Buzzworm complains, “If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture” (81). Manzanar, on the other hand, was equipped with this special perception and could detect even the minutest of geographic interrelationships: “[as] far as Manzanar was concerned, it was all there,” from the geological imprint of Los Angeles to the “man-made grid of civil utilities” that included the respective networks of Southern California Edison, the Department of Water and Power, “telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks” (57). To the average person, the complicated networks and layers of L.A. would be overwhelming:

On the surface, the complexity of layers could drown an ordinary person, but ordinary persons never bother to notice, never bother to notice the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport –sidewalks, bicycle paths, roads, freeways, systems of transit both ground and air, a thousand natural and man-made divisions, variations both dynamic and stagnant, patterns and connections by every possible definition from the distribution to wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies” (57). In other words, most Angelenos, suffered from an urban myopia in two ways, demonstrating that they did not yet “possess the perceptual equipment” to understand what postmodernism demands of space (Jameson 242): first, they did not notice the potential connections between these various disparate fragments of the city, and second, tended to interpret its lack of an urban core as failure, contemplating the layout of L.A.’s neighborhoods as occupying the periphery – what Soja refers to as the “fixed sites of myopic understanding” which one tends to “[generalize] to represent the whole” (222). These various single-perspective maps represented in the novel reflect myopic understandings of community, contributing to a fragmented picture of L.A.: the map that the Crips and Bloods imagine divide each gang’s territory⁸⁷ from one another, the bureaucratic map which indicates which areas of the city lie in the path of freeway construction, a map containing moving landmarks that confounds Gabe, and Buzzworm’s mental map of his community. He functions as a catalyst for interaction and dialogue between L.A.’s various layers that coexist, collide and interpenetrate”

⁸⁷ *Tropic of Orange* alludes to the map of L.A. gang territory Mike Davis includes in *City of Quartz*.

(41). It is only a matter of time before others participate in an “expanding symphony of which he was not the only conductor (238); various homeless persons will pick up their own improvised batons and join in the conducting from “overpasses and street corners, balconies and park benches,” adding “strange and wonderful elements...lutes and lyres, harmonicas, accordions, sitars, hand organs, nose flutes, gamelons, congas” (238). It was, as Manzanar describes, a “choral babel,” beautiful in its chaos and chaotic in its beauty (238).

The Domestic and International Narratives Converge

Manzanar’s objective in conducting this symphony might be understood as his desire to interpret this choral babel, “to grasp the conceptual order underlying the seemingly chaotic processes of the global system” (Chang 841-2). His project anticipates the merging of the domestic and international narratives in *Tropic*. Just as gentrification imposes restrictions and is intended to benefit a minority of Angelenos, the transnational space imagined in Yamashita’s work represents a similar marginalization, and the domestic and international narratives in *Tropic* converge to emphasize these related oppressions. Free trade agreements and a history of colonization enable the U.S. to erase and redraw national boundaries to its benefit, defining a larger transnation as the site of oppression. Symbolically tying together *Tropic*’s domestic and international narratives, an orange arrests the pulse of the freeway, a poisoned one no less, and an orange drags the tropic of cancer and thus

Mexico closer to the U.S. By juxtaposing the dominant narratives of the city against those of the larger Americas Yamashita critiques the way in which both narratives suppress the voice of the “other.” Ruth Hsu sees this novel as a criticism of the dominant narratives’ oppression:

Tropic of Orange may be read as a critique of the ways in which the prevailing Anglo American-centered narratives about Los Angeles constitute a history that has been imposed by successive generations of white colonizers who have traversed, liberally and as libertines, the “American” continent, and particularly in terms of *Tropic of Orange*, Los Angeles and the region of Mexico immediately south of the border. (80)

Significantly, the two different narratives in this story are tied together by two oranges that traverse the content, one orange making its way down from an orchard in Southern California while the other makes its way up in truck from Mexico crossing the border erased by NAFTA. The narratives are not separate but rather interconnected spheres, and until this fiction is exploded, until the orange literally explodes, there can be no true transformation for the city. The myth of separate national spheres is only emphasized when the LAPD attacks the homeless as if in an international war:

A single shot heralded the possibility of war. On cue, the thunder of hundred helicopters announced their appearance on the downtown horizon, strafing the freeway along its dotted lines, bombing the valley with tear gas and smoke. The coordinated might of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the Coast and National Guards, federal, state, and local police forces of the most militaristic of nations looked down as it had in the past on tiny islands and puny countries the size of San Bernardino and descended in a single storm. (239)

The LAPD’s attack signifies the latest repressions of the U.S. empire. Claudia Sadowski-Smith interprets this use of force as a fictionalized account of the 1992 Los Angeles riots in which “[v]arious representatives of the state, like the LAPD and the

spaces that become the site of military forms of Empire. Thus, such a geography would shift narrative control from colonizer to the colonized, the space becoming, to borrow Pratt's terminology, a "contact zone," "reconfigured yet again by the vast mobilizing powers of technological curiosity, necessity, and empire" (Pratt, *Imperial* 241). The oppressed transnational subject seeks to subvert the type of nationalism that Clifford argues often "[articulates] their purportedly homogenous times and spaces selectively, in relation to new transnational flows and cultural forms, both dominant and subaltern. The *lucha libre* match between *El Gran Mojido* and SUPERNAFTA most readily exemplifies this subversion. By heading north to a wrestling match that takes place on the U.S.-Mexico border, Arcangel symbolically reclaims the lost territories of the mythical Aztlán, "[reconsidering] this area as the Chicano ancestral homeland by declaring Mexican Americans the heirs of the Mesoamerican Aztecs" (Sadowski-Smith 2). The shifting border might be understood as the emergence of Aztlán, consistent with Anzaldua's description: This land was Mexican one/Indian always/And is/And will be again (25). From a historical/political standpoint, this northerly movement of the border reminds us of the motives of an earlier U.S. empire to impose the grand narrative and erase this fact of history to suit its desires and objectives. In wrestling SUPERNAFTA, Arcangel also reveals the imperialist agenda of NAFTA (*El Contrato con America*) that forces Mexico to concede economic territory just as the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo Mexico to concede physical territory. For instance, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) equated NAFTA to a "death sentence for poor, especially indigenous, Mexican farmers because it [cut] agricultural tariffs against

cheap American and Canadian grains and provides for the likely return to an agricultural system based on large landowner control” (Sadowski-Smith, “The US-Mexico Borderlands” 100-1). Accordingly, Arcangel shows how the European discovery of the Americas is alternately “[t]he last greatest doom that marked the end of the world as we knew it” and a “great curse” or a “great discovery,” depending upon the perspective – that of the colonizer or that of the colonized from which one views this space (49). Thus, the discoveries of Haiti, San Salvador, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Patagonia, Argentina, the Hudson Bay, and Plymouth Rock all signal the doom of the future (49-51).

This New World (B)order recognizes the increasing difficulty in locating national borders in the 20th and 21st centuries. The location of this match is significant for another reason: because the match takes place at the Pacific Rim Stadium in Tijuana, the match actually posits not two but three contenders – Mexican, American, and Asian perhaps suggesting yet a third borderland. Sadowski-Smith argues that *Tropic*’s examination of transnationalism reveals “increasing intersections among Asian American and Latino communities along the border” (48). In this respect, the entire world actually consists of a series of shifting borders, and to truly understand the transnational intersections, we must demonstrate a “borderland consciousness,”⁸⁸ which “values racial cross-fertilization and cultural complexity[,]...refuses dualistic thinking, [and is] the consciousness, Anzaldua believes, that Americans...need to be able to

⁸⁸ In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua argues that Latinas should adopt a new “mestiza consciousness” that requires “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” to negotiate the various terrains of culture: the terrains of Mexican culture, indigenous culture, patriarchal culture, white culture, and other forms of dominant culture (101). Kristen Comer expands upon Anzaldua’s own “consciousness of the Borderlands” in *Landscapes of the New West*.

negotiate the twenty-first century” (Comer 216). Thus, the Pacific Rim Stadium has a de-centering effect, shifting the focus from the U.S., Mexico, and Asia as three distinct locales to the specific *junction* of these three places. No longer neatly-defined nations with distinct economies, political systems, cultures, peoples, and designated borders, these nations now represent interactive states in a new global union – a New World (B)order - that speaks to the intersections of these specific countries, the mobility of borders, “the links among border territories and their diverse populations” of which Sadowski Smith explores in *Border Fictions* (3). Through this New World (B)order, *Tropic* “depicts growing parallels among various communities in the border region and in Los Angeles, a city whose urban sprawl reaches and is shaped by the border” (Sadowski-Smith 59).

If the transnational world in Yamashita’s imagination poses the particularly dangerous motives of U.S. Empire, then this world is also one of potential and thus future-tending in the apocalyptic tradition. Massey, for example, calls for “a global sense of the local, a global sense of place” that may reward us with a better “understanding of its ‘character’, which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond” (156). Such a lens can reveal truths, the tensions between parties in the struggle for power, but also suggests new directions, alliances, and ethical possibilities. *Tropic* signals just such a new consciousness and transnational ethics, exposing the imperfections of a transnational geography and re-imagining national lines but also envisioning an ideal transnation as the site of ethical possibility. These “two faces of globalization,” exploitation and the imagining of a new community – are not “logically

incompatible” as Jameson asserts (qtd. in Rody xi). While we cannot ignore the inherent exploitative aspect, “[I]terature still works as a space for the exploration of possibilities amidst and beyond those of the market” as Rody asserts (xi).

Tropic participates in discourses about the Mexican-U.S. boundary and in debates about postmodern L.A. as “one of the great centers of the Pacific rim, to be compared with Mexico City and Tokyo – great urban cosmopolitan experiments of enormous energy and fomenting change” (qtd. in Sadowski-Smith 61-2). In this respect, Arcangel’s northerly journey toward the “New World Border,” which has “waited for him with the anticipation of five centuries” reflects a space of possibility (198). Los Angeles, in Yamashita’s vision, is a different place, one that can acknowledge and grapple with some of these historical wounds, and the New World Border of which Arcangel speaks interprets history from an ethical perspective, moving beyond merely recording the territorial expansion of the U.S. but instead finally acknowledging that such encroachment has resulted in the birth of a “border culture,” a site of tension. Referring to the “grating” that occurs between the two countries, Gloria Anzaldúa characterizes the U.S.-Mexico border as an “*herida abierta*,” an open wound that forms a “third border culture” (25). She further asserts that borders are set up to distinguish “safe” from “unsafe” places and “*us* from *them*,” but that a *borderland*, on the other hand, is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). Yet *Tropic*’s acknowledgement of the “emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” the uneven distribution of power and subjectivity, ethically revises notions of the border. In this respect, Anzaldúa’s conception of a third border

culture resembles Pratt's conception of the "contact zone," the space "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" ("Arts" 4).

Although the shifting of the border that occurs as Arcangel carries the orange (and the tropic of cancer) with him might suggest a remedy to America's current and past colonizing reach into the country, Yamashita suggests that this restoration/replacement of the border is still flawed, for proximity to the party wielding power does not bring the characters closer to wielding the power itself. Thus when Rafaela pulls the "silken thread" that represents the tropic of cancer around Bobbie and herself "until they were both covered in a soft blanket of space and midnight, their proximity to everything [was] both immediate and infinitely distant" (254). The "blanket of space and midnight" suggests that Mexico's symbolically reclamation of former territory by moving the border north is neither a comfortable nor complete solution:

[The couple continues to] straddle the slender endless serpent of a line – one peering into a private world of dreams and metaphysics, the other into a public place of politics and power. One peering into a magical world, the other peering into a virtual one. The line becomes as wide as an entire culture and as deep as the social and economic construct that nobody knew how to change. (254)

Again, they find personal desire at odds with political access and representation, the chasm between the two wide, deep, and endless. What Bobby and Rafaela do not realize is how dangerously close they are to replicating the very colonialisms they resist in moving the U.S.-Mexico border back to its pre-Guadalupe-Hidalgo origins. Brady warns us that "[t]he danger [of]...anticolonial geographic imaginaries is that such imaginaries may inadvertently depend on a conceptualization of land and society that

maintains its roots in an imperial narrative” (147) and emphasizes that new claims to land may not necessarily be “transformative” (148).

The silken thread that envelops Bobby and Rafaela promises the possibility of transformation, for it weaves together a blanket of both space and *midnight*, that particular moment of the day that signals a transition to a new day. There is still hope in *Tropic*. Yamashita’s text demands a new understanding of space as something dynamic that has the power to make social change, echoing Soja’s idea of a “third interpretive geography, one which recognizes spatiality as simultaneously...a social product and a shaping force (or medium) in social life,” (7). By repositioning various borders depicted in the novel from the tropic of cancer to Gabe’s walls to the artificial divisions implied by a traditional understanding of time and by questioning the ethics of such a repositioning, *Tropic* complicates the grand narrative that threatens to elide the emotional residue resulting from territorial expansion. Additionally, much in the same way as the protagonist in *Amnesiascope* must re-member the traumatic events of his past to understand his present existence and Jackie in *Southland* must finally notice the symbolic cracks, and even chasms, in the pavement after the Northridge earthquake, *Tropic* ruptures the continuity that a world history suggests by frustrating traditional notions of time and space. Thus, *Tropic* illustrates Lisa Lowe’s understanding of culture as not only “the terrain through which the individual speaks as a member of the contemporary national collectivity” but also as “a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered” (x). Thus, the novel re-examines historical understandings of time and space through the more flexible lens of culture. For this

reason, Buzzworm encounters an “Hour 25” on the radio: “mythic realities, like everyone gets plugged into a myth and builds a reality around it. Or was it the other way around. Everybody gets plugged into a reality and builds a myth around it. He didn’t know which. Things would be what he and everybody else chose to do and make of it. It wasn’t gonna be something imagined” (265). This idea of being “plugged into a reality and [building] a myth around it is reminiscent of the *Death of Marat* experience of *Amnesiascope*’s narrator.

Additionally, Buzzworm struggles to determine which map of L.A. is the correct one because he cannot seem to locate it; the error in his perception of Los Angeles lies in his view of urban space as static and unshifting, as what Harvey refers to as “things,” rather than as dialogically layered with space (“Contested Cities” 230). Distinguishing the static view of urban space as a “city” which connotes its “thing” status and the more dialectic conception of urban space as “urban process, ...urbanizing process or urbanization process,” Harvey argues that “space and time do not exist outside of process...[and that] process defines space [and] time” (230); furthermore, he asserts that “[e]ach particular kind of process [defines]...its own distinctive spatio-temporality...producing multiple frameworks within which conflicted social processes are worked out” (230). In this respect, the multiple L.A. maps in *Tropic* gesture toward a flexible strategy to which Manzanar’s character is particularly attuned: at first, only he comprehends the city’s multiple of spaces and times, which offer different ways to consider, negotiate, and resolve or not the various urban issues that arise. Moreover, once those “things” of Yamashita’s L.A. - the “political-administrative territories, built

environments, fixed networks of social relations” of which Harvey speaks of – are constituted, they, in turn, will affect the very processes which produced them in the first place, thereby contributing to an urban “palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other” (230). Time in this sense, is not linear, nor separable from conceptions of space. This is the dialogical layering at work in L.A. that Manzanar understands best.

Moreover, *Tropic* uses the metaphor of music to connect conceptions of time to conceptions of space. Music represents a metaphor for the fluidity that exists between these various layers of the map. Manzanar himself compares his capacity to discern all the layers of the map in L.A. to a musical one, suggesting that “each mapping layer” corresponded to a “layer of music, a clef, an instrument, a musical instruction, a change of measure, a coda” (57). Just as musical notes demonstrate a dialogical aspect with its notes resounding, the echoes of past notes permeating, harmonizing (or clashing) with the present, and turn, suggesting future notes, music, like the layers of Manzanar’s map, refuse to be understood strictly in terms of a linear narrative. By itself, a single note is almost meaningless, and its very meaning relies on interaction with other notes. This dialogic layering in Manzanar’s maps and the deconstruction of historical continuity become a metaphor for a differently-defined transnational space. Manzanar’s vision affirms Ruth Hsu’s claim that “[t]here is no singular reality, no one “universal, irrefutable, and immutable truth [that] inhabits the realm of desire, a yearning for certainty that cannot be fulfilled” (90). Just as a postmodern interpretation of these urban maps loosely and temporarily connects through the infinite overlays that

sometimes correspond to one another, other times contradict one another, but in any case respond to one another, adding a dialogical element to each of the layers. Most importantly, *Tropic's* stance is one of postmodern simultaneity as opposed to a modernist chronology that posits history as a master narrative intolerant of multiple possibilities.

Hybridity in the New World (B)order

In the same way that multiculturalism imposes the fiction that though our racial or ethnic backgrounds may vary, we are essentially all the same, conventional notions of nation elide very real economic disparities, imbalances of power shared between different groups, the political and economic blurring of national borders, and the resulting lack of clear-cut national identities. The more honestly-defined New World (B)order attempts to remedy the insufficiency of such conventional definitions of the nation-state; one viable remedy this new transnational space offers is the strategy of flexibility, for which the concept of “hybridity” becomes a significant metaphor. As Rody argues, hybridity replaces the “sort of thin multiculturalism” that fails to acknowledge the tensions and contradictions present within this category (Rody 21). Refusing to draw simplistic boundaries between race and ethnicity as multiculturalism does and between nation-states as current boundaries imply, hybridity takes into account the fact that complex and often asymmetrical economic and political

relationships between nations, in turn, shape equally complex national and ethnic identities.

Several characters speak to the hybridity evoked by the transnational space imagined in *Tropic*. Bobby, for instance, is more than simply an Asian immigrant to the U.S.; instead, as Sadowski-Smith asserts, affirming Viet Thanh Nguyen and Tina Chen's perspective, Yamashita shifts the focus from Asian American studies to "a global approach to Asian populations" with an emphasis on the U.S.'s colonial and neocolonial presence in various countries. Bobby's Chinese-from-Singapore heritage, his family's victimization by a *maquiladora* industry in Singapore, plus his self-invented Vietnamese refugee identity already suggest the multi-faceted nature of his identity as well as the complicated economic and political factors that push him out of his two countries and into the very country responsible for his emigration. His complex national and ethnic identities remind us of the false assumption that the Asian subject necessarily comes from a "stable, continuous, 'traditional' culture" untouched by U.S. colonialism, war, and neocolonialist incursions⁸⁹ (Lowe 16). Furthermore, to complicate matters, once Bobby does immigrate to the U.S., his marginalized status only persists: he grows up (or rather raises himself since he arrives with just his brother) in a Spanish-speaking Mexican neighborhood, gradually learning a third language and picking up on the cadences of Mexican-inflected Spanish and a Mexican-

⁸⁹ Lisa Lowe explains that post 1965 immigration includes immigrants from South Korea, Philippines, South Vietnam, Cambodia, countries necessarily affected by U.S. colonialism, war, and neocolonialism (16).

Spanish-inflected English, and finds himself working as an office cleaner, a member of L.A.'s underclass.

As a result, Bobby's multi-faceted immigration experience may differ vastly from the experiences of other Asian immigrants, yet at the same time, may prove more similar to the experiences of economic and political refugees from other nations.

Hybridity, then, is power-laden and asymmetrical. Sadowski-Smith comments on this possibility:

While the comparison between Bobby and his cousin reveals further internal differences among segments of the Chinese diaspora today, Yamashita also draws attention to growing intersections among undocumented Chinese and 'illegals' from other countries. Bobby's immigration story demonstrates that, in response to expressions of U.S. empire, Chinese immigrants converge spatially at U.S. land border with immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. In *Globalization and Its Discontents*, Saskia Sassen has identified the transnationalization of U.S. investment as the most decisive factor in transforming out-migration from certain countries into large-scale immigration. (65)

And in this way, Bobby's body becomes a borderland in itself, his ethnicity, nationality, and multiple tongues resisting simplistic categorization and contributing to notions of hybridity. His body figuratively represents an "ethnically mixed situation," mapping the various power struggles inherent to the "interethnic turn" (Rody 22). His hybridity only becomes a source of power, however, once he finally acknowledges the unequal power relations that have shaped his identity, the very same economic fact that pushed him out of Singapore in the first place.

As a winged, mythical creature, who is part historian and part performer and familiar with multiple dialects, Arcangel's body becomes a figurative borderlands that speaks to multiple identifications that result from a transnational world and the

asymmetrical power relations that often result. Multiply talented, he is the quintessential transnational performance artist:

He was actor and prankster, mimic and comic, freak, a one man circus act...big epics and short poetry...romantic musicals, political. Scandal, and, as they say, comical tragedy and tragical comedy. And he was not beyond doing provocative, exploitive, or sensational work; timing was everything. Across the border, they had a name for such multiple types; they would call him a performance artist. (47)

Moreover, Arcangel speaks a “jumble of unknown dialects, guttural and whining, Latin mixed with every aboriginal, colonial, slave, or immigrant tongue, a great confusion discernible to all and to none at all” confuses a mainstream narrative and furthermore speaks to the interconnectedness that spans oceans, national lines, and time present (47).

His situation and identity highlights the paradoxical nature of diasporic and hybrid identities: these identities “produced by these movements can be both restrictive and liberating. They stitch together languages, traditions, places in coercive and creative ways, articulate embattled homelands, powers of memory, styles of transgression” (Clifford 10). This “jumble” of dialects may suggest a more accurate representation, on one hand, but also competing dialects in the struggle for power, on the other hand; for this reason, “aboriginal, colonial, slave, or immigrant tongue” supplement the Spanish spoken by the conquistadors of the Americas. For this reason, Rody asserts that “[w]hen Arcangel gives his name at the border as ‘Cristobal Colon’ and he and Rafaela lead the undocumented masses across the U.S. border on *‘the gliding wings of a dream’* (199, 202), Yamashita has brought to the America novel not only a broader understanding of global migration but also a prophetic vision from the point of view of the uprooted, a migratory ethics” (Rody 135).

Thus, if as Pratt argues, such a stitching contributes to contact zones, unstable areas that often become the sites of cultural reformulation, generating hybrid forms of identity. In this respect, then, perhaps the single, sorry orange that travels from Gabe's hacienda to the U.S.-Mexico border signifies a mutation, the hybrid product of the grating between two cultures, or to borrow Anzaldua's words, the "emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). It is important to remember that the orange does not simplistically replace the border but rather causes a necessary friction between cultures to produce something more meaningful. that In this manner, "Yamashita's writing [undercuts] familiar landmarks" like national borders "that offer false comfort that obfuscate the truths in direct, lived experiences (Hsu 76). Significantly, Rafaela suspects that Gabe's orange tree is not a pure variety but rather a hybrid, bred for desirable traits, and though she "didn't think much of Gabe's fascination with an imaginary line...[the tropic of cancer], she instinctively knew the importance of the surviving tree" (11). Thus, Gabe's miracle fruit, an "aberrant orange, not to be picked, not expected, and probably not very sweet," had instinctively fragmented from its original genetic make-up to survive, a metaphor for hybridization. In this sense, hybridity can signify survival, the colonized subject's direct response to the cultures, traditions, languages, and political and economic systems imposed upon the subject. .

This orange and the hybrid characters Bobby and particularly that of Sol become the key elements of a transnationalist city. The hybrid Sol marks, in Rody's opinion, more than "transracial consciousness" (156) but more importantly, a "liminal moment when fiction sketches futurity – these children are emblems of a new vision" (viii).

Tellingly, once Arcangel, accompanied by Sol (whom he cares for as part of a promise to Rafaela), reaches the Pacific Rim auditorium and assumes his alternate persona *El Gran Mojado*, he juggles the hybrid orange and several ears of corn in the ring. After spotting Bobby in the audience, Arcangel releases Sol to his father and tosses the orange to him as well; when Bobby catches the orange, he symbolically accepts hybridity as the new lens through which to view the world, a world that he finally recognizes as a transnational space of asymmetrical power relations. Furthermore, with Sol in his hands again, this gesture is even more symbolic. Not only is Sol ethnically mixed (half Mexican and half Chinese), he is, as a result of his parents' economic refugee status, also a product of the transnationalization of U.S. investment, to borrow Sadowski-Smith and Sassen's idea. Yet, he, together with Arcangel, drag the orange and the tropic of cancer northward toward the border and as the *sol*, Spanish for sun, assumes the metaphorical center of this new solar system. Despite his now central role, his hybridized identity and the mobility of the U.S.-Mexico and tropic of cancer boundaries have a de-centering effect; thus, this new solar system is no longer characterized by fixed boundaries between ethnicities, nationalities, economies, and political systems. In essence, Sol forces the other characters to accept this new de-centered transnational space or Sol System: "Sol...is a mixed child so obviously right with nature that the inability of his parents or anyone around him to get over ethnic, racial, or national differences seems plainly wrong. His northward progress amidst the migrating throng helps make that transnational quest seem utterly natural, too" (Rody

157). Had Sol not dragged up the tropic of cancer, LA would continue to exist as a territory reinforced by a global economy and global subjugation.

While the transnational paradigm should not replace entirely racial subjectivity or national identities as Rody⁹⁰ urges, hybrid identity, represented by a hybrid family, suggests another viable lens through which to make sense of a world of complicated and uneven economic, political, social, and cultural connections. As Rody argues, Yamashita imagines a new community beginning with a model family unit:

The notion of a transnational family perfectly encapsulates Yamashita's vision of resilient nature, triumphant over the national – and ethnic – borders that rise and fall in human history. In her oeuvre, borders seem not only artificial and unjust but also limiting, deadening, dull, compared to all that unbounded, mobile imagination can bring to life. Traced through Yamashita's novels, the interethnic literary impulse of Asian American and U.S. fiction becomes part of a much larger post-national imperative: the imperative of imagined community, of human integration in an imagined ecology, on a global scale. (Rody 144)

At first, Bobby continues to hold on to the two ends of the line, and not until he lets go of these ends, symbolically letting go of “the social and economic construct that nobody knew how to change,” is he able to embrace Rafaela and their son Sol and in turn, embrace a new vision, what Rody refers to as the “transnational holy family” (vii).

While Bobby does nothing to change these constructs, what he does effect is a change in his position, his view, his understanding of these constructs; he moves from the object position, an acceptance of the fictions imposed by the colonizer, accepting the ways in which “empire makes the world meaningful to its subjects[,]...weaves itself into

⁹⁰Although David Leiwei Li recognizes that “the multivalenced formations both ‘difference’ and ‘diaspora’ can helpfully generate,” “the notion of Asian America as a compelled solidarity” and “‘nation’ as a viable ground for critical alliance” still remain relevant organizing principles in thinking about identity (qtd. in Rody 18).

the everyday[, makes its subjects] part of a history that was somewhere else made by people who were not [them]” (Pratt, *Imperial* 3). Bobby dismantles myths of “national, racial, and ethnic divides. Bobby asks himself, ‘what are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide? What’s he holding onto?’” (Sadowski-Smith 67). His actions signal his refusal of the colonizer’s story.

People of Paper

Salvador Plascencia also imagines a transnational world in his first novel *People of Paper*, a New World Border that does not limit its citizens but rather arms them with new possibilities. According to a Publisher’s Weekly review, *People of Paper* “is explosively unreal, but bares human truths with devastating accuracy.” Winner of the Bard College Fiction Prize for 2008 (“Salvador”), Plascencia’s novel imagines “a mythic, alternative history of the town of El Monte” (Rich), and the characters narrating the story have been compared to “Lilliputians” battling “to emancipate themselves from Plascencia’s tyrannical authorial control” (“People”). “Blending fragments of American culture with Mexican folklore” (Taylor), Plascencia’s work is experimental, reminiscent of Borges and “a mischievous mix of Garcia Marquez magical realism and *Tristram Shandy* typographical tricks”; the novel is also both “playful and cheeky” and “violent and macabre” (“People”). Yet, as the committee that awarded Plascencia the Bard award notes, “The categories of magic realism, postmodernism, or urban fabulism, while applicable, are utterly inadequate to describe this metafictional marvel” (qtd. in

“Salvador”). Though Nathaniel Rich, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, comments that *People’s* various episodes “never cohere into a single, larger story,” the critic also praises the novel for its “radiant, peculiar world that forms a convincing borderland between Hollywood and Jalisco.”

In an interview with Daniel Olivas, Plascencia comments on his experimental style, saying that *People* is “a throwback to the spirit of early books and to the playfulness that existed before industrialized printing presses” rather than as a “deviation from tradition”; Plascencia also laments that technology has “limited and uniformed our conception of the book instead of expanding the possibilities” (qtd. in “Salvador”). The author attributes the unique format of his novel in part to his interpretation of a paragraph as not so much a “syntactical arrangement of spacers and letters” but rather “a unit of time” (qtd. in Baker). Because the traditionally formatted novel could not contain all of these units of time, Plascencia sought alternatives and in his research found the likes of Lawrence Sterne, Cris Mazza, John Edgar Wideman, and Denise Chavez who, according to Plascencia, opted for the “sabertooths” over “domesticated [versions] of the wild, feral, origins of the book” (qtd. in Baker).

People takes place for the most part in this mythical El Monte, California, a rural town of transplants from various towns in Baja California. El Monte Flores (EMF) is the local gang but unlike their counterparts in the city who steal car parts and rob stores, they are a mescal-drinking gang of farm laborers, who, united by common experience, feel “no softness in petals” nor “aroma in flowers” but instead, only splinters and calluses from performing the back-breaking work of picking carnations

and roses, flowers that would find their way to flower shops of neighboring, more affluent towns or glued on floats in the Pasadena Rose Parade (34). EMF wages a war against Saturn, the omniscient narrator who peers into the thoughts of others, controls the narrative, and whose real name is Salvador “Sal” Plascencia, the fictionalized author of the narrative; their war is a war for volition and against Saturn’s commodification of sadness, his exploitation of their tales of woe. Some of the town’s more important citizens include Federico de la Fe and his daughter Little Merced; Froggy, a military commander in EMF, Subcomandante Sandra; and Smiley, EMF’s accountant. The novel contains numerous other stories, but of these, the two most important narratives include Saturn’s own experience of loss (when he leaves New York to fight a war against Federico de la Fe, Saturn’s beloved Elizabeth or Helen leaves him for another man) and the story of Merced de Papel, a woman made entirely of paper.

In the same way that Claudia Sadowski-Smith classifies *Tropic of Orange* as a “border fiction,” emphasizing the way in which Southern California represents a “New World Border,” *People* also imagines a similar border community, one that is differently-defined, paying less attention to current national lines and more attention to historical permeability of the U.S. Mexico border, the symbolic Chicano ancestral homeland Aztlán, and the economic and political connections between Latino/as in America and their countries of birth (Sadowski-Smith 2). Like *Tropic* as well as *Amnesiascope* and *Southland*, *People* explores the concept of the border community and echoes the theme “the past is never dead”; in making this stance, Plascencia’s novel undermines the notion of a grand narrative and the notion of linear progression,

propelling the story in one direction rather than pause, rewind, and recognize the currency of history. Plascencia's novel borrows from several different categories to undermine the notion of a linear and unified narrative. Like *Tropic*, Salvador Plascencia's text employs postmodern fragmentation and magical realism but also borrows from the metafiction and memoir genres and uses typographical tricks as well to expose the limits of language and the difficulty of communication for the writer. More importantly, however, *People* also reveals how the limited nature of the written word can limit the expression of a national identity. Specifically, national borders may intend to communicate clear demarcations between nations, yet for economic, political, social, and other reasons these borders may prove to be an unsatisfactory definition of nation.

Moreover, because histories are usually told from the perspective of the victor, such a grand narrative ignores the voices of conquered peoples, the fragile "people of paper" imagined in the novel. If a linear narrative imagines a single story, *People* then, affirming postmodern fragmentation, exposes the incomplete and fictive nature of a single story; thus, multiple voices literally compete for space on the page and for a place in the narrative, the varying widths and lengths of columns a gauge of the characters' current narrative control. The text alternates between "blotted-out text; razored-out text; sideways text; and text split into as many as five columns across two pages, each column representing a different character's narrative" (Rich). Because *People* tells the story of a war between the residents of El Monte and Saturn, the widths of columns shift depending upon the current victor in the war, illustration the unevenness of power

relations. In addition, whereas in *Tropic*, the various characters are allotted relatively equal time in the spotlight, *People* emphasizes the extent to which representation is uneven. Because the story is told from the perspectives of characters of various import in the novel, their representation must necessarily be uneven, the length and number of their narratives differing from character to character.

Through the epic battle between the El Monte's denizens and Saturn, *People* probes the issue of power relations in society and advocates the overthrow and restructuring of any totalizing force that stifles plurality. The two parties fight for narrative control: imposing a totalitarian regime upon the residents, Saturn attempts to quash their will by telling the stories of their lives from an omniscient point of view while the residents defend their subjectivity, their right to the first person "I" and "we" perspectives. Like *Tropic*, *People* includes an alternative table of contents that contributes to this notion of competing voices for representation; the chapters are listed and identified by a corresponding code to indicate their narrative point of view whether omniscient, first person, or a combination thereof, reflecting the struggle for voice. Thus, *People* challenges the notion of a "singular reality," a position consistent with David Harvey's point that postmodernism acknowledges that "radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate" (*Condition* 41). Furthermore, El Monte's refusal to remain quiet and submit to Saturn's narrative control illustrates what Simon Malpas identifies as one primary goal of the postmodern writer, to question the "grand narratives of modernity [that]...still exert a huge influence on contemporary culture" by "[interrogating] the universal assumptions of our contemporary power

structure, [challenging] their explanatory schemes and [making] room for different voices to emerge” (98). The war that El Monte wages on Saturn illustrates precisely this very tension between the impetus for a single, coherent narrative and the possibility of multiple narratives; the residents accept the latter notion. Perhaps these various perspectives reveal the different ways in which history is recorded, and the battle between Saturn and El Monte serves to confirm how despite the fact that multiple voices exist in a story, oftentimes, only one voice, that of the victor, is heard and recorded. Different voices literally compete for space on the written page, illustrating the point that narrative control is always in flux. Accordingly, the possibility and multiplicity exemplified in Plascencia’s novel inherently reflect the postmodern condition.

Communication Breakdowns

People also borrows from the metafiction genre,⁹¹ complementing the postmodernist fragmentation highlighted in the novel and its message about the risky business of narration and narrative unity. Self-reflective in nature, metafiction is “fiction about fiction” (Balder 151). While critics have variously defined metafiction,⁹²

⁹¹ Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* is an 18th century example of metafiction. More recent examples of metafiction include Thomas John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*.

⁹² Robert Scholes defines metafiction as “a fiction which if it is ‘about’ anything, it is about the possibilities and impossibilities of fiction itself while Stanley Fogel comments that “Metafiction entails exploration of the theory of fiction through fiction itself. Writers of metafiction scrutinize all facets of the literary construct – language, the conventions of plot and character, the relation the artists to his art and to his reader” (qtd. in Christensen 10).

Inger Christensen's definition of metafiction, "fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making," especially befits Plascencia's novel (11). Christensen's particular understanding of metafiction takes into account more than just "technical brilliance" (11) but also the "novelist's message," (10) thus emphasizing how form and technique contribute to the overall meaning of the novel. In works of metafiction, "[t]he author places himself inside the fictional world and figures as a structural element in the novel. The historical author will of course always exist outside and apart from the work itself, so that metafiction only operates with an additional factor: fictional author" (Christensen 13). Hence the author Salvador Plascencia should be distinguished from the Saturn/Sal persona who appears in *People*, the latter persona serving as a commentary upon the difficulty of communication, making the words on a page correspond to the novel's message, the fragility of mankind.

If one message in the novel is lack of representation and the fiction of any singular reality, then *People* also demonstrates the limited nature of language. Because the codes in the table of contents are tied to point of view, the author effectively instructs readers how to interpret each chapter. Peering into the minds of characters and passing judgment on them, Saturn represents an editorial omniscient narrator. Yet, as the novel progresses, he experiences increasing difficulty maintaining his omniscient point of view and suffers a complete break-down in Chapter 10 when he shifts to the first person perspective for the entire chapter; significantly, this chapter is identified as

omniscient in perspective to signal this failure of communication. By breaking with narrative consistency, the novel self-consciously comments on narrative technique: the omniscient “Saturn” perspective slips from the grasp of the fictionalized author Sal in the story to emphasize the inability of the bird’s eye view to always accurately and otherwise satisfactorily communicate ideas and emotions. Thus, such a break illustrates a popular theme in the metafiction genre, how the limited nature of language oftentimes frustrates the author’s attempts at expression (Christensen 13-4). Throughout the story, Saturn attempts to maintain an objective tone by writing from the omniscient perspective, holed up in a New York apartment, symbolic of the objective distance he tries to put between El Monte (his topic) and himself.

Plascencia’s novel also speaks to the alienation experienced by the artist. Because the fictional Sal is also the author of the novel, *People* seems to comment on the personal connection authors have to their characters, sometimes a connection that is painful and difficult to depict. Despite the narrative distance he plans to maintain, Sal cannot ignore his broken heart and resorts to the “I” perspective to interact directly with a character. Chapter 10 is written as a dialogue with one column dedicated to Saturn and another devoted to Liz though only Saturn’s name appears in a heading at the beginning of his narrative because he finds any mention of her name agonizing. Moreover, expressing the name of Liz’s new lover on the page is also too painful for Sal who literally cuts his name out of the page (a razor-cut hole appears on the physical page): Liz tells Saturn “You went away to fight de la Fe and was here” (117).

Sal's entire world has collapsed; symbolically, the roof of his apartment collapses, his furniture breaks, his bathtub leaks, and his tableware disintegrates (117). He tells Liz,

This is what happens, the natural physics of the world. You fuck a white boy and my shingles loosen, the calcium in my bones depletes, my clothes begin to unstitch. Everything weakens. I lose control. The story goes astray. The trajectory of the novel altered because of him. They colonize everything; the Americas, our stories, our novels, our memories... (117)

Here, he suggests that stories, even those intended to be fiction, are personal in nature to the writer, may bear some truth about a writer's life. What happens in Sal's life necessarily affects what he is writing. As his romance with Liz falls apart, so does his apartment, and the destruction enters the story as well. And to show how words are oftentimes insufficient conveyors of ideas, the ink on the last page of the chapter gradually fades to more effectively communicate Sal's anger and sadness; Sal wills Liz's home to crumble as has his, her new lover's "bones to break" and that he "rot and decay and fade" in the same way that Sal has faded from Liz's life. In doing so, Plascencia addresses a popular theme in works of metafiction: the "isolation of the artist from mankind, his difficulties with communication" (Christensen 12). Thus Sal intrudes on the narrative, switching from omniscient to a first person narrative, for the omniscient perspective inadequately conveys emotion. As a result, he finds himself closer to mankind, giving himself a moment to grieve, touchingly depicting personal connection to his story. For the same reason, when he disappears from the narrative altogether for several pages in chapter 15 (his absence is represented by a blank page, a *Tristram Shandy* typographical trick), the story takes a brief turn for the bland because despite his oppressive ways, his input is still important to the overall narrative. Though

the residents do not want to be defined by Saturn's story or be used to sell his story, the fact is that Saturn does give their lives some meaning, if only in the form of an opportunity to assert their subjectivity. Additionally, Saturn is also a grieving individual whose actions exemplify his emotional distress and a response to the very same colonizing to which he subjects the El Monte residents.

Moreover, like many works of metafiction, *People* brings up the question of audience, distinguishing between a work's actual audience and a fictional audience: the "relation of narrator-story-reader is expanded in the fictional situation to encompass: author-narrator-story fictional reader (audience-actual reader)" (Christensen 13). The fictionalized Sal writes his story for Liz, who in Chapter 14, asks Sal to leave her out of the story: "Sal, if you still love me, please leave me out of this story. Start this book over, without me" (138). Sal does attempt to meet her demands by starting the story over, inserting a title page again but this time dedicated the book to only his family; there is no mention of Liz on his dedication page. Yet, it is too late. His feelings still raw from the breakup, Liz is heavy on his mind and though he never mentions her name again, Sal cannot help himself when Sandra knocks on Liz's door in an effort to enlist the help of residents from other towns. When he becomes obsessed with Liz again and utters her name bitterly, the trajectory of his story goes astray once more. He eventually loses the battle for narrative control (though not entirely) to the residents of El Monte, symbolically shifting roles from narrator to narratee.

Sal loses control of the narrative by the time Smiley locates him after Smiley visits a curandero for information regarding Saturn's whereabouts. There, he learns that

Saturn is a “pseudonym,” “a name to hide behind” and is given a map (102). In magical realist fashion, Smiley, guided by the map, goes to the “peak of the San Gabriel range,” and his discovery of a new world contributes to postmodernism’s positing of multiple realities (103). Smiley reaches his hand upward and locates a rough spot in the sky which he peels back to find layers of papier-mâché through which he saws to make a passageway to Saturn’s New York City apartment. Smiley is surprised to find that Sal has lost his powers of omniscience:

It should have been the moment when the creator acknowledges both the necessity of my existence and the reader’s role as witness. But it was not the dignified meeting one might expect: the author sitting in his chair, wearing a starched dress shirt with a double-stitched collar, smoking hand-rolled tobacco, awaiting the visit because, after all, he is omniscient foreseeing all surprises...He did not have the foresight to see that I was coming, nor did he care. He had surrendered the story and his power as narrator. I found him asleep, sprawled and naked, laying on his stomach, pillowcases beneath him but the pillows tossed against the wall. And despite the order he had provided in the form of columns and chapters, he applied none of that logic to his sleeping quarters: his shirts and pants crumpled and pushed against the corners, the linens and towels unfolded and dirty, books stacked in badly planned towers that disregarded alphabet and size, falling and collapsing into rubble. And paper unbound and scattered everywhere. (103)

Perhaps Smiley’s observations also suggest how grand narratives that imply linearity are really fictions. Unaware of Smiley’s presence, Sal calls Liz in desperation, but she refuses to speak to him, and when he finally notices Smiley standing in his apartment, he does not care and tells Smiley to let the members of EMF that they have won the war; brokenhearted, Sal returns to bed. Smiley does not kill Sal, still hopeful that Sal will recognize his importance as a character to the novel though Sal explains that “in the jumble of things sometimes minor characters are forgotten, even by the author” (105).

In the pages after his encounter with Sal/Saturn, Smiley will sleep naked and exposed, hoping for Saturn's recognition of his loyalty.

Colonizing Visions: The Plains of Id and Suburbia

Before Saturn incites the residents to fight against his omniscience, the city of El Monte is a thriving place of society despite the marginalization Saturn attempts to impose. *Every Night Is Ladies' Night*, a collection of short stories by Michael Jaime-Becerra, is another work about El Monte that also counters the marginalization implied by the unmistakable dominance of the 10 and 605 freeways in the cartography of the city; in the story "Media Vuelta," for example, one character trying to find his way in El Monte complains to himself that the map appeared "more concerned with El Monte's position in relation to the bordering freeways than with specific details" (203). Yet despite the freeways' effect of slicing up the city and separating neighborhoods from one another, *Every Night* refutes a Plains of Id identity, proving that El Monte is a place of "specific details," those human relationships that reveal a structure of feeling to borrow Raymond Williams's term. *People*, like *Every Night*, also defies the "Anywheresville" or "Nowheresville" characterization Banham assigns to the Plains of Id (172), instead depicting El Monte as a modest "town of furrows and flowers" whose rural ideals are reflected in its strong sense of society (33). The frequent social interactions in public that define the El Monte of Plascencia's imagination are what

make the city so special. The vivid public scene that characterizes El Monte sharply contrasts the more suburban ideals of privacy:

The original settlers of El Monte, people who had come from the east using the path of Santa Fe and the paved route of 66, gradually moved from El Monte to the foothills of Arcadia and Pasadena, towns that did not have the foot traffic of flower pickers or the smell of oregano and lard bubbling from the boiling pots of menudo stands. The only time that the pioneers of El Monte returned was in December, when they bought flowers to decorate the motorized carts that floated down the avenues of their newly adopted towns. (34)

The very things other cities might turn their noses up at – the foot traffic, *menudo* stands, and traveling *elote* men who sell hot ears of corn slathered with an assortment of condiments – uniquely make El Monte a space of human connection. The *menudo* stand becomes a gathering place for people, and the *elote* man who covers the neighborhood on foot also provides the community with temporary gathering spots each time he stops to sell his treats. A reinvention of the *zócalo*, central plazas often found in even the smallest of Mexican towns, both the *menudo* stand and the *elote* cart possess geographical significance for El Monte's neighborhoods, functioning as temporary but recurring communal sites. Reconfiguring the landscape of El Monte to reflect their values in strong society, the residents add what architectural critic James Rojas⁹³ suggests is a “layer of architecture to the landscape...[to] help make public spaces usable” (47). These domestic markers of El Monte avow independence from the traditional values that made swimming pools and uniformly landscaped backyards the focus of sub(urban) studies as Dolores Hayden suggests (86).

⁹³ Although James Rojas describes the spaces of East Los Angeles in this manner, his ideas might also be relevant to El Monte, which like East L.A. has a significant immigrant Latino population.

It is this very colonialism, the suburban identity, that the residents of El Monte battle. Thus, when Saturn forces the residents to retreat into the spaces of their homes, he attempts to convert El Monte's citizens into suburbanites, who privileging privacy and the individual (or the family, the smallest unit of society) over connections to a larger community, maintain a safe distance from one another in the comfort of their homes. By driving them behind close doors into the domestic sphere, Saturn "barrioizes" their existence, the term Raul Villa uses to describe the practice and effect of trapping unstated, legitimate experiences and knowledge (8). Hayden also laments such marginalization and promotes a more "inclusive public history, rooted in the struggles over the urban landscape" that would account for the specific experience of various ethnic communities vying for a place in the larger narrative (96). Saturn, who strives to limit the expression of this specific experience, is privy to "[s]ights usually reserved for hovering crows and crop dusters" (84). His bird's eye view allows him to insidiously invade the thoughts of the residents:

His power is of a piercing strength, able to penetrate asbestos and wood shingles, tar paper, plywood, the darkness of the attic where yellowing cardboard boxes are kept, the painted plastered drywall, the spinning lead blades of the ceiling fan that Saturn carefully eludes (after first banging himself against the whirling vanes. He then makes his way through the polyester and acrylic sheets, down to where Little Merced lies sleeping, her feet rubbing against each other and her arms wrapped around the pillows. (84)

While Saturn advances upon El Monte, taming the thoughts and actions of its residents like a frontiersman settling the West, the residents themselves have a very different experience with mobility. Movement outside the confines of the home is treacherous ground, highlighting the ways in which movement for the ethnic American subject does

not always share the same connotations as it does for their white counterparts: “reservations and the vast spaces separating them for Native Americans; the dreaded ‘downriver’ for African Americans and the river separating bondage from freedom for African Americans; the border and borderlands often the site of multiple crossings, and the migrant laborer’s endlessly looping routes,” for example (Wong 164). To protect themselves against Saturn’s prying eyes, all residents, except for Smiley, hide in their homes under the shield of a lead roof. Saturn’s colonizing reach also demonstrates the violence Edward Said connects to imperialism; Said discusses how “[i]mperialism is an act of geographic violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control” (qtd. in Brady 145). In Saturn’s case, his exploration, charting, and control literally reach their front doors and without the protection of lead roofs, into their minds as well. Moreover, Saturn further colonizes their thoughts by commodifying their experiences of loss, writing their stories for his own financial gain and fame. Each time Saturn peers into the thoughts of others, he benefits from the “thought capital” or “intellectual labor” of the El Monte’s residents without justly compensating them. Only Smiley welcomes Saturn’s intrusions, comforted by the feeling of “knowing that something is watching [him]” (87) and fearful that “the defeat of Saturn would bring [their] own end, that everything would conclude with its crash” (101).

Additionally, though Saturn forces them indoors and subjects them to a colonizing force, the residents are never fully assimilated into the suburban identity of their oppressor. By forcing them indoors and capitalizing on their various experiences

of sadness, Saturn draws a border and imposes what Brady would call a border system of abjection that “effectively [disarticulates them] from the signs of their subjectivity, to deprive them of meaning and identity” (57). Significantly, many of the residents choose to settle in El Monte to escape the sadness of their respective pasts; however, in El Monte, they experience added injury, “disarticulated” from their agency because they no longer *own* their sadness, yet because this sadness continues to dominate their lives, they are unable to extricate themselves from it. Rather, they find themselves enmeshed in a system that “depends upon the repetition of this estrangement, their continued sadness. Several characters subject themselves to self-inflicted injuries in order to numb their emotional grief. For example, Federico de la Fe mourns the abandonment of his wife for years afterwards, only able to temporarily quell his pain by burning his skin with hot metal. Likewise, his daughter Little Merced sucks on the bitter pulp of limes to counteract the same sorrow, finally dying of citric poisoning. Other minor characters also combat their sadness through unhealthy means; for example, Cameroon (Sal’s subsequent lover) suppresses her own grief with dozens of bee stings each day. While the abject sadness is not limited to El Monte, the residents of other cities such as Alhambra, San Gabriel, and South Pasadena decline to join EMF in their battle against Saturn due to past defeats, or because like Smiley, they prefer the order and consistency of “the only thing that is holding us together” (189). In this respect, Saturn’s control is the equivalent of modernity’s grand narrative or alternatively, a colonizing vision; either way, the narrative elides the specificity of experience.

However, as most residents of El Monte realize, Saturn's intrusion into their intellectual territory is nothing more than a neocolonialism that frustrates El Monte's attempts to define progress and modernity on its own terms. Just as the characters in Yamashita's novel realize the ways in which neocolonialism has been mistaken for modernity and progress, El Monte's residents also find themselves unable to "subscribe to the values of the metropole and seek to fulfill them" but at the same time, "unable to exit the system and chart a separate course" (Pratt, *Imperial* 226). Instead, however, Saturn seeks to control El Monte from afar, from the comfort of his NYC apartment; tellingly, El Monte is so insignificant in his perspective that it does not appear on his map of Los Angeles, so he must pencil in the city's location himself (53). Moreover, he enjoys the fruits of the residents' labor, their stories of sadness: Federico de la Fe tells his people that they "are part of Saturn's story. Saturn owns it. We are being listened to and watched, our lives sold as entertainment," and in this way, Saturn prevents El Monte's residents from living "[their] lives for [themselves]" (53). Rather, they find themselves being controlled by a force that seeks to control from a distance, thereby attempting to erase its complicity. Moreover, this battle is an uneven one, the subjugator Saturn asserting his economic power from abroad, funded by a generous grant from the Landin Foundation. *People* highlights the contradictory nature of U.S. empire, which, as Pratt asserts, is at once both inclusionary and exclusionary, requiring the colonized to adhere to "norms generated elsewhere [that] cannot be implemented where one is, but cannot be refused either" (*Imperial* 226). Parenti also explains that "North American and European corporations have acquired control of more than three-

fourths of the known mineral resources of Asia, Africa, and Latin America,” yet these very same nations do not enjoy the same rights as North American and European citizens in exchange (Parenti 4). The colonized subjects in *People* are unwillingly made a satellite in Saturn’s economy, forced to do his bidding without question and “to [live] their lives without looking up” (46). Saturn’s demands echo Banham’s characterization of the Plains of Id functioning as “a great service area feeding and supplying the foothills and beaches – across its flatness of distant track-laying ballast” (173). Inspired by Federico de la Fe’s speeches about “dignity through privacy and their right to be unseen” (46), El Monte rejects “the fate that has been decided for [them]” and reclaims volition (53). Unwilling to be barriozed, they ultimately wage a war against Saturn’s authorial dominance. Accordingly, they subvert his barriozing tendencies by reclaiming their agency and practicing “barriology,” to use Villa’s term, instead reemerging from the confines of their home, wresting narrative control away from Saturn’s colonizing omniscience, fighting back with their stories, and celebrating their experience as they please even in the form of sideways text.

The Fiction of the Border

El Monte, in this light, comes to represent a place of agency and its residents subvert the border system, the border fiction that Saturn imposes upon them. Exposing the fiction of national borders, they re-imagine a transnational space not unlike the

space imagined in *Tropic*. One interesting feature of the novel is the mirroring that takes place between towns in Mexico and El Monte, California:

While El Monte was one thousand four hundred forty-eight miles north of Las Tortugas and an even fifteen hundred miles from the city of Guadalajara, and while there were no cockfights or wrestling arenas, the curanderos' botanica shops, the menudo stands, and the bell towers of the Catholic churches had also pushed north, settling among the flowers and sprinkler systems. (34)

Thus, *People* suggests that border-crossings are nothing new, echoing Saldívar's assertion "that whereas modernism's border patrol once kept the barbarians out and safeguarded the future within, there is now only liminal ground" (20-1). El Monte, in this respect, is imagined as an urban space simultaneously united with Mexican towns in their epic battle against the commodification of sadness. To emphasize this connection, a tortoise that escapes from the disassembly pile "makes its way south, propelled not by a forward crawl but by pushing dirt behind its legs. Bringing Tijuana closer one scoop at a time" (96). This unification is reminiscent of Arcangel's dragging of the tropic of cancer up with him. The theme of mobility is further highlighted elsewhere in the novel; for instance, Liz is descended from Ticuanenses and Gypsies, nomadic "people without a homeland and of a bohemian fidelity" and whose homes are "set on axles and wheels" according to Sal's grandfather (107). Referring to Tijuana as a borderland occupied by migratory peoples, *People* alludes to the permeability of boundaries and questions the economic and political distinction borders are meant to delineate.

This mirroring and permeability of borders hints a larger, more comprehensive transnational space that considers colonialisms and diaspora; after all, many of the

characters have been driven out of their hometowns and settle in El Monte, hoping to cure their losses. Several characters in Plascencia's novel find themselves pushed out of their countries due to various experiences of loss. Plagued by an inability to control his bladder while he sleeps, a condition symptomatic of his sadness, Federico de la Fe drives his wife Merced away after she becomes fed up by a decade of urine-soaked sheets every morning. Moreover, unbeknownst to de la Fe, she leaves him for Jonathan Smith who "had come from England to Spanish America to colonize and help plant the seeds of Protestantism" (197). She prefers "the endearing qualities of white Protestant men," qualities such as "their height, the ease with which they made allusions to real literature (here, the author self-reflexively questions what is considered part of the canon), and the exceptionally funny, yet dry, humor they possessed," as well as the extensive knowledge of sexual positions named after Biblical figures. Though he never "[speaks] one word against the Pope," his intentions are not innocent and imply an "anti-conquest" narrative, the scenario in which European bourgeois "seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (Pratt, *Imperial* 9). Accordingly, whether Federico knows it or not, his sadness is attributable, at least indirectly, to the colonizing reach of a Western nation, and he is subsequently pushed out of his hometown.

Other characters, too, find themselves pushed out of their hometowns in Mexico by sorrow (the colonizing reach of the U.S.), and find solace in the transnational space they find in El Monte. Having "fled his childhood adobe town and settled in one made of tinsel," another character Ramon Barreto, too, finds himself pushed out of his home

country by a disease that turns his town into dust (75). However, “[a]s always, with those estranged from their patrias, it is a woman who reminds them of the maize fields and songbirds...For Ramon Barreto, [his lover] Merced de Papel was a way to return home without leaving the comforts of central air conditioning and reclining living-room chairs” (75). Furthermore, the melody of an Oaxacan songbird seems to figuratively unite Ramon’s hometown with tinseltown, thus lessening his pain to some degree (67-8). Merced de Papel and the Oaxacan songbird erase, if only temporarily, the boundaries between nations. This transnationally united space is a source of comfort for Julieta, who unlike others who “[leave] their hometowns to escape the memory of love lost, Julieta [comes] to El Monte and [finds] it” (50). Like many of her new neighbors in El Monte, she flees the sadness that seemed to curse her in El Derramadero, a small town in Jalisco. Anything that Julieta touches in the town – “stone fences...barbed wire...steel plows...alloy utensils in the kitchen drawers”—turned into dust (42). In some ways, the decay that plagues El Derramadero might be likened to the drying up of local economies, the condition that has forced many Mexican citizens to look for alternative employment in U.S. cities. Interestingly, only plastic, a synthetic substance survives in El Derramadero, suggesting the presence of an unnatural, destructive force that might be understood as NAFTA’s ability to precipitate the collapse of domestic economies and force migrations.

Significantly, Julieta’s impetus for leaving El Derramadero to head north and her relative ease in crossing the border into the United States illustrates the “reverse diaspora” Pratt speaks of in *Imperial Eyes*. When Julieta goes to the border, where once

there had been just a chalk line separating the U.S. from Mexico, the border is now fortified. Yet, she also finds “a gap in the three-hundred mile long fence where the steel had corroded,” suggesting that the same force that turns her hometown to dust also figuratively allows her, perhaps even expects her, to make her way across this border as symbolized by the hole in the fence that provides her easy passage to the U.S. side of the border (49). Her magic touch might illustrate Sadowski-Smith’s claim that “[s]ome border fictions employ magical realism to conceptualize the complexity of contemporary neoliberal realities, while others present reformist approaches, and still others call for the evolutionary overthrow of the dominant order” (10). While the fence serves to officially limit Julieta’s access to the U.S., at the same time, the hole in the fence seems to expect her border-crossing. Moreover, Pratt points out how wealthier nations use the term “free trade” euphemistically to cover up the true exploitative nature of their economic involvement in weaker nations:

For many people the imperial character of the new global order was obscured for a time by a legitimating language of free trade, flow, open markets, a global ecumene. And yet, the reverse diaspora of people from the ex-colonial countries to the cities of the ex-colonizers was mainly caused by multinational capitalism’s latest scheme to maximize profits through indebtedness and low wages, both abroad and at home. Along with people, a vast and continuous inflow of wealth comes from the poor countries to the rich, in the form of debt servicing, sheltered cash, and wildly exaggerating profits. (238)

The effects of this “new wave of plunder” has been felt by migrant laborers who “[have taken] on the task of recuperating some of that plundered wealth, to redistribute it back to its place of origin⁹⁴ (238). Clifford seems to affirm Pratt’s argument:

⁹⁴ Pratt identifies several nations whose economies “depend upon for their stability on this money sent back along family lines” (238).

[T]raditional ethnography ignores reasons for a people's displacement and that ethnographers often [localize] what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins the external relations and displacements of a 'culture'" (24). In this respect, more than just represent a novel about immigration, *People* recognizes a reverse diaspora, those forces that push residents out of Mexico and into the town of El Monte. Diaspora focuses not simply on the idea of multiple ethnic groups occupying a single space but rather on what role the adopted country plays in pushing such groups in the first place. Thus, while Federico de la Fe decides to take his daughter Little Merced northward to make a new life where she "could go to school and learn about a world that was built on cement and not mud," we need to examine why what forces shaped such a world of poverty, "mud," in the first place (19).

In this sense, then, El Monte represents a diasporic community who in the face of economic and political challenges imposed upon by a New World (B)order, attempt to define and create a community on its own terms, a community that refuses to adhere to the dominant narrative of progress. This self-portrait imagined by El Monte's people echoes what Pratt identifies as the "most conspicuous mark" or shift from the twentieth to twenty-first century, "the demise of a narrative of progress that was widely shared by peoples in very different circumstances across the planet. The grand narrative of modernity, which included all humanity in its teleological design, slowly lost its grip on imaginations and actions" (*Imperial* 238). Rody, in affirming Saldivar's critique of "linear narratives of immigration, assimilation, and nationhood," insists that we "imagine new cultural affiliations and negotiations...more dialogically, in terms of multifaceted migrations across borders. Of course, the people of El Monte are met with resistance from the dominant perspective that traditionally authors history, who in this case might be identified as those who draft hemispheric free trade agreements, those who run the *maquiladoras*, those who figuratively ride the freeways as in *Tropic*, and those who see the world through a multiculturalist lens, then literature offers an

alternative version. Refusing to let Saturn obliterate their valuable knowledges, their way of life, El Monte rises up against his omniscience, which is a metaphor for imperial control. For this reason, Federico insists on showing Little Merced the last of the Mexican heroes – the wrestler Santos, a masked Catholic saint, who is martyred, eventually perishing at the hands of Satoru “Tiger Mask” Sayama, who, in turn, might represent Japanese investment in the *maquiladora* industry. Once in El Monte, Little Merced continues to learn about economic disparity and social order/borders when she is humiliated at lunch time for not having a secondhand typewriter case instead of a proper lunch pail (41).

Travel, Mimicry, and other Colonialisms

One theme that runs through *People* is the theme of travel, a theme that is tied to the neocolonialist relationships explored in the novel; furthermore, *People*, like *Tropic* warns of the insidious nature of travel literature. To thoroughly understand how Plascencia uses travel to explore neocolonialism, we need to examine two additional claims that Pratt makes: “[T]ravel is the code that expresses the neocolonial relationship” (229) and “the dramatic changes of the last three decades require us to learn to think through mobility” (*Imperial* 238). Aside from the residents of El Monte who make the trek, we need to examine the travels of a fictionalized Rita Hayworth; Elizabeth of Helen or simply “Liz,” the former lover for whom Saturn pines; and most importantly, Saturn. The fictionalized Rita Hayworth to whom readers are introduced is

a character who was born not in Brooklyn but rather as Margarita Carmen Dolores Cansino in a Jalisco coastal town where she tends to “a plum orchard irrigated solely by salt water,” harvesting *saladitos* or salty plums (41-2). A young Margarita has her first sexual experience with an off-season fisherman and part-time lettuce picker, an experience that becomes local folklore but in a transnational space follows her even to Hollywood. Rita later moves to Baja California where vacationing Hollywood executives in a Tijuana casino discover her beauty and talents as a dancer, and eager lettuce pickers “[follow] her backstage [after shows], [lay] down their own beds of lettuce, and [solicit] her love,” advances that she rebuffs by “kicking their lettuce beds and giving them only two things: a bag of her salted fruit and a note to be delivered to the fisherman who had told them about her” (44). Angry and betrayed, a band of lettuce pickers [pelt] the screen of a movie theater screening Rita Hayworth’s latest film with rotting heads of lettuce (45).

Discovered in the border town of Tijuana, Rita knows very well that she is not simply a product of Mexico but rather a product of border culture. Yet, she is also very aware that cultures are seen as discrete and static bodies rather than dialogical, and for this reason, the border system demands that she abandon one identity for another: Rita eventually moves to tinseltown and “[sheds] syllables from her name,” excising from her birth certificate traces of her Latino heritage (56), lightens her hair, “[pinches] her cartilage until her mestizo nose was pointy,” learns “to unroll her r’s and pronounce words like *salamander* and *salad* without sounding like a wetback” through the instruction of a Fox Pictures linguist (47). On the other hand, she understands why the

lettuce pickers regard her as a sellout and traitor or *vendida*, someone who has pledged allegiance to the dominant culture. Comparing her actions to that of a MGM animal trainer who was mauled by the cubs of a lioness sold off to a traveling zoo, Rita knows the lasting pain of those betrayed:

[T]hose we betray, those we hurt...pass down their memories through generations, transferring their bitterness and resentment to their kin, never able to forgive, their arms always locked with lettuce in hand. Unable to excuse a change of address or wardrobe. Telling their children and grandchildren [Rita is] their sellout whore. (214)

Thus, when she finally arrives in El Monte to witness the war between El Monte's own and Saturn, she is not surprised when the lettuce pickers peg her Town Car with lettuce heads and chant "Rita, *vendida*...go fuck your white boys" (211). For she, too, is no stranger to sadness and pays the price for racial passing, lamenting that her lovers love not her but rather Gilda, one of her on-screen personas (47).

Yet, at the same time, her visit to El Monte is more than mere spectatorship but hints at a neocolonial motive. Is she guilty of objectifying and exoticizing the people of El Monte in ways similar to what Clifford observes happening in Philadelphia neighborhoods? (42) For the Hollywood starlet, El Monte becomes a spectacle that she views through the lens of a colonizer, despite her similarly marginalized beginnings and the ethnicity she shares with many of El Monte's residents. In fact, the lettuce pickers characterize her attitude as that of a colonizing traveler, if travel includes sites traversed by commodities, pipelines, as well as tourists (Clifford 28). She imposes upon El Monte her presence, the story she wishes to tell, rather than allow the townspeople to tell their own: according to the lettuce pickers, she "always wants the spotlight, forcing

herself into stories that are not hers. The sky falling and she starts her dancing routine” (217). In this sense, Rita assumes the role of an ethnographer who narrates the story of El Monte from the perspective of the subjugator, not that of the residents or lettuce pickers; her presence in El Monte then only serves to underscore the socio-political power with which she is imbued and that the residents lack. Her role as a traveler to the space of El Monte might also suggest that she, like a flâneur (though not exactly a flâneur since no true “crowd” exists in El Monte), defines herself against the common man acknowledging the anonymous existence in a modern world but only as a means of defining oneself against such anonymity. Despite the stakes of the imminent battle and the sovereignty El Monte stands to lose, Rita makes a mockery of their struggles by “[tossing] her cigarette holder in midair and [catching] it between her lips” (217). More than signal her insensitivity, Rita’s actions suggest that she actually needs this very backdrop of colonized people against which to define herself.

However, her performance, her use of her beauty and body to call attention to herself is not within the scope of the flâneur whose experience is inherently a male one; she, too, is a sight for consumption. Perhaps then, she might instead be considered a traveler, who “by definition, is someone who has the security and privilege to move about, in relatively unconstrained ways (Clifford 34). At the same time, however, as a female traveler, her options are limited: she can “conform to, masquerade, or rebel discreetly within a set of normatively male definitions and experiences” (Clifford 32). Rita has chosen to conform to the tourist/spectator norm, and in doing so perhaps is in fact constrained, lacking the ability to move about freely. In this respect, Rita lacks

agency and is subject to a different yet comparable neocolonialism herself. And though the lettuce pickers call her a *vendida*, alluding to *La Malinche* (variously known as Malintzín Tenepal and Doña Marina), perhaps Rita's lack of agency might be compared to Malintzín Tenepal's own limited agency as a woman. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano notes how Cherrie Moraga's "'Vendidas' critiques the narrative, crystallized in Octavio Paz's influential telling, of how Cortes' mistress, translator, and tactical advisor – 'La Malinche' – made possible the defeat of a people and the destruction of their culture through sexual union with the 'white' European conqueror. In 'La Malinche,' signifier of betrayal, the historical experience of colonization is spoken in the language of a racialized and gendered sexuality that produces the 'half-breed' or mestizo race," and the myth "[constructs] the woman as soft, passive object," a tool Cortes uses to colonize the New World (33). In this respect, though like other travelers who "move about under strong cultural, political, and economical compulsions," she may actually represent a materially "oppressed" traveler rather than a "materially privileged" one (35). As Hollywood's marketable product, she must dance even when the sky is falling.

Saturn, like Rita, comes from humble beginnings yet vacillates between the colonizer and colonized positions. Saturn is one of El Monte's own, accustomed to the sound of crop dusters dropping pesticides on the rows of carnations in his hometown and his mother familiar with the ways of the curanderos. Despite this fact, however, and despite the fact that he rails against the white men who colonize his own dreams and his one true love Liz, he is, in spirit, a colonizer of thoughts, perched at his figurative command post, a NYC apartment, imposing his presence on the people of El

Monte. Yet, like Rita, he is also victimized by the very colonizing force, which he ultimately mimics when his beloved Liz leaves him for a white lover, moving to a Pasadena apartment, choosing the city's "neat shrubs and painted mailboxes" over El Monte's working class dwellings. Liz is to Sal what Rita Hayworth is to the lettuce pickers, and when she abandons him, his world literally begins to crumble, pieces of sky falling to the earth. Saturn scathingly accuses her of being a sellout, "worse than Rita Hayworth. Too good to fuck us lettuce pickers...Vendida...worse than the Malinche, worse than Pocahontas. Fucking white boys and making asbestos fall from the attic" (118). Thus when his affection for Liz goes unrequited, he promotes himself to "the loyal and kind one, the only one true to Monte. The romantic hero" (137). Under the command of Sal, the lettuce pickers attack Liz's front door with heads of rotting lettuce everyday to remind her of her transgressions. His "diatribe against womanhood" reminiscent of the bitter rants of the protagonist in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Saturn lists various women from history and pop culture who proved to be the undoing of men and various civilizations, calling them the pejorative "cunt": Mary Louise to Napoleon, Eve to Adam, Delilah to Sampson, and Ashley Judd to Val Kilmer in *Heat*.

However, Liz, finally unable to remain silent while Sal continues to vilify her in writing, stands up to him and calls him on his colonizing ways. Lusting for power, omniscience, and authorial dominance, Saturn, too, has proven to be a sellout. She points out that he has turned on his hometown, abandoning the modesty of El Monte for what he perceives as the literary capitol, New York City; from the vantage point of New

York City, Saturn has assumed the role of an expansionist, gazing westward toward El Monte, salivating at sight of a literary frontier –a vast expanse of raw stories to be exploited - in the same way that the European explorers and settlers gazed upon the New World as a raw wilderness in need of shaping, as a blank canvas in need of order. Despite the fact that his Monte represents a viable source of precious experiences, Saturn attempts to eliminate them from the book by literally squeezing them off the page, widening his columns and further quieting their voices. At the same time, he commodifies their stories of sorrow for his own gain:

In a neat pile of paper, you have offered up not only your hometown, EMF, and Federico de la Fe, but also me, your grandparents and generations beyond them, your patria, your friends, even Cami. You have sold everything, save yourself. You have delivered all this into their hands, and for what? For twenty dollars and the vanity of your name on the book cover. (138)

Greedy selling their stories of struggle to make his own mark on the world, Saturn, too, has sold out. By envisioning El Monte as a frontier to be conquered, Saturn imposes a form of colonialism upon the town. Sal is no flâneur given the lack of a true “crowd” in L.A., but he is not a flâneur for another reason: while he may define himself against the common man when acting in his capacity as a colonizing Saturn, his identification with the common man other times, the lettuce pickers abandoned by Rita, for example, also prevents him from being a flâneur. In fact, his empathy with their social position causes the grand narrative to go astray, and in this respect, *People* self-consciously comments on the moral dilemma that writers always face: on one hand, telling a people’s stories may give them a voice, but on the other hand, stories always involve some degree of exploitation.

A Battle for Narrative Control

However, the people of El Monte refuse this characterization and subvert Saturn's colonial endeavors by insisting that their stories be heard in a manner they see fit, not as Saturn wishes to narrate their lives. At first, Sandra and her fellow female EMF members use kerosene, which they set ablaze, and completely encircle El Monte with a fire, both marking the town and in proud defiance but also to obstruct Saturn's view of the townspeople and their thoughts. For this same reason, Little Merced creates a thought shield, a skill she learns from Baby Nostradamus, an all-knowing character whom others mistakenly believe to be mentally deficient (159). At first only able to hide "basic acronyms and simple sentences," Little Merced eventually graduates to obscuring compound sentences, full paragraphs, and even the most complicated of thoughts (163-4). Alluding to metafictional elements of *Tristram Shandy*, *People* contains entire sentences, paragraphs, columns, and even pages obscured by black ink that represent both Baby Nostradamus and Little Merced's respective thought shields. Yet both Sandra, Little Merced, and the people of El Monte will discover that shielding themselves from the prying eyes of Saturn is no way to live; giving into his control is not living, nor is it truthful. And like Sterne's novel, the censoring of one's thoughts, represented by a blackened page, is tantamount to death.

Thus, the residents transform the same space into what Pratt understands to be “contact zones,”⁹⁵ “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (*Imperial* 7). While a colonizing force may impose a particular way of life, perceived as a superior way of life, on a colonized peoples in both colonial frontier lands and in contact zones, contact zones, unlike colonial frontiers, define the “relations among colonizers, or travelers and ‘travelees,’ not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power”⁹⁶ (8). Viewing these spaces as a contact zone thus empowers the colonized people, giving them an opportunity to define interactions with the colonizer not as a stages in some narrative of progress but rather for what the interactions really are, “relationships, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (*Imperial* 8). If Saturn’s strategy has been to force El Monte from the pages of his book, make them concede territory, the people realize that using his same tactic would be to simply mimic the language of their oppressor. Is Saturn, in his anger toward Liz and the colonizers who invade his thoughts and relationships, merely replicating a new colonialism? Brady warns that “the radicality of an anti-imperialist geographic imaginary can be lost when identities

⁹⁵ Pratt borrows her idea of the “contact zone” from the term contact language, which refers to creole languages, “improvised [languages] that [develop] among speakers of different tongues who need to communicate with each other consistently, usually in the context of trade” (8).

⁹⁶ Pratt’s understanding of the contact zone underscores James Clifford’s demand for a “better comparative awareness of these and a growing number of other diaspora cultures...a comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling in dwelling, dwelling in traveling” (36).

are merely resedimented under a new nominative” (146). Instead, they determine that they must emerge from the shelter of lead roofs and ultimately refuse to allow Saturn to decide their fate by narrating their own stories in a manner they choose. Symbolically, their roofs are made from pieces of lead cut from the shells of mechanical tortoises, like the tortoise that symbolically unites Mexico with the U.S. Froggy rallies the people of El Monte to take a stance against Saturn and his grand narrative:

We are fighting a war against a story, against the history that is being written by Saturn. We believed that silence was our best weapon against the intrusion of Saturn, that our silence would in turn silence Saturn. But we have discovered an allergy to lead, and learned that history cannot be fought with sealed lips, that the only way to stop Saturn is through our own voice. (209)

Accordingly, Froggy encourages the citizens of El Monte to assert their collective voice, to “[say] all the things [they] had always wanted to say” (209). Some are too shy to express themselves on the spot and instead choose to first write their words down and then read them; others read letters kept in their back pockets while still others “read from underlined passages in worn and dog-eared books” in autoethnographic fashion (209). Whereas ethnography is told from the colonizer/traveler’s perspective, “autoethnographic expression...refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s terms[,]...texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (Pratt, *Imperial* 9). First, the people of El Monte used the monks’ strategy of “quiet meditation” (216). Though at first orderly in their military formations, they abandon order, an order Saturn prefers, for a more honest, natural response to Saturn’s tyranny, letting their “voices [bloom] everywhere, like wild

unfurrowed flowers. EMF members are “finally free to step wherever [they] wished, to think what [they] wanted, [their] story unobstructed, unexploited by Saturn” (212).

While they borrow the convention of columns from Saturn, various characters⁹⁷, major and minor, express their stories, no longer constrained by Saturn’s omniscience, a freedom signified in the way they place the columns on the page, forcing readers to turn the book sideways. Society has returned to the geography of El Monte.

In critiquing Saturn’s control of the narrative, *People* simultaneously critiques what Clifford sees as “the monological control of the executive writer/anthropologist and to open up for discussion ethnography’s hierarchy and negotiation of discourses in power-charged, unequal situations” (28). Clifford reminds us that historical accounts are often told from a biased perspective that always posits the traveler/ethnographer above the travelee/subject of writing; at the same time, he warns of the other danger in “[asserting] a naïve democracy of plural authorship,” perhaps comparable to the multiculturalism loathed by Emi in *Tropic*. Now, rather than allow Saturn to speak on behalf of El Monte, El Monte speaks its collective voice:

After all these pages, as Saturn faded, it was our voice that directed the story, our collective might pressing Saturn into a corner. No master pushed us forward or held us back. We were no longer obliged to serve anybody’s expectations but our own. [We] could sit in [our chairs] and do nothing. Glory or dénouement could come, and [we] didn’t have to move. (216)

⁹⁷ These characters include Subcomandante Sandra, Smiley, Pelon, and Little Oso, members of EMF; Julieta; Baby Nostradamus, a drooling child soothsayer; two alter boys, Cardinal Mahony; Rita Hayworth and the lettuce pickers; Cameroon; Jonathan Mead, Cameroon’s long lost father; Little Merced; Apolonio; Saturn; Natalia and Quinones, owners of a honeymooners-only hotel; Julieta; the elote man; Ralph and Elisa Landin; Legal Counsel for the Ralph and Elisa Landin Foundation; the Mechanic who first introduces Federico de la Fe to the mechanical tortoises; a *luche libre* wrestler Satoru “Tiger Mask” Sayama; and the Marching Franciscan Monks of the First Order.

No longer “shy of [their] own freedom and voice” and no longer willing to be censored (taking refuge behind the walls of their homes or behind thought shields), the narrative of the story now belonged to El Monte. On the other hand, those like Smiley, who mourn the loss of convention and imposed order, continue to exist, disgruntled that “order [has] been upset, lost in a melee of voices that for years wanted their freedom” (217).

Accordingly, the narrative proposed by El Monte’s people suggests a new ethics, one that is more representative of traditionally marginalized voices, one that more accurately portrays the tensions between colonizer and colonized and between order and freedom, one that is inclusive of contradictory narratives, and one that does not depict order as uncontested, readily accepted social, political, and economic norms. Had Smiley slit Saturn’s throat when the opportunity presented itself, the blood that spilled from Saturn’s throat would have spoken to these very tensions and asymmetrical relations of power: “Because if that is what he wants, to write, let him write his own blood letter on the cloth and foam of his mattress. A dense warm prose that stains the floors and always reappears six coats of paint later. Something that will remain longer than any novel will” (104). However, because Smiley chooses not to kill Saturn, EMF and El Monte must pursue an alternate means of expressing themselves.

Yet, at the same time, the novel also serves as a reminder of how fragile such history, one that ethically and accurately represents these tensions, can be; this fragility is expressed in the novel’s title and in Merced de Papel who provides an alternative to Saturn’s communication. Merced de Papel is a character born not out of sexual union

but rather from the skilled hands of an origami surgeon named Antonio⁹⁸ who constructs her using cardboard, newspaper, and construction paper along with pages from the *Bible*, the *Book of Incandescent Light*, and Austen and Cervantes novels (25). She is a hybrid of sorts: part person, part historical record. Little Merced names Merced de Papel after herself when they meet on the bus headed to Los Angeles, “the last refuge for those who had lost their civilization and were afraid of the rain” (25). Her vulnerability to fire and rain or any water and the fact that she is the “last known survivor of her people” (unbeknownst to her, Liz is another person of paper) speaks to her fragility and prompts Merced de Papel to document everything she experiences in a book, *Los Dolores y Amores de la Gente de Papel*, a title which roughly translates to “the pain and love of the people of paper.” In her book, she chronicled the challenges of romance as a person of paper whose sharp edges often scar her lovers with paper cuts. In contrast, however, while “men sometimes hope that she would let some of the stains remain, if only for the afternoon...Merced de Papel never [allows] history to accumulate, her skin changing with the news of the world” (164-65). Like her short-lived relationships, a month-long at most, she painstakingly removes all traces of her lovers from the surface of her body “[peeling] away every mark and scribble her lovers left” including blood stains of her lovers’ paper cuts, shopping lists, and even Sal’s scrawls of “Liz” a thousand times upon her back (165). When Merced de Papel dies in

⁹⁸ Giving up a lucrative sidewalk business folding paper into the shapes of animals, Antonio locates the now-closed down factory where Franciscan monks once fashioned people from scraps of paper until the Vatican decided to cease producing people in this manner. Though he creates Merced de Papel, he never gets to see the fruits of his labor because while he is passed out, exhausted from his nonstop labor, she exits the factory (12-15).

a head-on collision on L.A.'s Wilshire Boulevard on a rainy day, there is no official record of her death because the rain transforms her into a soggy pulp that washes away into the street's rain gutters. Her demise illustrates the fragility of existence and history, how our stories, like Merced de Papel's fate, are vulnerable to erasure.

Furthermore, Merced de Papel and her lovers' conflicting accounts demonstrate how history is never unified and is always fraught with tension, pain, and loss. Even though Merced de Papel attempts to control history in the way that Saturn does by eliminating all traces of these men from her body, ultimately, she cannot control the image of her others paint. Aware that accounts of her existence recorded in the scar tissue of her lovers may be bitter or otherwise biased, she chronicles her own history to counter those whom she refused to rekindle romances: men who devote two years in seclusion to writing the perfect love song to for her, men who sent "flowers, chocolate-covered fruit, and reams of archival paper scented with perfume," men who photographed "fifty different men with scars across their lips" for a "Pictorial of a Paper Whore" (168). Yet, those most hurt by her, those whose long tongues "stretched by the long vowels and double r's of the Spanish language" are scarred and mourn her the most (201). Yet, the fact that both Merced de Papel and her lovers record their respective scars represents success in that the multiple perspectives counteract a grand narrative; in this respect, the work they do is not unlike that of Arcangel in *Tropic* who seeks a more inclusive history, a history that speaks of both order and disorder, of both norms and subverting norms, of both colonizers and colonized peoples, of both colonial frontiers and contact zones. Such a history would include the perspectives of both

victors and defeated civilizations to underscore how historical authorship – who has the privilege of writing history - is always in flux. Any grand narrative that purports to convey an official history is dismantled by the multiplicity of authors in *People*, but such a dismantling would never have been possible if not for a monk, who challenges the decree of the Vatican by telling Antonio how to find the factory in the first place (53). The texts written by the people of El Monte, Merced de Papel, and her slighted lovers illustrate the decolonization of knowledge, history, and human relations as Pratt suggests and also offers a means of exposing the asymmetrical power-relations inherent in these relationships. If literature seeks new cultural and ethical possibilities, a new social consciousness, then *People* accomplishes this goal by de-centering the dominant narratives of origin, unity, and linearity.

Although Saturn is considerably weakened, the residents of El Monte ultimately lose the war against his tyranny. Defeated, Federico de la Fe and Little Merced pack up their belongings and “walked south and off the page, leaving no footprints that Saturn could track” (245). Their departure indicates their concession to Saturn’s oppression, their insistence that “[t]here would be no sequel to the sadness” (245). Significantly, early on in the novel (Chapter 3), Froggy El Veterano, now an old man, laments what El Monte and EMF have become, not unlike the way in which Waldie quietly laments what Lakewood has become in *Holy Land*. No longer a place of rural ideals, community, and coalition, El Monte now resembles the city with its focus on profit, cold, hard cash: “El Monte was no longer a town of flowerbeds and strawberry fields. Stucco houses paved alleys, and cement riverbanks now covered its soil. And instead of

flowers, gasoline pumps and lampposts rose from El Monte, all marked by the EMF tags,” the gangs engaged in bloody disputes over territory and customer bases for their drug trade (46). Instead of taking pride in “wars of volition,” Froggy explains, “Pride now came in the form of shank marks, scars left by screwdrivers and switchblades; the indentation of flesh where the bullet entered” (46). So caught up are EMF’s members in mapping new territories to exploit, that they have forgotten their gang’s rural beginnings and the origin of its name, El Monte Flores.

Conclusion

However, some degree of hope, though perhaps a muted hope, persists, speaking to the apocalyptic tension of Salvador Plascencia’s *People of Paper*. The possibility of human disaster in the future, a looming second war against Saturn, implies the ongoing nature of the project of de-centering grand narratives: El Monte will have another opportunity to assert itself against new colonialisms. When the gang members respectfully decline to declare a second war against Saturn, Froggy finally abandons his campaign. Though Saturn threatens to re-colonize their existence, EMF is unwilling to fight a war that even the veterans could not win and ignore Froggy’s admonitions that they would regret their decision one day “when they were old men and were making love to their wives, they would feel a mocking smile staring down at them from the rings of Saturn (49). Yet, despite EMF’s failure to recognize the wisdom of Froggy’s words, *People* suggests a future of possibility in the “unwritten afterword.” The

declaration at the end of the novel that “there would be no sequel to the sadness” is Saturn’s since he has regained narrative control of the story. Nevertheless, if Federico and El Monte fought in the “war against the future of this story,” that future, that afterword, has yet to be written as Froggy. Accordingly, there necessarily remains the potential for El Monte’s residents to narrate their own lives, to transform the space of El Monte once more into a place of free thinking and society.

On the other hand, in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, hope amidst the apocalypse comes in the form of what Rody sees as the new or “Ngu” family whose hybridity implies and a “critical paradigm” (23), a negotiation of difference (26), and a revised understanding of society. The conflicts between the Ngu family and imperialist predators and within the Ngu family speak to such negotiations, revealing how hybridity, as a critical lens, accounts for more than ethnic difference, tackles the effects of U.S. empire, and highlights “the creative potential of ethnically mixed situations and identities [that arise] within difficult, overdetermined historical contexts” (Rody 22). Accordingly, this Ngu family occupies a newly and differently-defined space that favors the notion of multiple connections (economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and definitely historical) over the too narrow binary formulations; its complexity, comprehensiveness, and elusiveness might be likened to the Aleph. *Tropic* sends a clear message that failing to acknowledge this New World (B)order threatens tragic consequences such as baby organ-trafficking, the figurative dismembering of tomorrow’s hope, tomorrow’s generation.

Both *Tropic of Cancer* and *People of Paper* describe transnational worlds that are fragmented and governed by shifting borders and reexamine the narratives of unity, linearity, and progress championed by modernism. Yamashita and Plascencia's novels also question a postmodern reading's ability to take into account other identifications and differences such as race, ethnicity, diaspora, colonialism, and gender, demonstrating how such categories continually erode and redraw the boundaries of nation. Yet, both works avoid the pitfall of imagining an easy formulation of a transnational world that elides such differences in the same way that multiculturalism does. While human disasters result from failure to acknowledge the fictions of borders imposed by colonial forces, the characters Yamashita and Plascencia imagine still remain poised for the apocalypse, ready to address the uneven distribution of power that result from new colonialisms and to transcend such oppressions. Both novels warn that if we do not reformulate our transnational imaginary into a "contact zone," one that honestly recognizes to and adequately grapples with the colonizing reach of the U.S., the U.S.-Mexico border's historical permeability, and the diasporic relationships between immigrant Americans and their home countries. While hope is just a glimmer in the unwritten afterword of *People of Paper*, *Tropic of Orange* is more future-tending, envisioning a more cohesive transnational "Ngu" humanity.

Chapter Four

The Virgin of Flames: The Urban Purgatory of Los Angeles

Introduction

The Nigerian-born Chris Abani is a contemporary Nigerian writer who addresses the themes of post-colonialism, diaspora, transnationalism, and hybridity in his fiction. Yet, Abani's work, in the opinion of several scholars, represents a new generation of Nigerian literature less focused on the specific topic of nationalism and more on the significance of the nation-state's place in the era of globalization, signaling a shift in the canon⁹⁹ (Adéèkó 11-12). Chielozona Eze asserts that the current generation of Nigerian writers is characterized by "a shift from the postcolonial concern of blame to the inner, transcultural one within the African socio-political setup....They do not 'write back' to the Empire in the classic fashion of postcolonial textualities. Rather they focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space with the goal of enhancing human flourishing there" (qtd. in Novak 49). In this respect, Eze affirms Adéèkó's observation that the more recent body of Nigerian literature explores the theme of identity not in reaction to a colonial past but rather in the larger framework of the transnational imagination. Along these same lines, Obi Nwakanma, categorizing Abani as part of the "third generation of Nigerian writers, comments on the "cosmopolitan" nature of current

⁹⁹In "Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination," Adéèkó shifts the focus of Nigerian nationalism to the relationship between the U.S. and the way Nigeria is figured in more recent Nigerian works of fiction including Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and Chris Abani's *Graceland*, comparing these works to earlier Nigerian fiction.

Nigerian literature, “the intriguing presence or overwhelming prominence of Igbo novelists writing in the English language” and asserts that this “Igbo traveling identity” has been key “in the formation of the modern state[,]...providing the cultural and historical factors, stimulus or circumstances that animate” the current body of “contemporary Nigerian national literature” (1). In fact, referring to himself as a “global Igbo,” Abani “has invited his readers to appraise their moral landscapes” and focuses on the theme of “human resilience” and “redemption, the remarkable spirit of those who refuse to be defeated by historical forces” (Okpala).

This very cosmopolitan element of recent Nigerian literature is evident in Chris Abani’s 2007 novel *The Virgin of Flames*, illustrating Adéèkó, Eze, Nwakanma’s characterization of current themes in the Nigerian literary canon, highlighting what Nwakanma identifies as “transborder claims...and new metropolitan tropes,” an examination of which is essential to “fully [comprehending] the nature of Nigeria’s contemporary cultural production as well as its implication or significance in shaping modern, postcolonial Nigerian identity and the direction of its narrative of the nation” (1). Yet, according to Rob Nixon, Abani’s diasporic, transnational fiction responds to Raymond Williams’s call nearly three decades ago “for more novels that attend to “the close living substance’ of the local while simultaneously tracing the ‘occluded relationships—the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics—that invisibly shape the local”¹⁰⁰ (qtd. in Nixon 443).

¹⁰⁰ Rob Nixon further explains, “To hazard such novels poses imaginative challenges of a kind that writers content to create what Williams termed “enclosed fictions” need never face, among them the challenge of rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness (*Writings* 238). In our age of expanding and accelerating globalization, this particular imaginative difficulty has been cast primarily in spatial

Although *The Virgin of Flames* is another story that takes a closer look at the marginal spaces of the City of Angels and thus focuses on close human bonds, Abani's novel simultaneously posits the narrative in the larger transnational imaginary by including several diasporic characters, including its deeply troubled protagonist Black, a starving artist, who longs to quell the internal demons that haunt him. Whereas *Holy Land* describes a migration from the margins toward the center and *Tortilla Curtain* examines a reaction against such an expansion of the margin, Abani's text presents the margin paradoxically as a focal point. In contrast, the novels *Amnesiascope*, *Southland*, *Tropic of Orange*, and *People of Paper* respectively lure the readers away from the center, beckoning them to join their characters in L.A.'s margins, a location that offers an illuminating vantage point and that exposes the truth about dominant culture. Just as bell hooks sees a "definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility," Abani's novel imagines a similar subversive space in which a marginalized population asserts their agency in questioning their oppressed status (153). A significant contribution to "a growing literature on the new city" that includes *Southland*, *Virgin* addresses the need to look backwards into history and not to burn it "but to render it and, in the process, to face our difference once and for all" (Martinez).

terms, as exemplified by John Berger's pronouncement, famously cited in Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*: "Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality" (qtd. in Soja 22).

Recentring the Margins and Peering into L.A.'s Heart of Darkness

In *Virgin of Flames*, the story takes place entirely in the marginal spaces of the city – fitting given L.A.'s characterization by Waldie as a “metropolis that only has edges,” (*Where* 13) this oft forgotten space now becoming the central focus of meaning in Los Angeles. Abani does not depict a city of smoke and mirrors, shallow definitions based on the material, political muscling, nouveau riche pretension, or icons:

Los Angeles for [Black] wasn't Beverly Hills, or the movies, or Rodeo Drive. It wasn't the deception of movie studios that built sets with varying door sizes so that cowboys looked brawnier against the smaller doors and ladies daintier against the taller ones. It wasn't the Mulhollands and their water, nor the people everywhere with too perfect hair and smiles as fake as the teeth they framed. Nor was it San Marino and its pretend class, or even the Hollywood sign. (99)

Instead, Abani's L.A. is the quintessential postmodern L.A. – variously depicted as an egalitarian, elitist, nativist, hospitable, fractured, interconnected, transnational, and colonizing city. L.A. is quite honestly, a fragmented metropolis¹⁰¹, where the margins shape the city's “center.” If the city is understood metaphorically as the human psyche, then the city's fragmentation illustrates at least one version of postmodernity defined by Simon Malpas: “For many people, the mere mention of the world ‘postmodernism’ brings immediately to mind ideas of fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality, all of which are indeed key postmodern figures”¹⁰² (5). Abani employs

¹⁰¹ In *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles*, Waldie refers to Los Angeles as a “heteropolis, fractal city, regional city, exopolis, post-modern city” (14).

¹⁰² Simon Malpas elaborates upon postmodernism, warning that its surrounding discourse is also “fractured and fragmented”:

As a means of thinking about the contemporary world, the postmodern has been defined in a huge variety of different ways: as a new aesthetic formation (Hassan, 1982, 1987), a condition (Lyotard, 1984; Harvey, 1990); a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self-

postmodern pastiche in fusing the L.A. disaster genre with Biblical allusions, Catholic rituals, Mariology, Islamic allusions, Igbo and Greek mythology, postcolonial commentary, onto the urbanscape of L.A. in *Virgin*. Abani's conception of the city also affirms the decentered nature that Phillip Brian Harper locates in the "individual human psyche":

Postmodernist theory suggests that our sense of the individual human psyche as an integrated whole is a necessary misconception, and that various technological, economic, and philosophical developments of that late 20th century demonstrate to us the psyches fundamentally incoherent and fragmentary, or decentered nature. (3)

In both of these respects, the setting of Abani's novel is not a unified urban space or even an urban core complemented by or competing with its margins; rather, *Virgin's* gritty, industrial, L.A. River-adjacent locale is a relatively insignificant piece of real estate compared to the material excess of Rodeo Drive, the McMansions of Beverly Hills, the celebrity-sightings of Hollywood, the sun-kissed residents of Manhattan Beach, or the vanilla modesty of the San Gabriel Valley. In many ways, the sobering portrait of the city that *Virgin* paints is reminiscent of John Rechy's depiction of L.A. in *City of Night*, a novel in which the narrator is aware of disappointment experienced by dreamers of the golden dream (Wyatt 43).

Despite this reality, however, *Virgin's* L.A., imbued with apocalyptic tension, represents the real pulse and soul of the city, a spatial synecdoche in which the marginal space really represents the whole. Significantly, one of the specific settings of this gritty

conscious representation (Hutcheon 1988, 2002), an ethical or political imperative (Bauman, 1993, 1995), a period in which we have reached the 'end of history' (Baudrillard, 1994; Fukuyama, 1992; Vattimo, 1988), a 'new horizon of our cultural, philosophical and political experience' (Laclau, 1988), an 'illusion' (Eagleton, 1996), a reactionary political formation (Callinocos, 1989), or even just a rather unfortunate mistake (Norris, 1990, 1993). (7)

L.A. is the Ugly Store, a name that evokes the concept of the “beauty shop,” revealing Abani’s deliberate play on words. Whereas a beauty shop might figuratively contribute to some grand narrative that privileges that which is beautiful and implies coherence, the Ugly Store becomes a space that acknowledges postmodernity’s fragmentation and lack of coherence, a sight where subjects seek the truth, however revolting, probing the hidden memories and secrets in the most marginal of spaces within themselves. In this way, the L.A. imagined in the novel affirms Lois Parkinson Zamora’s claim that “[a]pocalypse sets tribulation against triumph and defies suffering in terms of transcendence” (*Writing* 10). In the apocalyptic tradition, confronting that which is ugly gives birth to beauty in the Ugly Store, which promises its clientele a different sort of makeover, one from the inside out: psychic, emotional, and spiritual reinvention.

Fittingly, the characters who occupy this imagined L.A. do not exemplify a unified beauty but rather the “ugly” in this particular sense, existing on the fringes of society, their “damaged psyches and/or bodies” reflected in their extreme, carnivalesque identities (Stobie 171). The protagonist Black is a starving artist, whose occupation alone suggests dedication. Haunted by a traumatic past, he has been suicidal at times and is drawn to cross-dressing, the motivation for such activity connected to his childhood, specifically his unresolved feelings about his parents. Finally, Black’s inability to quell the overwhelming emotions that over-stimulate him is the cause of an almost permanent erection, a condition which he conceals by binding his penis. Iggy is a fakir psychic for whom physical pain induces truth-telling trances; Bomboy, an ex-Nigerian soldier possesses expertise in killing, which becomes a translatable skill in his capacity as an

owner-operator of an illegal halal¹⁰³ slaughterhouse; and Sweet Girl, a transsexual stripper, identifies as a lesbian. Drawing upon Christian Ethics and Practical Theology scholar Marcella Altheus-Reid, Cheryl Stobie discusses the potential promised by *Virgin's* socially and sexually deviant characters:

The desires and anxieties of those outside the 'heterosexual pervasive normative, including Sweet Girl, Black, and others, are of major concern....It is...a carnivalesque space of artistic creativity and metamorphosis of self, supported by the alternative tribe. Simultaneously, the neighborhood is a place of desolation, addiction, death, and thoughts of suicide, as well as a place of revelation, devotion, and yearning for spiritual blessings. The sexual and the spiritual are not compartmentalized in a Manichaeian division. The world of the text is discomfiting, excessive, transgressive, corporeal, and perverse. The indecent theology embedded in the novel may well cause some readers to flee, but for those who stay the course the effect is perversely uplifting. (172)

More importantly, however, their wounded personas and outsider identities come to stand for the larger wounded nature of L.A. as a whole, the grievances of an entire urban society. The notion of an outsider identity is most apparent with respect to *Virgin's* break with society's heteronormative imperative, yet this deviation also suggests a potentially transformative space. Furthermore, Stobie's description of the marginal space imagined in *Virgin* as a paradoxical combination of "desolation, addiction, death, and thoughts of suicide" and "revelation, devotion, and yearning for spiritual blessings" affirms the apocalyptic tension of the novel (172).

Yet, the urban landscape of *Virgin* also suggests the possibility of reinvention and renewal, a hopeful message that contradicts the dearth and death of the L.A. imagined in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. Black observes how "[I]n...moments of wind

¹⁰³ Halal, Arabic for "lawful" or "permitted," is a label given to foods that conform to Islamic law in variety, processing, and preparation ("Halal").

and rain, Los Angeles revealed its kinship...what was otherwise a large garbage pile left to compost in the heat pulled its sleeves back and demonstrated the trick of this becoming; a city constantly digesting its past and recycling itself into something new” (153). The protagonist’s comment highlights the currency of history, the city always “digesting” or reinterpreting the past for new meanings, an idea that resonates with the messages of the works examined in the previous chapters. In Abani’s text, L.A. is the quintessential city of transplants, with very few “natives,” including its fauna: “Nearly everything now native to Los Angeles came from somewhere else. That was perhaps its beauty, Black thought. That it never tired of reinventing itself, producing as many shades and nuances of being as a bougainvillea: pink, magenta, purple, red, orange, white and yellow” (177). The sheer number of variants is reflected in Black’s vocabulary: “nuances” is a term even more specific than mere shades and speaks to the multitude of available identifications for the L.A. subject that defy easy categorization. Iggy tells Black that L.A. can function as catalyst, “[holding] for him...the power to become, to confront a past in such a way that does not make him stagnant. One that allows him to move forward” (207). L.A. provides the perfect setting for a subject intent on transformation because the city lacks a “common mythology” that controls the narratives of its residents; instead, the unstable nature of the past means flexibility, a welcomed “ambivalence” for its residents as Iggy suggests:

In LA we are always becoming, and *any* idea of a solid past, as an anchor, is soon lost there...that’s why people come here, to get lost or to be discovered...But here, there is...just you and what you see and imagine this place and your life in it to be, moment by moment. If you can’t change, if you don’t embrace it, you destroy yourself. The only landscape in this city is in your mind. It’s very Zen. (207)

L.A. thus functions as a metaphor for “continuous reinvention” (Cheuse 6) though some critics view such a reading of the city as “uncritical recitations of booster-like slogans” (Martinez). Nevertheless, Abani’s characterization of L.A. as the perceived locus for transformation is echoed in the Waldie’s admission about his relationship with the city: “But I am, like millions of others, an Angeleño by willful reinvention” (*Where* 14). And though a person “had to yield to it, before it revealed any of its magic,” L.A. was not the shallow sunny paradise depicted on postcards or the empty, meaningless city depicted in *Locust*; rather, the city offers Abani’s characters insight, a “rambling maze” that “forced [them] to find the city within [them]. In that way it was a grown-up city....And even in this city with no blizzards and a fiberglass mastodon pretending to drown in a tar pit, truth could be found on misty mornings” (177-78).

Psychically but unknowingly attracted to the Ugly Store for this reason, Black, the deeply lost protagonist of *Virgin*, finds himself at Iggy’s storefront one night, in his darkest moment. Just hours before, Black finds himself contemplating suicide, purposefully peering over the edge of L.A.’s 4th Street bridge, and the self-inflicted scar with which he later “[carves] himself into visibility...[t]o fill the emptiness inside...a deep well” is the only reason he does not kill himself (30). There at the Ugly Store, Black meets Iggy for the first time, embarking, though he does not yet know it, on a voyage inward into the darkest places in his psyche. As the owner of the Ugly Store and a fakir psychic, the once Jewish Iggy is an allusion to the body performance artist Stelarc whose fascination with what he saw as the potential of the body, despite its obsolescence, to “[trigger] an evolutionary dialectic with technology to produce a hybrid human – one

that will generate new diversity and tremendous potential in the human phylum”¹⁰⁴ (*Los Angeles* 74). This dialectic is exactly what Iggy engenders in her work, inducing herself into trances to predict her clients’ futures by “[suspending] her body midair” from custom-made stainless steel loops that have been “threaded under her skin. Three on each side of her spine” (31-2). Black compares the odd picture of Iggy suspended in midair over a client seated in the Ugly Store’s tattooing chair to “a bald, white, demented broken-wing bat” and the stretched skin of her back to “the big pimples of a fetish cushion” or “[a] witch from the Middle Ages about to be flayed” (32). Iggy’s sadomasochistic clairvoyance rewards pain with clarity, answers to the physical scars, “psychic scars, mental scars, and general eccentricities” of her clients, who now included the likes of Jennifer Garner and Uma Thurman whom Black observes “scratching desperately but discreetly at their faces to ensure entry” (31):

Once in a trance, Iggy divined a shape and began to create an intricate tattoo on the client. While the needle danced over burning flesh, she would sing the prediction in a droning monotone that matched the needle’s buzz. The results varied, ranging from a single black dot, small geometric shapes and flowers, to the one that covered a client’s entire back. It all depended on how long the client had been coming to see her. For squeamish clients, she offered a henna alternative so that they could reverse the designs, but though she never said anything about it, Black could tell from her eyes that she disapproved of the no-pain-wanna-gain clients. (32)

This “need pain to gain” theme is prevalent throughout the Ugly Store and the artwork by Black which adorns the wall of the café. Black composes a head-turning mural entitled *American Gothic: The Remix*, an ironic nod to iconic Americana. Through this piece,

¹⁰⁴ In a 1984 exhibit for the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Stelarc suspended himself by wires to engage the technology-body dialectic to exemplify “THE END OF EVOLUTION/THE SPLITTING OF THE SPECIES” (*Los Angeles* 74).

Black aims to acknowledge ugly, private truths to which the larger society turns a blind eye, this blindness symptomatic of its decay and malaise: social inequalities and racial and sexual loathing in a public era of political correctness. The mural transforms the space of the Ugly Store into the sort of marginal space hooks envisions “as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives...not a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (149-50). Symbolically, this mural, comprised mostly of racist and sexist jokes that he paints onto a canvas, is the only mural that Black locates indoors, juxtaposing a public art form in a private space:

Covering one whole wall in the [Ugly Store], it measured eleven feet high...and thirty feet long...and was composed entirely of jokes (racist and sexist ones preferably) that he had collected over the years from the walls of men’s rooms in Los Angeles. That was the criteria. At first he had collected them himself but over time, as he had begun the installation, the community of The Ugly Store had started to collect them and pass them on to him. He was firm about their source, men’s public toilets, but flexible about the cities they came from. The best part for him was when women gave him the jokes and graffiti they had snuck into men’s toilets in restaurants and athletic clubs to jot down hurriedly. As Iggy’s fame grew among the Hollywood and ‘it’ crowd, Black began to get them from celebrities. (88-9)

Black explores the semi-private spaces of public restrooms to find material for his piece, which he combines with verses from Wallace Stevens, whose poetry, particularly “Sunday Morning,” pushes for a new world order. In “Sunday Morning,” Stevens reveals how particular belief systems, including Christianity, upon which our society relies “have become hollow and empty” for mankind, and offers poetry as a new religion to counter

such hegemonic belief systems (Clippinger). Black, too, exposes certain falsehoods that society has accepted as true and other truths it has chosen to ignore.

Specifically, Black's mural reminds his audience that Los Angeles, despite the disguise the city wore, represents no racial heaven but is instead, plagued by its own "heart of darkness" as he puts it: he attempts to expose this particular heart of darkness because "racism and sexism had retreated from the overtly public to the private...all the jokes and so forth that people only feel safe telling in the confessional space of toilets...the ones that still reveal the soul of this country to be racist and sexist" (89). Historically, this repressed racism often surfaced in violent eruptions such as the 1965 Watts Riot and 1992 L.A. Riots. Significantly, these repressed sentiments exemplified in these very verses come from mainstream society, the center that traditionally wields power, albeit from its recesses:

Paris Hilton gave him lines from the Hilton Hotel public restrooms across the globe, Aishwarya Rai from the men's toilets in Mumbai and Bombay, Penelope Cruz from Madrid, Morgan Freeman from the toilets of river boats, Sharon Osborne gave him a juicy one from Buckingham Palace, Julie Warner had given him one from the men's room in Spago's. (89)

Despite the center from which these dark sentiments are derived, the margins become the locus of truth-telling, exposing the insidious nature of racism and sexism that through Black's artwork.

Alluding to Joseph Conrad's seminal work about the man's potential for inhumanity, Black's literary allusion also highlights *Virgin's* theme of transnationalism, positing the racism and sexism expressed in these jokes in the larger global imaginary. Of mixed race - part Igbo (Nigerian) and part Salvadoran - Black's heritage is diasporic.

Another character of African (Hutu) descent, Bomboy Dickens (the irony of his surname abounds), a former child-soldier conscripted into the rebel army affirms the war-torn environment of Rwanda. Significantly, Bomboy is always seen wearing T-shirts with offensive messages, his own public means of exposing the city's "heart of darkness" (255-56); one particularly offensive T-shirt, for example, depicts a lynched black man and the message "Just Hanging," a reminder of this nation's legacy of oppression.

Although his T-shirts are shocking, in Bomboy's mind, his acts are subversive, part of a "counter language" and "space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor" to borrow hooks's definition of marginality (150). In another instance, Iggy sacrilegiously attempts to anatomically "correct" and thus sexualize a Christ figure by attaching to him a phallus made of clay; if sexuality is understood as a metaphor for empowerment, then her actions seek to undo the ways in which Christianity, represented by the Christ figure, has historically been used by colonizers to suppress the masses.

Again drawing upon Althaus-Reid, Stobie interprets Iggy's actions as indicative of her integrity, her desire to reveal the way in which "good and evil coexist, even in religion" (171). In a way, the indecent, the merging of the sacred and the profane, is essential to the absolute truth-telling that the margins of LA come to represent in the novel. In another sense, this truth-telling is the reason Black finds himself the work of June, a fellow artist, so appealing; he says that something about her prints "gave them soul...moved him, made him realize how deep surface could be" (97). Tellingly, June reimagines the "psychic space" (98) of L.A. through her latest piece, "a map of Los Angeles without the religious place names"; her project evokes Pratt's conception of the

contact zone by considering California's missionary past from the colonized subject's position, exposing and grappling with various social, political, and economic inequalities of colonialisms or their equivalent.

These stories of diaspora and colonialism have their place in postmodernism according to Harper. While Harper affirms hooks's claim in *Yearning* that "the overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance (3), he also argues that "marginalized groups' experience of decenteredness is itself a largely unacknowledged factor in the 'general' postmodern condition" (4). Finally Abani employs "many techniques, including the pervasive image of fluidity, to unsettle binaries and render brushstrokes between differing cultures, identities, and embodiments: between Africa and the United States of America, between genders, between religion and sexuality, and between art and life" (Stobie 170). The author's combination of strategies may imply a postmodern pastiche, but may also suggest a fresh interpretation of the new nation, which borders are necessarily ambiguous. According to Homi K. Bhabha, the nation is paradoxically defined by a "Janus-faced" boundary: the nation requires, on one hand, "a plurality because one person does not himself constitute nation," but on the other hand, is threatened by the possibility that "a plurality [may dilute] all strict standards of differentiation" (4). What results is "a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated" (Bhabha 4).

Accordingly, indecency paradoxically functions as a strategic medium for social, political and economic resistance, exposing inequalities and strife within the nation-state as well as unevenness that exists between nation-states. In this sense, *Virgin* shares with *Amnesiascope*, the notion of the past's currency and a refusal to use the blasé attitude as a defense, confronting these ugly truths head-on. Abani's characters welcome "the distinctions between things," contrary to the blasé (Simmel 73). In fact, stimulation abounds in the marginal spaces depicted in the novel, which the characters confront directly. Moreover, the combination of the indecency of Black's mural, Bomboy's provocative T-shirts, and Iggy's blasphemous New Testament revisions contribute to the transformation of the Ugly Store and its environs into a contact zone. In the marginal space of the Ugly Store, these repressed truths of colonialism can be made public through arguably the most public artistic medium, the mural. This transformative space allows Angelenos to make themselves over, reinvent themselves into subjects wielding power, not oppressed objects subjected by colonizing forces, a distinction that Edward Soja makes, drawing upon bell hooks's characterization of marginality as "a space of radical openness...that contributes significantly to a powerful revisioning not only of the cultural politics of difference but also of our conceptualization of human geographies" (99). These marginal spaces become the very setting of creation, reinvention, and potential sites of resistance (Soja 105).

Supplication and Slaughter

The theme of sacrifice permeates *Virgin*, speaking to the redemptive nature of the Ugly Store and environs. Iggy must temporarily sacrifice comfort and well-being to induce her trances. And because the Ugly Store houses Black's installation, the space becomes a museum. In some ways reminiscent of the protagonist of Abani's novella *Song for Night*,¹⁰⁵ Bomboy, on the other hand, literally performs sacrifices everyday in penance for past wrongs, working as a butcher in the halal abattoir he owns. Bomboy tearfully explains how the Hutu Army forced him and other Hutu orphans to join in the war against the Tutsi:

'We were afraid to refuse because we'd seen them killing people. Plenty people like this,' Bomboy said, mimicking the hacking action of a machete with his open palm....'They gave us cutlasses and marched us many days to reach the Tutsi Army. A week passed and we didn't see any sign of the army so the Hutu soldiers, our people, took us to a Tutsi refugee camp, only women and children. They told us to kill them, or if we couldn't, to cut them well well.' (105)

Out of fear, Bomboy butchered his innocent victims, and is forever traumatized as a result. Although he was unable to look as he killed Tutsi women and children at the time, his current profession allows him to symbolically acknowledge those lives he took; each time he slaughters an animal, he purposefully allows the animal's blood to splatter on his clothing to atone for his sins: "Bomboy understood meat. And knives. Black had seen him work. Seen him talk tenderly to the beef and sheep cadavers as he carved them into

¹⁰⁵ In *Song for Night*, My Luck is an Igbo orphan who is conscripted into the rebel Army and to participate in the Nigerian civil war at thirteen years of age. A deeply conflicted character, My Luck wanders the terrain of his past as a ghost, unable to find peace with the wrongs he was forced to commit.

choice cuts....And Black knew enough that if Bomboy wanted, he could carve meat all day without getting any blood on himself, but blood was a choice he made” (103).

As he apologizes to the carcasses of these animals, he apologizes to the victims he once maimed and slaughtered, symbolically dipping his hands in the blood of the animals to honor the lives sacrificed, so that he might preserve his; he is praying for his own soul. Finally, the fact that Bomboy’s abattoir prepares halal meats that have been slaughtered properly in accordance with Islamic law emphasizes his contrition, given the fact that he is not Muslim, but rather Christian and the fact that the Muslim Tutsis had once been his enemy.

In a sense, the association between prayer and sacrifice in *Virgin* resonate with Georges Bataille’s analyses of the interconnected spaces of the slaughterhouse and museum. Explaining how temples once served but have now lost the “dual purpose [of]...supplication and slaughter,” Bataille comments on the prevailing view of abattoirs as “cursed sights” that we “quarantine...like a boat carrying cholera” (22). This prevailing attitude toward the slaughterhouse marks it as a “site of exclusion” whereas the museum, in contrast, functions as a “site of attraction,” retaining the very same “notion of sacrifice” that the slaughterhouse has since lost. Bataille points out that because the Louvre, Paris’s first museum, was founded on July 27, 1793, it is “thus linked to the development of the guillotine” and the slaughter/sacrifice during the French Revolution (22). In this respect, sacrifice underscores both Bomboy’s abattoir and Iggy’s Ugly Store, effectively marrying the two spaces together in *Virgin*. Both Bomboy and Iggy practice sacrificial rituals, seemingly responding to W.B. Seabrook’s lament that

“the blood of sacrifice” is no longer “mixed in with cocktails” or ritual (qtd. in Bataille 22). In this way, Abani creates a cityscape that links the related spaces of the slaughterhouse and the museum, a space that has lost its symbolic purpose of sacrifice (Leach 20).

Because Bomboy imbues his everyday routine with bloodshed, slaughtering cattle or the sacrificial lamb, an allusion to Christ, he is able to deal more effectively with his shame and traumatic past than is Black; the abattoir essentially serves as his daily confessional. Through this ritual purgation of the confession, Bomboy acknowledges his vulnerability to himself everyday, an admission that he needs to keep him from becoming hard-hearted, a threat that Chris Abani addresses in his essay “Ethics and Narrative: The Human and Other.” Abani discusses the need as an artist to reveal all of his “vulnerability” to his audience:

[T]o face the most terrifying thing in narrative...to dare [himself] to imagine, to conjure and then face all of [his] darkness and all of [his] light simultaneously. To stand in that liminal moment when we have no solid ground beneath us, no clear firmament above, when the ambiguity of our nature reveals what we are capable of, on both sides. The intensity of that confrontation is the only gift the writer has to offer, the only redemption that is possible. (169)

Reminiscing about the first time he slaughtered a goat for a special feast, an Igbo rite-of-passage for young boys, the author recalls how a friend and classmate Emmanuel, “a former boy soldier” who “had seen many terrible things” (168) in his lifetime, came to a terrified Abani’s aid. Emmanuel steadied the goat, muffling its cries that sounded “[s]o human that the Greeks [had] named catharsis after it” while Abani forced himself to slit the goat’s throat, sobbing as he did it (167). A war-hardened Emmanuel warned Abani that if he cried in this manner each time he had to kill, he would “die of heartbreak”

(168). Since this initial loss of innocence, Abani has seen much bloodshed, including that of humans, and “[his] knowledge of blood, of the terrible intimacy of killing, has taught [him] that though [he] has never killed a man,” he knows he is capable. What really “terrifies [him] is that he] may not feel sorry” about killing. Accordingly, Abani feels an ethical obligation to explore this question in his work, the possibility “that we all stand at the edge of the same abyss,” teetering on inhumanity (168). By exploring such questions, Abani “[hunts] demons – injustice in all its forms” (“Chris Abani”).

Black finds himself perched on this very same abyss, peering into a heart of darkness, his own heart dangerously close to succumbing to the malaise of society and becoming black as his name implies. Initially, Black’s name is a source of agency; although at first he names himself “Black” as a means of claiming his pain and social marginalization, after “[a]ll these years of carrying the darkness like a perverted torch,” his name now threatens to subsume and own him because he refuses to deal with the shame he carries (141). For this reason, when Black says, “I am Black,” his guardian angel Gabriel reminds him, “But not your heart” (140). Though the margins were once a source of agency and “radical openness” (to use hooks’s phrase) for Black, this same space threatens to revoke his agency and marginalize him once more. According to Bomboy, “[w]ithout...shame...[Black has] no people, without people...[he has] no lineage, without a lineage....[he has] no ancestors, without ancestors...[he has] no dead and without the dead [he] can never know anything about [his] life” (255). Black refuses to confront his “terrible” but necessary truths, and in this respect, he is a victim:

In fact, the victims of this curse are not butchers or animals but the good people themselves; who through this [curse], are only able to bear their own ugliness that

is effectively an answer to an unhealthy need for cleanliness, for a bilious small-mindedness and for boredom. The curse...leads them to vegetate as far as possible from the slaughterhouses. They exile themselves, by way of antidote in an amorphous world where there is no longer anything terrible, and where, enduring the ineradicable obsession with ignominy, they are reduced to eating cheese. (Bataille 22)

Because Black is so divorced from the related notions of prayer and sacrifice, he finds himself in an arrested state of emotional development much like the protagonist of *Song for Night*, another novel by Abani; Black has yet to begin a journey to confront and sacrifice his demons, which could mean for him a sense of purging, a catharsis that might fuel his journey to self-discovery (256). Instead, Black's memories haunt him like "ash," which when dispersed by the wind, pervades his life but at the same time escape his grasp; interestingly, Bomboy's comparison is reminiscent of the smoke-like memories that haunt the narrator of Erickson's novel. As an artist, Black, in Abani's estimation, must confront and exorcise these demons and thus his "vulnerability" – personal, social, and political vulnerabilities – if Black is to present "honest artwork" (Abani 169). However, because of Black's failure to be honest with himself, he eats the bland "cheese" of which Bataille writes, going through the motions of living but never really at peace with himself and his past. Black is a deeply traumatized individual, illustrating the scarred identity of the artist, and his story "touches on the far reaches of psychic pain, religious and sexual, and creates a hallucinatory despair" ("*Virgin*" 37). Accordingly, the scar below Black's eye only marks the surface of much deeper wounds.

LA as Purgatory: A Liminal Place of Guides and Ghosts

The novel's apocalyptic vision suggests that despite the disconnection from these personal, social, and political vulnerabilities that Black, as an artist, experiences, there still remains the possibility for transcendence. Zamora writes that during the latter half of the twentieth century, artists have been portrayed as alienated, "separated from the political and social mainstream by their artistic sensibilities and esthetic priorities" (184). Unlike Bomboy who, in his capacity as a butcher and through his politically conscious fashion, is socially and politically connected on a daily basis, Black has yet to make those connections. These spaces of supplication and sacrifice, museum and slaughterhouse, however, are occupied with both ghosts and spiritual guides, becoming the ideal setting for Black's own reawakening. Ghosts are a recurring image in *Virgin*; Bomboy, who lives in the former Langley hotel and whose penthouse once belonged to Cary Grant, is convinced that the ghosts of past residents haunt the hotel. Black is familiar with the feelings of these ghosts, who for whatever reason, are not at peace, cannot move on, crossing over to the afterlife, but he is also aware that in a city like Los Angeles, attending to these ghosts, acknowledging their grief is difficult given the city's excessive stimuli: "There were a lot of ghosts around the old parts of Los Angeles, same as in any city. It was just that in Los Angeles, the neon lights and the new buildings distracted one's vision. But Black knew if he looked closely they would be there, crowding in, singing begging, crying, and dying all over again, every night" (10). However, even as

he makes this comment, Black, too, is distracted and unable to acknowledge the ghosts of his past that haunt him.

Haunted by the painful memories of his parents, Black has not yet come to terms with his painful childhood or his parents' deaths, and as a result their ghosts continue to paralyze him. Black's childhood includes a fraught father-son relationship marked by financial stress, a frustration that his father takes out verbally and physically on his family. Additionally, Frank, Black's father, has his own troubles assimilating into society, always straddling the fence between the mainstream and his Igbo identities, between rational science and superstition, struggles he later explains to Black in a letter. As a scientist working on a NASA space project at Cal Tech, he chooses the mainstream route of "the rational...science" in his public life (45). However, in his private life, he secretly opts to believe in "forces other than science," like the superstition that male children in his family are cursed; for this reason, Black dons girl's dresses to hide from the threats of evil spirits until he is 7-years old (164). Furthermore, Frank's harrowing experience fighting in Vietnam, compel him to confess the duality of his beliefs to his son: "I know that I told you to believe only in the rational, in science. As a scientist it was important for me to give you that, son, so you wouldn't be held back by superstition, but after what I have seen here in two years, I urge you to find something to believe in that brings you comfort and when you find it to hold on to it with both hands" (164). Despite Frank's admonition, Black has yet to find that comfort, that alternate belief system, his unresolved resentment toward his father and issues of abandonment

evidenced in a recurring dream that he and his mother are drowning in an unfamiliar living room while his father looks out the window, his back turned to them (247).

Black's relationship with his mother was even more troubled, so much so that Black welcomes his father's physical abuse of his mother at times. Frank's affection is as meager as Maria's attention is overwhelming. Damaged after losing her husband to the war and their Pasadena home to the bank in a foreclosure, Black's mother tortures Black with her angry version of Catholicism and God, devotion to whom could only be expressed in corporal punishment, often sexual in nature, and marathon-rosaries at home followed by formal worship at church mass. During these prayer sessions at home, his mother, aptly named Maria, expects him to summon the Virgin Mary, blaming him each time the Virgin ignored their plea:

Two hours of kneeling on sharp pebbles, sackcloth under his nightshirt chafing with an infernal itch that he wasn't allowed to scratch. Two hours of saying Ave Maria's trying not to count them off as he progressed down the rosary because if he seemed too pleased that it was coming to an end, his mother would add an extra caplet. Calling, calling, calling: but still no Virgin and no sign of an angel, just a fly buzzing annoyingly around his head, resting on his forehead to drink from his beads of sweat. Two hours of having hot wax from the fast melting candles dripped onto his skin, his arms, stomach and sometimes even his penis. Acts of contrition, his mother explained gently. (133)

In his mother's twisted thinking, Black must pray for forgiveness for what she perceives as her sins - the sins of dating a black man against her parents' wishes, becoming pregnant before marriage, and giving birth to Black. Black, in this respect, is her "punishment from God," yet it is he, who atones for her transgressions, who pays for "her mud in the mouth from God" by "[tasting] ever morsel, every grain of their shame... his body [holding] on to that memory" (107). Then as a teenager, his mother is diagnosed

with terminal brain cancer, another experience that leaves Black conflicted; on one hand, he wants her to die, but on the other hand, he dreads her impending abandonment of him (115).

Black knows that he has to give up the ghosts of his parents who have thus far subsumed his identity, rendering him spiritually homeless as a result and is on a journey to find himself, whether he acknowledges his position or not. Iggy, in many ways, serves as a mother figure to him, guiding him to some extent on this journey. Recognizing Black's paralysis, Iggy tells him that he is headed in the wrong direction and should be focused on "the you you're becoming or have become" (208). Likening his spiritual homelessness to taking a wrong turn, Black explains to Iggy how "[i]t seems like [he] turned a corner one day and ended up in an alternate life, an alternate city" and now "[has] to do something to find [his] way back" (116). Significantly, years earlier, at fifteen, Black runs away to avoid the foster care system, choosing instead, an itinerant life of train-hopping and temporary work for the next five years of his life, an aimless existence that only underscores his existential melancholy. Black's "existential melancholy" is an inherited condition from his father, whose own spiritual loss may have been shaped by the racism he experiences as a black man in L.A., the rocky relationship with Black's mother, or unhappiness in his professional work (196). Black, too, driven by a similar spiritual loss, partially finds his way back when he "[follows the L.A.] River from the Pasadena arroyo where [he] was born to [the Ugly Store]" in the same way his father once dreamed of "flying away on a spaceship, getting lost in the stars"; like his father, "an artist at heart or at least a scientist like Einstein, Black, too, must dream (196).

This dream, however, must have an objective and end, and his comparison of himself to “Parsifal or some other Knight of the Round Table on an eternal quest, a never-ending search, ” is an unhealthy identification that stands in the way of Black’s locating his own humanity (196). As Iggy tell him, his search for himself lacks direction. When Black aimlessly switches from one identity to the next, none of them his own, his shape-shifting does not represent transformation but conversely, an arrested development that prevents him from realizing his human potential; the various identities he wears – “fear, hate, pain, love, jealousy, self-loathing” – conceal his humanness and function as unhealthy “crutches” as Abani suggests (“Ethics” 170). And like the “commonplace shame” and “grudging love” that compels us to keep a community center like the original Los Angeles (the “Spanish garrison to one side and the Pueblo across the river at Alameda”) open, Black keeps the ghosts of his parents alive out of a grudging but unhealthy love (155).

The L.A. River symbolizes the path that Black needs to take to reintegrate his fractured self though he is not yet aware of its magic. As such, the answers that the River holds are within sight though not within reach for Black, “distant, yet never far” (188). Drawn to the River for this and other reasons, Black, at one point, opts to follow the river in his yellow VW bus rather than use the freeway, and thus changes the focus of L.A. from the freeways celebrated by Reyner Banham to a river that has not been a deciding monument for a long time. And when Black explains that though his path may be more “circuitous...in Los Angeles, to go the long way round was sometimes the shortest path between two points. It was a quantum thing” (16). On one level, Black is describing his

immediate trip but on a different level, he is referring to his own meandering life journey. The protagonist of *Virgin* is drawn to the River's rich history of subjugation, noting that it was "[b]uilt in the thirties by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to control the floods" (135). He is also drawn to the tenacity of the River, which he compares to a python digesting its prey and which he observes "[fights] its concrete prison, changing course every few decades" (135). And while most Angelenos pay more attention to the city's manmade freeways, Black reminds us that the "L.A. River was alive,... was here before anyone knew this was a River, before anyone saw it and said, River. And its personality shaped this city. *Was this city*" (135). Finally, the river yielded no answers, only a distorted perception, when observed from a distance; rather, it required intimacy of those seeking answers and interested in the "slight variations" it had to offer (135). Thus by requiring seekers to get up close and personal with it, the L.A. River demands a specificity and a closer look at the margins, echoing Cornell West's commentary on a "new cultural politics of difference"¹⁰⁶ that appreciates similar variations. The River's ability to capture these variations and its tendency to change course periodically might also illustrate what Soja terms a "thirdspace," a conceptual space "that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearance, and meanings" (2). Not surprisingly, when Black takes the River's path down to the Santa Monica, he is rewarded with the sight of a heterogeneous mix of people in symbolic affirmation of its thirdspace or ability to "other."

¹⁰⁶ Accorded to Cornell West, Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general, and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; to historicize, conceptualize, and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provision, variable, tentative, sifting and changing" (qtd. in Soja 83).

The L.A. River, however, proves to be the most magical in its service to the protagonist as a reflecting pool, offering him clarity and the guidance of a guardian angel, specifically Gabriel, whose human form – clad in “sandals and jeans, its once-white wings stained by exhaust soot and tag signs, smoking a cigarette” – is portrayed in a mural painted on the River’s concrete bank (99). In this way, both the River and Gabriel watch over Black. The L.A. River is the site where Black, after being raped, first consciously meets this spiritual guide, who variously appears to him in the form of a fifteen-foot winged angel, cooing pigeon, or buzzing fly (6). Arguably, Gabriel first appeared to Black when Black prayed for him as a child on behalf of his mother. After being raped, Black, in his darkest hour, contemplates suicide but notices “[a] fly [buzzing] with the insistence of a guardian angel” (139). On another occasion, Gabriel, a pigeon this time, stops Black from jumping of a 101 freeway overpass (141). Whereas the ghosts bear bad news for Black and “sing [the dying] along the dark path” (141), Gabriel is the angel of annunciation, the herald of good news, as Iggy reminds Black (35). As a messenger, Gabriel also “reveals the hidden plans of God” (Jones 62). Unlike the ghosts in Black’s life, who do nothing to intervene, who, like the voice inside him, tell him to jump off the bridge into the river, Gabriel insists that Black live, that his heart has not become gangrened with bitterness, and that he otherwise has hope (138-39). Notably, the inner voice that tells him to jump and to “cut off that limb which offends” is in Black’s mind, the voice of his unforgiving mother or alternatively, the voice of her angry God.

The Journey to Healing in a City of Angels

Yet, the L.A. River also represents the River Styx,¹⁰⁷ that body of water that must be crossed to reach the afterlife. Before meeting Sweet Girl for dinner one evening, Black visits the River, feeling the magnetic pull of the River and “always chasing this River in some way. Its flow, its line, its energy, its alchemy” (256). Gabriel, who is there waiting for Black, speaks to him from across the River in a voice that is oddly enough, crystal-clear. Wondering whether Black is aware of how much red he uses in his artwork, Gabriel explains to Black how “red says a lot about...humans. The whole story of our miserable species unravels along the river of that color. The blood you are made from, the bloodline you belong to, the blood in your veins, the blood of your sacrifice and redemption” (257). Though Black does not yet understand the meaning of Gabriel’s lecture, the connections between the color red, the notions of sacrifice and redemption, and the L.A. River are powerful. In order to move on, Black must let go of or sacrifice the pain of his past - the memories of bitter parents, verbal and physical abuse, abandonment, and unrequited affection from his family – so that these ghosts may pass to the afterlife. As Bomboy knows, holding on to the past in the way that Black does will only allow the bitterness to fester and blacken his heart, to control his existence. Bomboy’s slaughtering, in contrast, is a symbolic sacrifice and payment to the ferryman Charon, a daily means of giving up the ghosts that haunt him, blood literally flowing

¹⁰⁷ In Greek mythology, the dead must cross the River Styx to reach the underworld of Hades. The deceased would be buried with two coins covering their eyelids as payment to the ferryman Charon, so he would see the body safely across this river (Martin 236).

from Bomboy's halal abattoir into the River each work day. Black, too, must find a way to pay the ferryman and to bury the memories of his parents or face the prospect of letting them control the rest of his life just as those who do not receive proper burial rites face wandering the banks of the Styx for a hundred years before being ferried over (Martin 236). Ironically, Black recognizes the River's significance but is unable to bury the ghosts of his parents. When he sees a group of cruel girls throwing live dogs over a bridge, he comforts the dying dogs by singing them a lullaby for a permanent sleep, "the rhythm carrying their spirits across the other mystical River" (184).

As a messenger angel, Gabriel offers Black knowledge that unlocks the various mysteries of Black's existence. In the Bible, "Gabriel is a figure 'having the appearance of a man' who explains the meaning of Daniel's vision (Daniel 8:15-16). He comes 'in swift flight' to give Daniel knowledge and understanding (Daniel 9:21)" (Jones 58). Gabriel accompanies Black on an "Angel's Walk," Black's journey to find that Los Angeles within himself, to reinvent himself but not in the image of his mother. "Black is all desire and no direction, and his story takes shape as a mystery of identity as he wanders the city trying to reconcile himself to his memories and his peculiar urges," explains Karen Olsson in a book review for *The New York Times*. Black's "quest [unfolds] like a rosary," each "stop" a familiar L.A. landmark from the Bonaventure Hotel to the Biddy Mason Park.¹⁰⁸ However, Black's journey is also a meditative one,

¹⁰⁸ Black visits the Ronald Reagan Building, Biddy Mason Park, Bradbury Building, Central Market, Angels Flight, Hotel Inter-Continental, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, Watercourt at California Plaza, Wells Fargo Center, Wells Fargo History Museum, ARCO Center, Ketchum YMCA, Westin Bonaventure hotel, Bunker Hill Steps, Library Tower, One Bunker Hill, The Gas Company Tower, Regal Biltmore Hotel, Pershing Square, Jewelry District, Oviatt Building, Pacific Center, Los Angeles Public Library and Maguire Gardens, Macy's Plaza, Fine Arts Building, Home Savings of America Tower,

personalized to Black's needs and desires, one marked both by such L.A. landmarks but also by the more personal "steps" of this sojourner, "the careful measure of each [stop], the small steps in which it was done and undone, the subtle movements that made and unmade a life, like the constant seismic tremors of this land, this city"(143). Each stop illustrates a particular mystery for Black (the joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries), the steps of each stop meaningful to Black in their own way, from the "a girl outside the public library on Fifth, in the garden of water and concrete, bent over a book spread like an eagle's span, [discovering] wonder" (144); to "[t]he twin searchlights of the Spearmint Rhino Gentlemen's Club pulling men off the 10 [freeway] like siren singing ancient ships to wreck" (145); "where a nameless Black boy shot a nameless Brown girl even as he smiled at him, even as he closed his eyes in terror and squeezed his fear out in metal" (146); to "[s]ometimes rain, but not especially" (148). Notably, "all the stops, when connected [trace] the outline of a plump bird on a branch," perhaps a dove that might signify peace or humorously in Black's case, a pigeon that reminds him of Gabriel's avian form.

Gabriel, along with Iggy, more or less act as Black's conscience, especially concerned about Black's obsession with sexual perversion, an obsession connected to his troubled relationship with his mother. He frequents a prostitute and a local strip club, where he meets and becomes obsessed with Sweet Girl, a transsexual stripper of whom both Gabriel and Iggy are wary. Yet, Sweet Girl is also an angel of sorts, guiding Black to some much needed answers about himself, the source of his pain and emotional

Seventh Street Market Place, the Visitor Information Center, Union Station, Gateway Transit Center, and Olvera Street (143-44).

stagnation. When he finally attempts to consummate his relationship with Sweet Girl, he does not have the epiphany he hopes for, but instead realizes that she “had become emblematic of his unspoken even unknown, desire” (179). When sex with Sweet Girl does not yield the comfort he longs for, he breaks down into tears, finally realizing his previously unacknowledged lack and that his attraction to Sweet Girl was about intimacy, “an intimacy that wasn’t about love, or even sex, but about filling himself. Shrouding himself in the body of another” (275). For this reason, when Sweet Girl then dances with Black, the couple locked in a tight embrace, he finds that truth that has eluded him all these years; significantly, he observes a mist that blankets the city, a mist that has the power to reveal the truth (78). After the song is over, they continue to hold one another in an embrace that Black finds comforting; Sweet Girl’s affection consequently makes “something” glacial in him “give way” (278).

Because his mother wouldn’t swath him in kindness and comfort, he attempts to find substitutes though not all of them are healthy ones. What the protagonist finally realizes is that what he existentially longed for in Sweet Girl was the same warmth that drew him to his grade school teacher Mrs. Bovay, who “was everything his mother wasn’t, “her voice all softness and kindness like her flesh and her hug that pulled him close into the smell of sweat and talc, all sweet like a baby and...the faint scent of pecan or nutmeg from the pies she baked for the class” (166). After emigrating to the U.S. from Mexico, Sweet Girl has a difficult time finding decent jobs to pay the bills, and turns to cross-dressing and stripping to pay support herself. As a transsexual stripper, Sweet Girl is multiply-alienated – by her lack of economic means; by a family who abandons her,

rejecting her gender identification and sexuality; by mainstream society given her profession, gender identification, and sexuality; and from intimacy as stripping requires her physical proximity but emotional distance from clients. Black becomes conscious of and is drawn to the alienation he shares with Sweet Girl. For the same reason, Black is attracted to the “absolute aloneness” of a forlorn woman he sees at the beach. Hair graying and clad in a business suit, she stands at the shoreline, where Black imagines her rebirth and his part in it; he envisions baptizing the woman in the waters of Santa Monica.

By the time Black is fourteen, AIDS has ravaged his mother’s body, and the brutality of her tongue continues to grow in inverse proportion to the decline of her health; at this moment, Black needs the comfort of his mother the most. Desperate for her love, Black attempts to simulate it when he puts on his mother’s wedding dress. In defiance, he walks into his mother’s room naked, ignores her stares of disgust, and grabs her wedding dress (166-167). He continues to associate any pain he experiences in the present with the pain his mother inflicted on him because violence was the only physical contact he had with his mother. For example, when Black is sexually assaulted at the L.A. River, his assailant forces his penis in Black’s mouth, a traumatic experience that reminds him of an equally traumatic childhood experience: the sensation of “the wood of the cross [that] his mother would force into his mouth to make him have visions” (138). He also recalls seeing, to his horror, his obsessively religious mother masturbate out in the open, her mind demented by disease. Moreover, instead of kindness and affection, he associates sin and penance with his mother, and therefore, sexual acts, both consensual

and forced, take on a religious connotation for Black. Every time he comes home from seeing Sweet Girl, he does penance to “wash the pleasure from his soul, because in his mind, pleasure was a sign, but a sign he loved” (69). The combination of a lack of stimuli (affection) in his childhood and over-stimulation with his mother’s obsession with her Catholic faith continues to plague Black in the present: suffering from an almost permanent erection, Black is forced to bind his penis all day to avoid notice in public.

In the present, Black continues to relive these memories, which manifest themselves as an obsession with women; as Bomboy points out, the subjects of Black’s portraits are mostly female. Not only is Black fascinated by a cross-dressing Sweet Girl, but he also becomes obsessed with cross-dressing himself, stealing Iggy’s old wedding dress from the dry cleaners to complete his portrait of the Virgin Mary. Because he cannot afford to pay a model, Black chooses to paint himself in gender-bending garb – make-up and the wedding dress, re-sized to fit his 300+ pound frame. Yet, his actions suggest his subconscious desire to recreate both the warmth absent from his childhood and to resurrect his mother, whose wedding gown he once wore (Iggy’s dress becomes a substitute) and whose maniacal obsession with the Virgin has permanently scarred him; his desire to cross-dress also reveals his desire to reconnect with his father, who, based on a family superstition, dressed Black in dresses for a good part of his childhood. Iggy confronts Black about his visits to a prostitute, his infatuation with a cross-dresser, theft of her dress, and finally the makeup she finds in the spaceship he constructed atop the building of the Ugly Store, aware that he is “going through a tough time and returning to the familiar safety of [his] childhood” (161). Despite the panic he feels, he knows now

that he must finally read his father's words in the letter, which he hangs around his neck in a plastic pouch, an albatross that continues to burden his psyche: "[H]e had pried the lid of the box that first night...he had to go inside" and reveal it to Iggy, and ultimately himself (161).

What Iggy realizes is that Black is stuck in purgatory, some sort of in-between place, not unlike the holding cells on Angel Island, where Chinese immigrants were detained after a devastating fire destroyed the San Francisco building containing their immigration records, leaving them without proof of legal documentation. Caught between their home country and the country they had hoped to make home, they carved poetry onto the walls "to make sense or to make real the things that are too frightening to contain in any other way" (206). This in-between place where Black finds himself drives his actions, compelling him to attempt to make sense of a world that otherwise confounds him; for example, he paints a figure of the Igbo river and sea goddess Mami Wata on a gravestone, which Iggy knows is somehow connected to Sweet Girl and Black's mother. Plagued by feelings of abandonment, Black conflates the memory of his mother and the myth of Mami Wata, who signifies female power and conversely, the more sinister potential for murder and castration (Stokes). This conflated image of mother/Mami Wata manifests itself vividly in Black's nightmares:

[H]is dreams had been of blood. Of being stuck in the River and of blood in a flash flood washing him away and then, sailing toward him on an upturned wooden box, was the Virgin except when she got closer and reached out her hand, he saw it was Sweet Girl and then just as she was pulling him to safety, she turned into his mother and drowned him. (178)

Black's dream is yet another allusion to the River Styx, the swift currents of which carry him away in a "flash flood" of blood, and whose ferryman at first appears to be the Virgin and then Sweet Girl but later turns into his unloving mother who thwarts his journey across the river, leaving him to figuratively aimlessly wander the River's shore.

Like the Goodoo dolls that she creates and prepares to market, Iggy helps Black ward off evil spirits (119). Iggy implores him figure out the source of his motivations, to face the demons of his past as she once did, explaining that she was never jilted by Raul, nor any man for that matter but had, in her sick mind, planned an entire wedding to a man who did not exist. Because she had confronted these lies, having determined why she needed the wedding gown in the first place, she could move on, symbolically sacrificing the dress by giving it to the cleaners to sell for her; Iggy gives up her ghost. She asks Black the hard question, one that he does not want to hear: "Why is he holding on to the dress?" (162)

Not My Virgin

Regardless of Iggy's keen perception of Black's condition, he is not ready to confess that the ghost of his mother is what drives him to dress up as the Virgin Mary. Haunted by memories of his mother forcing him to summon the Virgin and by her lack of affection, affection that he tries to feel by wearing her wedding dress, Black conflates the two images of bride and Virgin to transform himself into a cross-dressing Blessed Mother. The version of the Virgin that he associates with his mother is the Virgin of the

Conquistadors, the Mary his initially tries to emulate must white facial make-up, reminiscent of “an empire in decline” (4). Black recalls being at mass after one of his mother’s tortuous rosary-marathons when he hears the Virgin’s pleas “but [n]ot the Fatima Virgin, or the Lourdes but this white-faced, red-lipped crumbling plaster Virgin, all Virgins as it were for the price of one. She asked him to free her” (134). Fulfilling her request, Black secretly sets fire to her robe using a votive candle before sneaking back to the church pew, and as he watches her become engulfed in flames, he dubs her the “Virgin of Flames” (134). In this way, though he does not yet know it, the protagonist attempts to release the Virgin and the oppression she symbolizes from his life, symbolically freeing himself from her control and by extension, from his mother’s control. His attempt, however, is futile, and his muddled memory of the Virgin, Catholicism, and affection (by way of physical contact with others) continue to control his life. As a result, traumatic incidents later in life end up reminding him of his thorny relationship with his mother.

Initially spotted on the rooftop of the Ugly Store, Black, in his Virgin ensemble, is mistaken for the Virgin. Later, when Black sleeps in the window of an abandoned warehouse, he awakens to find devotees gathered around the window (224). Despite Black’s unintended deception (once he does realize the ruckus he has created, it is too late), his cross-dressing appears to transform L.A. into a place of magic, specifically an otherwise ordinary rooftop into a political space, complete with a spaceship that signifies the possibility of change. Ironically, the marginal nature of the industrial district in which the Ugly Store is located is what allows Black the opportunity to build his

spaceship without a planning permit since “[t]he city’s planners had forgotten this part of the city” (52). Already, this geography signals the political, echoing Fredric Jameson’s claim that space is always political. The spaceship recalls Frank’s desire to travel to space and join the stars (51) perhaps out of frustration given his struggles to negotiate the racisms of society, to keep his family together, and to survive financially. For Black, “[t]he spaceship [is] his desire, in a sense, to become a thing of his own making,” to transform into something greater than his current being, (37) and offers “an almost unimpeded view of downtown LA, parts of the 110 Freeway and the River,” giving him a unique, “thirdspace” vantage point that illuminates the dynamic stimuli of the city, again what Soja identifies as a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearance, and meanings” (2). On a more intimate level for Black, the spaceship becomes a liminal space, symbolized by the blue “half-light” of dawn that he experiences sitting in the spaceship one early morning, in which he can reconnect with his father with whom Black continues to have a fraught relationship (144). In this sense, the spaceship implies a new consciousness and thus liberation and empowerment, a strategy to combat marginalization. In another sense, Black’s spaceship might be compared to significance of the bathyscope that shelters the main character of *Amnesiascope* during a firestorm.

Despite the wildfire that continues to burn in various parts of L.A. County, Angelenos are preoccupied with a greater concern. Inspired by what they think was the Marian apparition atop the Ugly Store’s roof, hundreds of people of all walks of life make the pilgrimage there to honor the Virgin in the same way thousands of

Guadalupe¹⁰⁹ devotees, or Guadalupanos as they are known, visit the site in Mexico where the Virgin appeared: “Even though it had been three weeks since the Virgin was spotted on the roof of the spaceship, the faithful returned every day. Some never left, setting up camp on the street. It was a little disconcerting at first as the makeshift shelters and tents began to spring up along the sidewalk, making the area look like skid row” (85). This devotion underscores the “safe and mystical ‘space’ in the midst of the uncertainty, oppression, and violence” that Guadalupanos find in the Virgin (Castañeda-Liles 158).

Furthermore, the devotees’ identification with Guadalupe and Black’s attraction to her might be explained by the fact of their shared social-marginalization. More than just a symbol of the Catholic faith, Guadalupe is more importantly, recognized as “a brown virgin who...appeared to a brown saint, Juan Diego” (41). This Virgin of a marginalized identity spoke to and continues to speak to marginalized people everywhere as Black suggests, noting how she symbolizes “justice, of a political spirituality” (41). Thus, she appeals to her devotees, who may find themselves negotiating their respective marginalized background – whether racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious – and the mainstream society to which they may be expected to conform but to which they may never be fully be able to assimilate. Poole also claims that the figure of Guadalupe was

¹⁰⁹ Though accounts vary, the popular story explains how Guadalupe appeared to the indigenous Juan Diego, a recently converted Christian, at the hill at Tepeyac and tells him to ask the Bishop to build a hermitage to her on the hill. When the Bishop Juan Zumarraga did not believe Diego’s story, Diego returned to the hill and told the Virgin that the Bishop doubted his credibility because he was only a lowly Indian; he suggested that she send a more credible messenger. The Virgin insisted that her choice in him was deliberate and rather than as himself and sent Diego to deliver the message to the bishop once again. Still doubtful, the bishop tells Diego to ask the Virgin for a sign. When Diego tried to avoid the Virgin by taking a different route to get a priest to see his dying uncle, the Virgin appeared to him nonetheless, tells him that his uncle is healthy, and that he should pick roses from the hill to give the bishop as proof of her appearance. Despite the fact that it was the dead of winter, Diego was able to pick the roses to finally prove to the bishop of Guadalupe’s appearance (Castañeda-Liles 155-57).

important in the “growth of a Mexican national consciousness” (5). He asserts that Guadalupe symbolized “liberation and native rights” for Miguel Hidalgo¹¹⁰ and Emiliano Zapata, who respectively battled for Mexico’s independence from Spanish rule and later from the American empire’s threat to annex Mexican lands (4). Marian scholar Jeannette Favrot Peterson connects Guadalupe with insurgency (qtd. in Poole 10). As such, for many Guadalupanos, Guadalupe represents nothing less than an emblem of *mexicanidad*, the sociopolitical consciousness of various Mexican peoples throughout history (4). Because of her empowering presence in their lives, Angelenos build various altars in her honor at the locations of her various sightings (132).

Black shares Guadalupe’s hybrid identity, evoked by the element of cross-dressing Black brings to what Angelenos believe is a Marian sighting, further expanding upon Guadalupe’s *mestizaje* status. Guadalupe, spoke in Diego’s native Nahuatl tongue, not in Spanish, the language of those who had conquered his people ten years earlier (Catañeda-Liles 155). The figure of Guadalupe has also been traced and connected to the indigenous goddess Tonantzin, whom Patricia Harrington explains was “the patron saint of physicians and mid-wives, female fortune-tellers, and sweat houses – a goddess of birth, health, and the future” (9). Like Guadalupe, who as a “brown virgin” combines the Catholicism of Spanish rule yet whose indigenous heritage is evident in her cinnamon-brown skin, Black, too, is of his mixed heritage (Igbo/Salvadoran American). From Black’s perspective then, Iggy, with her psychic abilities and motherly nature, re-

¹¹⁰ Stafford Poole argues that “[t]he longstanding rivalry between the virgin of Guadalupe (La Criolla) and the Virgin of Remedios (La Conquistadora) became clearly marked along nationalist and political lines” (3).

embodies the mixing of identities associated with Guadalupe. According to Virgilio Elizondo, Guadalupe represents a “*mestizaje*,” a mixing of faiths and ethnicities, an identity which Diego and other socially-marginalized *mestizajes* viewed as a source of social empowerment and liberation (qtd. in Catañeda-Liles 158). Poole also affirms Castañeda-Liles argument, asserting that Guadalupe variously represents “indigenism, religious syncretism, respect for cultural autonomy, [and] the struggle for human dignity” (4).

Additionally, just as Iggy’s Ugly Store suggests an alternate organizing principle for the city, shifting the focal point of L.A. from the center or beauty to the marginal or “ugly,” Black’s revision of the Virgin also suggests a new source of inspiration for Angelenos. Black’s cross-dressing as the Virgin affirms in particular Stobie’s claim that “Abani satirizes stereotyped associations with the Madonna and offers new elements for veneration....The reader is denied simply responses such as the solace of traditional religion or easy satire, but must grapple with the dialectic between differences in cultures, beliefs, and shifting sexualities” (170). In this respect, Stobie’s reminder about this dialectic affirms Caroline Rody’s warning that the “thinness” of multiculturalism fails to acknowledge the tensions and contradictions present within this category and often ignores the “interethnic imagination,” a more flexible strategy that looks beyond race and ethnicity as organizing principles, rather towards the possibility of grouping people by commonality, including but not limited to, shared experiences of marginalization, colonialism, immigration, mixed heritage, sexuality, and religious indoctrination. Such an understanding suggests the ways in which people might escape simplistic

categorization in favor of more complicated alliances and connections. Abani also makes over the Virgin of Guadalupe as a more flexible, if ambiguous, figure who shuns the simple dichotomies of virgin/whore, male/female, colonizer/colonized subject, white/other, etc. Additionally, the Virgin's makeover "[pushes] against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination" to create the sort of transformative marginality hooks asserts (145). Nonetheless, the Virgin of Guadalupe is his muse and has inspired in him the desire to change, not unlike the way in which he, cross-dressed as the Virgin, inspires others. Black recalls the night he witnessed an apparition of the Virgin firsthand:

The apparition of the Lady reflected on the wall of a small house in East L.A. Like everyone present, he hadn't believed the rumor at first. Even when he saw it, he was still searching for the trick, the illusion. He was skeptical until the woman whose house it was, opened and closed the Venetian blinds several times without disturbing the apparition. (41)

Just as the Bishop of New Spain did not believe Juan Diego when Diego recounted his sighting of the Virgin, (Castañeda-Liles 155-56) Black and other observers did not believe their eyes. However, since that experience, Black, too, is a Marian devotee who searches for truth in the folds of Iggy's wedding dress (225). Yet, the rivers and valleys of her dress yield no truth but only sadness, an unproductive form of sadness, not the kind that "[leaned] into healing" (225).

Why? The gown's fabric imparts no truths because Black searches for the wrong Virgin, *not his Virgin*, and thus transforming himself into Guadalupe is a flawed endeavor at best. Despite Guadalupe's identity as the "brown virgin," her image is still a restrictive one that some may argue seeks to oppress the voices of certain marginalized

groups. In this light, while Poole acknowledges Guadalupe's role as a "powerful national symbol," he is also careful to acknowledge her ambiguity as such; Guadalupe is identified with empowerment and humanity but at the same time, serves as a lingering symbol of colonial oppression and as a powerful conveyor of gender codes; for example, Althus-Reid associates with Latin American images of the Virgin a code of "decency, "the idea of the good daughter, good mother and wife...constructed around virginal/whore dichotomies according to the hegemonic production of the moral system of the country" (50). The Virgin's name alone is suggestive, telling the story of Mary's *immaculate* conception, a conception that implies the sinful nature of sexual intercourse: In this respect, "Mariology creates a history of gender from an artefact: a supposed woman who does not have a recognisable sexual performance is made into a sexual code" as Althus-Reid asserts (53). This reading of the Virgin implies a good girl/bad girl dichotomy: the Virgin's purity, in this sense, in direct contrast to Eve's immodesty and disobedience, which brought into the world for the first time sin, and by extension, sexual intercourse. In eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve sought that which she was forbidden to know and thus chose to cross the boundary of propriety; the immodesty of Eve, the mother of mankind, in this sense, counters the modesty or virginal nature of the mother of God.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Sandra Cisneros argues how the modesty for which Guadalupe represents at times appropriates "Latina sexuality of any agency constraining women to a double chastity belt of ignorance and *vergüenza* shame" (qtd. in Castañeda-Liles 169). Moreover, Althus-Reid notes the ways in which the public/private come into play in this gender code: while decent and sexually modest women are those who keep or are kept behind closed doors, women who assert their presence in the public realm are associated with the indecent behavior of prostitutes.

However, Abani's text questions the oppressive gender code implied by the virgin/whore dichotomy just as John Milton reimagines Eve in *Paradise Lost*, not as the first woman flouting the word of God, but rather as an example of female agency, who in her desire to gain knowledge to get closer to God, makes the conscious decision to eat from the forbidden tree. Similarly, the artwork reproduced on the novel's cover Alma López's *Our Lady* (1999) exemplifies female power, what Castañeda-Liles sees as a Chicana artist's "[celebration] and [affirmation of] Guadalupe's womanhood," which they "accomplish...by taking her inner strengths and making them visual palpable expressions" (170). Like Milton, López also re-envisioned an iconic religious female figure in her controversial work,¹¹² this time Guadalupe:

Our Lady of Guadalupe is wearing a two-piece outfit made out of bright colorful roses, like the miracle roses of the apparition account. Her eyes and posture have a challenging expression. Her veil is the dismembered Aztec Goddess Coyolxauhqui (a moon goddess); the backdrop appears to be the color and design of Guadalupe's original dress. The angel carrying her is a bare-breasted female angel with butterfly wings. (Castañeda-Liles 172)

López's revision of Guadalupe in this photo collage pays tribute to Guadalupe for the guidance and protection she has traditionally symbolized but at the same time, subverts the historical use of the Virgin as a tool of religious, cultural, and female subjection.¹¹³

While shrines for religious worship are built, homes for the poor are not, and in this respect, the Virgin represents political, social, and economic oppression (Althaus-Reid 60). These shrines ultimately represent tools of oppression, affirming Bataille's claim

¹¹² López's *Our Lady* was the source of heated debate when a Santa Fe museum exhibited the piece as part of the "Cyber Arte" exhibit (Castañeda-Liles 172-74).

¹¹³ Salinas, the model posing in *Our Lady* was raped as a teen but blamed by her family who felt that her behavior had brought on the crime; given her firsthand experience being subjected to virgin/whore gender codes (i.e., activity outside of the safety of the home), posing in López's work was even more personally-liberating.

that “the great monuments are raised up like dams; pitting the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements: it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak and impose silence on the multitudes” (21). To counteract such monuments, the artist evokes the dual nature of Guadalupe’s “potential to empower or suppress...sexuality” (Castañeda-Liles 168). First, the Coyolxauhqui motif on her veil might be understood as a celebration of indigenous identity and a stance against a history of colonial subjection. Moreover, the Virgin depicted in *Our Lady* unequivocally refuses to adhere to a code of female modesty and submission, her unapologetic near nudity reminiscent of Eve yet at the same time, in direct contrast to the postlapsarian shame felt by Eve. To sexualize the Virgin is to empower her, to refuse the cloak of an oppressive patriarchy that limits the movement of women. Moreover, the swagger of her pose and facial expression counter the popular image of a submissive and modest Guadalupe, usually depicted with her eyes cast downward.

Part of Black’s transformation necessarily includes his coming to terms with his mother/Virgin obsession, and in this respect, Guadalupe is part of his process of transformation. Because his family was broken, he needs to reintegrate the family unit in his mind so that he can move on. He attempts to redefine Guadalupe to suit his emotional needs and perhaps in this recreation of family, Guadalupe might speak to non-traditional, hybrid understandings of family.¹¹⁴ The duality depicted in López’s image of Guadalupe

¹¹⁴This reformulation of family is topic Carla Trujillo discusses though she talks about the significance of Guadalupe to gay individuals who fear coming out to their families: “La Virgen de Guadalupe represents the simulation of family in the modern-nation not only because her image ties together motherhood, country, and culture, but because some of us may need her as part of our redefinition of family” (Trujillo 223).

speaks to his own hybrid identity himself in many ways: Salvadoran/ Igbo, a man cross-dressing as a woman, hetero/homosexual. Additionally, the female angel who physically holds up Guadalupe is topless but more importantly, wears butterfly wings that imbue Guadalupe with a transformative power, suggesting the possibility of metamorphosis; the connotation of transformation, which Stobie, drawing upon the research of Susannah Cornwall, connects to apophasis, “a knowledge of God attained through lack of knowledge and certainty; instead of privileging fixity, absolutes, and stasis, it focuses on the journey, movement, and changing states” (173-4).

Rebuilding Black’s Temple: Uniting Supplication and Slaughter

Because this is precisely what Black needs, to reimagine his family with a more forgiving, loving mother but also a mother who signifies potency and power for him, Black needs to create his own version of the Virgin Mary, who is *not* the “perfect woman” as he clarifies to Bomboy (110). And because he needs to reinsert the ritual of sacrifice into his life, it is fitting that Black chooses to paint a giant Virgin, 50-feet high, on the side of Bomboy’s warehouse and abattoir (109). Significantly, he paints most of Fatima at twilight, that liminal period during which the day becomes night, signaling his own moment of “becoming” (185-86). After Black paints the white backdrop of the mural, he notices that “[b]ehind him, a plane flew in front to the sun, throwing the shadow of its wings across the wall: a dark cross on white,” as if God were blessing his endeavor (111). Yet, the portrait he does paint is not the Virgin in fact but rather that of a

Muslim woman “in a head to toe yashmak,” strangling a dove in one hand and brandishing an AK-47 in the other. The image he paints is that of Fatima, “the prophet Muhammad’s daughter, also known as *Maryam al-kubra*, or Mary the Greater” according to religious scholar Mary F. Thurlkill who compares the Virgin Mary to Fatima in *Chosen Among Women* (1). Significantly, Fatima’s hand is one of the few human images Shi’ite Islam sanctions, her hand representing Muhammad’s holy family and “[serving] as talismans against malevolent forces, or, the evil eye,” which as Thurlkill explains, “is associated with envy, much like the envy Eve cast to Fatima’s preexistent form in paradise” (101). The hand amulets often worn to “entreat the holy family to intervene against the evil eye” are unusual in that the hand imagery “alludes to a mother and her family,” unlike the “masculine, phallic imagery” of most Middle Eastern and African talismans (Thurlkill 116).

An allusion to Fatima’s hand, the image Black paints is meant to invoke security that a mother and family provide, the very same protection he did not receive from his own mother as a child. On the other hand, the AK-47 and strangled dove that Fatima grasps complicates any notion of sanctuary implied by her hands. Black explains that the most terrifying feature of this portrait is not the violence implied by her assault rifle or her strangulation of the dove that might signify peace but rather her fierce and “unrelenting” black eyes; if the terror of this image already exists in the minds of those who see her, those who in today’s international political climate may have a pre-existing, irrational fear against the Muslim individual, then Fatima’s eyes represent not windows into *her* heart of darkness but rather a mirror that reflects the terrified onlookers’ *own*

heart of darkness. The mural's audience, not Fatima, sees these images of violence. Thus, Black knows that the image will frighten passers-by, he also knows that their terror is a pre-existing condition in the same way that "a blind man staring at a sunset" is "able to see only what was already inside him" (188). This pre-existing condition applies to Black as well, for as Iggy points out, Black paints his own mug in his image of Fatima, implying that the mural is his mirror, too; from Black's perspective, then, Fatima reflects back at him the terror that seizes him, the ghosts of his past, and in creating this mural, then, he finally acknowledges the blackness that threatens his humanity. For this reason, he welcomes the "bright blue burning heart that someone spray paints onto his mural, the bright blue, perhaps reminiscent of the Virgin Blue of Mary's veil or the liminal blue of L.A. in twilight. Black's self-portrait, in this respect, illustrates Altheus-Reid's theology-"funfair photograph" comparison: she argues that just as funfair photographs suggest the hybrid, indecent theology has the ability to transgender us...at the cross-roads of sexual definitions complicated by age, culture, gender, race, and social classes" (48). Altheus-Reid further argues that "[t]heologians who write on the Virgin Mary as 'Virginal Liberationists' seem to also be pursuing this transcendental act of putting their heads in the Virgin's photograph" (48). Finally, by reimagining himself as both Guadalupe and Fatima, Black refuses to give in to easy binaries, further complementing the hybrid identity he must embrace.

In this respect, when Black paints *Fatima* on the wall, he makes a political statement against an intended architecture that Neil Leach argues "serves as a literal manifestation of social structuration which cements the existing order" and

“propagates...norms” (Leach 20). Architecture, in this understanding, represents a limited class of persons who wield power, “the ideal being of society,” who orders and prohibits with authority expresses itself in what are architectural compositions in the strict sense of the term” (Bataille 21). For this same reason, Black must later take down his representation of plebian artwork. By painting a Muslim woman, Black affirms Jameson’s characterization of space as always “political,” Black’s actions oppositional, illustrative of “a utopian space radically different from the one in which we reside” that counters a “reproduction of the logic of that society” (259). For Black, whose childhood was affected by class, race, religion, and cultural negotiation, he must necessarily connect himself to his Virgin. Yet, he cannot simply resurrect the Mary of his mother’s imagining, for such an act would be to recuperate the tyranny of his mother rather than step forward in his healing process; he needs to find his own empowering Guadalupe, and with Fatima, he does: “When he was done, he hung from the ropes, swinging like an effigy of a lynching while he smoked a cigarette and looked out onto the river. This River told the truth, he thought. What it was, though, he would only know when he reached it. And he would” (187). He’s sure that he will reach the truth; perhaps that’s Fatima’s purpose, to illuminate that particular truth for him.

In painting Fatima, Black also finally participates in the ritual of sacrifice though his participation is incomplete. When the city makes him remove his artwork, Black excises the ghost of his mother, perhaps not yet entirely, Although Iggy is sad that his work has to be taken down, Black is optimistic, knowing that Fatima is his contribution to the living history of L.A.: “Everyone who saw that painting will always carry it with

them. Do you thing the Chumash are gone because the Mission settlers wiped them out? History is everywhere here; if it weren't they wouldn't be trying so hard to hid it. As for my painting? It will haunt that wall forever" (239). Fatima is thus a "ghost of a painting" as Iggy suggests. Painting Fatima, however, is only part of his sacrifice. At the end of the novel, having determined that his relationship with Sweet Girl offers no healing of his past traumas, Black later wonders if he wants to become a woman as does Sweet Girl, who identifies as a woman and a lesbian though she is anatomically male. When Sweet Girl shows Black how to tape his genitals, Black imagines her mocking his feminization and is now even more frustrated by his paralyzed state:

And he knew that he would never find this thing, this becoming that he wanted. It was a grace far beyond anything he had in the face of it. He had nothing to give to the dark angel of it. Nothing. And they all knew it: Bomboy, who didn't know what it was he knew; Iggy, who knew things about him he couldn't even guess at himself; Gabriel, an androgynous pigeon-angel; Sweet Girl, this man who was more woman than he would ever be. (285)

Unfortunately, Black takes out his anger and frustration on Sweet Girl, physically attacking her; she, in turn, fights back by first dousing Black with turpentine and then stabbing him with a pair of scissors. Resembling "a deranged and psychotic Miss Havisham," Black heads for the roof, "dragging a long train of white death behind him, the gossamer hide of a dead angel" (287).

What happens next becomes a moment of transformation for Black, one that is connected to the image of fire, alluding to the myth of the phoenix's rebirth and representing a liminal, purgatorial stage that promises transformation in the future for Black. The turpentine, acting as an accelerant, sets the train of his wedding gown ablaze; symbolically, the wind tears the train from his dress, "[t]he floating train hovered in the

ash-heavy air for a moment, like a phoenix, all flight and fire, even as Black flailed dangerously close to the edge of the spaceship. Another updraft caught the train of lace and it sailed away still burning. Set free it floated over the crowd, heading for the River. It sank from view” (290). For Black, the destruction of part of his dress in this way suggests both rebirth and a release from his mother. At the same time, however, he retains part of his dress, symbolically permanently incorporating into his identity his memory of his mother, yet at the same time, giving up those memories that impede progress in his life.

Alternatively, Black, now ablaze, serves as a beacon for the Guadalupanos who watch from below; in this sense, his illuminating presence might be understood as a reincarnation of Fatima, the Radiant, albeit a possibly indecent, sacrilegious reincarnation. According to one version of the story, “Fatima stood in her prayer chamber and emitted a light that permeated they city. Muhammad instructed his community to orient themselves toward Fatima’s light while praying often” (100). Since then, she “[has assumed] the function of a *mihrah* (the prayer niche in mosques that points toward Mecca,” the lamps that illuminate these prayer niches symbolic of Fatima’s light (Thurkill 100). Just as Fatima “stands in the space between the profane and the sacred, the supplicant and Allah, earth and paradise” (100), Black, too, emits a light that orients the devotees toward the sacred; he is finally released of his demons.

Conclusion

Significantly, throughout Abani's novel, the image of burning wildfires quietly persists in the backdrop rather than prominently feature in the foreground until the novel's conclusion. Tellingly, early in the story, Black is drawn to a news story on television about the brush fires that threaten to consume several L.A. neighborhoods (84). As the fires continue to blaze, ash falls from the L.A. sky like the rain that might represent renewal for Black; in fact, one of Black's favorite activities is reading a book at Echo Park in the rain, likening the feeling of "the rain [washing] over [him]" to "worship" (87). In response to the fires, Black comments how the ash, which resembles snow "[seems] to mitigate what [is] usual here: sorrow and loss catching in the city's heart like tumbleweed" (263). Accordingly, though wildfires are supposed to be devastating, the people of L.A. recognize the symbolic power of fire to transform their lives: everywhere, Black notices Angelenos enjoying the scene, playing music, dancing, and drinking beer while their children frolic in the ash that snows down on them (265). In this way, *The Virgin of Flames* echoes the imperatives of *Amnesiascope*, *Southland*, and *Tropic of Orange* (and to some degree, *Tortilla Curtain* and *People of Paper*) in which disasters are sights of beauty, a repeating cycle of affliction but also of growth and renewal.

Abani's work also shares with *Amnesiascope* and *Southland*, the conception of natural disasters as ordinary while human disasters represent the extraordinary. L.A., in Abani's imagination, is thus poised for the apocalypse, ready for growth and renewal:

cataclysm is a constant in Abani's depiction of Los Angeles and is permanently juxtaposed against Black's process of transformation, contributing to the apocalyptic tension in *The Virgin of Flames*. Like the protagonists of Erickson and Revoyr's novels, Black, too, navigates the labyrinths of the city to search for himself, for that catalyst to jumpstart his arrested development; moreover, like the narrator of *Amnesiascope* and Emi in *Tropic of Orange*, Black is inclined toward over-stimulation, not the blasé. Yet, at the heart of his journey is his need to confront the past that haunts him – a past marked by an absence of love, abandonment, religious obsession, and cross-dressing –to prevent these pasts from taking over or otherwise colonizing his life. Dwelling in the past is not the same as grappling with it for Black. His journey involves the rejection of various simplistic binaries: male/female, straight/gay, white/other, artist/political activist, and Christian/non-Christian, Guadalupe/Fatima. Accordingly, Black transforms his marginalized status by reconfiguring the space of the margin, reinventing it into a space of radical openness, a site of empowerment, by blurring the boundary between and marrying the sacred to the profane. In his cross-dressing, Guadalupe-Fatima hybrid, Black finds his Virgin, the Virgin of Flames.

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