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Mysteries and Miseries: The Racial Uncanny in the American West

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Andrea Marie Dominguez

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Davidson, Chair  
Professor Ross Frank  
Professor Shelley Streeby  
Professor Nicole Tonkovich  
Professor Meg Wesling

2012

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The Dissertation of Andrea Marie Dominguez is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

## DEDICATION

This work is a result of more than just my own efforts. I'd like to thank the following people:

To my dear friends from all stages of my life – I am grateful for your company through all this madness, your kindness, your patience, and your amazing ability to always make me laugh.

To my mom, Rose – I am grateful for you always encouraging me to be the best scholar, teacher, and woman that I can be. I can never express how your own trials and strengths have inspired me through this process and you continuously remind me of what is really important in life.

To my dad, Andy – I am grateful for your constant encouragement, your willingness to listen, and all good memories that we have made during this process. Our football weekends will always be one of my favorite memories of graduate school. Thank you for helping me clear my mind week in and week out.

And, finally, to my best friend and husband, John – I am grateful that you have been with me every step of way. On our wedding day I told you that you were the best part of my heart. You are truly the best part of who I am and I could never have finished this project with your constant support and love.

This has been a long journey with many ups and downs, accomplishments and disappointments. But I glad that I did not have to go down this road alone. This project is for all of us.

EPIGRAPH

*I left my heart in San Francisco . . .*

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## VITA

- 2004 Bachelor of Arts, University of California, Berkeley  
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mysteries and Miseries: The Racial Uncanny in the American West

by

Andrea Marie Dominguez  
Doctor of Philosophy in Literature  
University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Michael Davidson, Chair

“Mysteries and Miseries: The Racial Uncanny in the American West” considers the use of the mystery genre in Western narratives as a representation of multi-layered histories and cultural ghosts that haunt a mythic and racialized discursive past. Through a case study of San Francisco mystery narratives, I argue that questions of race and blood signal layered and fragmented histories that suggest unstable ethnic-American identity categories. Placing the genre narrative form of the mystery at the center of this historical lens provides a re-reading of methods of cultural empire in San Francisco, California, and the American West that underscore a relationship to national conceptions of whiteness as related to constructions of racialized “others.” Thus, this project goes beyond critical regionalism to suggest that San Francisco literature complicates discussions of

California's relationship to the American ideology of the frontier by re-reading racial/ethnic formation in relation to past and present forms of American empire building.

I begin with a juxtaposition of the first known mystery novel set in San Francisco, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, by A Californian and the rise of anthropological study in California as related to American Indians in the West. In this chapter I argue that while these popular narratives suggest that the definition of San Francisco as an American city is contingent on the social and racial mixing of Spanish Californios and white immigrants, these constructions are in fact contingent on violent cultural forms of erasure. The second chapter, "Ghostly Ruins: Disaster and Collective Memory," further considers shifting definitions of whiteness by examining narratives of the 1906 earthquake and fire. Here I consider "disaster romances" such as Gertrude Atherton's *The Avalanche* (1919) and Alan Crosland's 1927 film *Old San Francisco*, in relation to the tension between erasure and memory. In Chapter 3, "Finding the 'Falcon': Hammett and Hard Boiled San Francisco", I consider the racial unease developed in Chapter 2 in relation to modern forms of cultural empire. I begin with *The Dain Curse* in order to complicate my reading of both Hammett's novel and Huston's filmic version of *The Maltese Falcon*. My fourth chapter, "Uncanny San Francisco: Urban Space and Haunting Iconography," examines the classic noir film, *Vertigo*, through a more feminist oriented lens to consider the relationship between race and agency in historical constructions of California.

**Introduction: *Resurrecting the Dead – A Haunting in San Francisco***



*The Presidio.* Andrea Dominguez. 2012.

Rows of gray stone rise across the Presidio cemetery, silent markers of space and time that offer an eerie contrast to the San Francisco urban skyline that sits below the rolling green hills. This narrative begins with the image of a place where things come to an end, yet the cemetery at the Presidio seems the perfect metaphor for the tensions between space and memory, between history and all its ghostly lingerings, that “‘Mysteries and Miseries’: The Racial Uncanny in the American West” investigates. The cemetery at the Presidio is a liminal space that belongs to multiple times and

simultaneously defines and challenges definitions of the spatial abstractions that signify *San Francisco* in the American cultural imaginary. As a memorial, the Presidio is a place that is about the remembrance of the past, one that serves to (re)imagine both the city that is and the city that was. As a graveyard, it is the embodiment of spectrality, a remnant of the shadows of the past that continue to shape our perceptions and misconceptions about the emergent and ever-changing urban landscape of the Bay Area. As a historical marker with a Spanish name, it is a reminder of the strains among American, Spanish, Mexican, and indigenous forces and colonial desires. As an *American* abstraction, the Presidio cemetery is a place of erasure and negation where the bodies of American heroes mask the reality of uncanny racial violence in the American West.

Founded on March 28, 1776 when Juan Bautista de Anza and his party of 193 men landed on the hillside, the Presidio became the Spanish military headquarters for their expansion in *Alta California*.<sup>1</sup> Originally designed to defend Spain's land claims and to support the endeavors of Mission Dolores a short distance away, the Presidio became symbolic of Spain's far-reaching power and the proliferation of its expansive empire. Yet like all colonial endeavors, the Spanish glory of the Presidio was challenged early on. As a fort made of adobe and wood, it was vulnerable to both indigenous attacks and the natural elements. The original fort suffered extensive damage in its early years from periodic attacks and devastating earthquakes that plagued the terrain, and, by 1783, there were only thirty-three Spanish men actively serving at the Presidio. Since support from other Spanish outposts was limited, the men stationed at the Presidio were responsible for defending the land against "Indians"; controlling indigenous labor for the

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<sup>1</sup> This was the Spanish name of "Upper California" during the colonial period.

Mission and other land developments; and engaging in farming, ranching, and hunting in order to support themselves and their small community. From the beginning, the Presidio proved to be its own community, an expression of Spanish colonial presence and dominance in the middle of what was perceived as a vast wilderness of danger and possibility. The promise and determination of the Spanish period would end when a new order arose with the 1821 Mexican declaration of independence. When Mexico declared itself free of the Spanish Crown, the Presidio became a symbol of a new national—and colonial—identity. Disconnected from the seeds of its initial settlement, the Presidio received even less support from the emergent Mexican government. Soon debates about the future of *Alta California* began to circulate in the communities around the Presidio and in the emergent space of San Francisco. As American settlers from the east began to move into the area, the future of the Presidio—and California—as a place linked to Mexican identity became more and more unclear. This tension came to a head in 1846 when U.S. military forces seized the Presidio at the start of the Mexican-American War. The capture of the Presidio proved to be a major symbolic victory for American soldiers and frontiersmen alike. During the infamous Bear Flag Revolt, Lieutenant John C. Fremont and a small detachment marched to the Golden Gate to claim the Presidio for the Republic of California, changing the course of history for the Bay Area and the West.

As this short and complex history illustrates, the San Francisco Presidio embodies the colonial legacy of conquest in California. In passing from indigenous, to Spanish, to Mexican, and, finally, to American control, the Presidio is a place where we can trace the geography of colonialism, nationalism, and racism in the American West. As a space of conquest, this militarized geopolitical location illustrates the collision of major ethnic

identities in California during the early colonial period. Like the seismic shifts that disturbed the earth where the Presidio stands, the rumblings of racial discontent and colonial struggles for power shaped not only the land but our collective memories of the contested space of the Presidio and San Francisco. In California, then, these contestations over space are not just about the land, but are also about the social hierarchies that come with conquest—about the spatial, textual, and political renderings of blood, color, and nation. While this is a history that is often masked and buried, in the Presidio we see these ghosts return to the surface of the urban imaginary of San Francisco.

The cemetery at the Presidio offers a rich site for the circulation of these ideas, serving as a constant reminder of the legacy of empire that lingers in the San Francisco Bay. On December 12, 1884, the War Department designated nine acres for the San Francisco National Cemetery, making it the first national cemetery established on the West Coast. Initial burials included the remains of the dead from the former post cemetery, as well as individuals removed from cemeteries at abandoned forts and camps elsewhere along the Pacific coast and western frontier. Enclosed with a stone wall, the cemetery rests on a sloped hills that frames a view of the Golden Gate. The original ornamental cast-iron entrance gates are still present, and tall eucalyptus trees further shield the cemetery. Those buried at the Presidio include many soldiers who died in Indian raids and the Spanish-American War, as well as soldiers and sailors who died overseas serving in the Philippines, China, Japan, and other areas of the Pacific. Today, the Presidio cemetery is one of only three within San Francisco city limits (the others being the Columbarium of San Francisco and the historic graveyard at Mission Dolores).



In addition to these important historic significances, the cemetery at the Presidio is a memorialization of not only those buried there, but also of the ideological constructs that create the colonial, historical, and cultural space of the city. These cultural lingerings, these specters and shadows of the past, are what “Mysteries and Miseries” seeks to investigate. As a metaphor, the Presidio cemetery is a place that signals to us the significance of the past, that questions the stakes of empire, and that exposes the impossibility of burying the dead forever.

Like the Presidio, “Mysteries and Miseries: The Racial Uncanny in the American West” is a project concerned with the collisions between a space and its historical hauntings. As the images of the Presidio cemetery suggest, this project is primarily concerned with the haunting of space in relation to the cultural imaginings and lingerings of empire. “Mysteries and Miseries” thus offers a concrete study of the genre of “mystery” in Western narratives as a representation of multi-layered histories and cultural ghosts that haunt a mythic and racialized past. Through a case study of San Francisco mystery narratives and their historical and cultural contexts, I argue that questions of race and blood signal layered and fragmented histories that suggest unstable ethnic-American identity categories. This project is situated after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and statehood, beginning with an examination of the first known mystery novel taking place in *American San Francisco* published in 1853. By using *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* as a point of departure, this project utilizes the historical hauntings of space in order to deconstruct racial imaginings. In this project, “space” is defined as a symbolic geography that illustrates a complex history. I define “haunting” as a return to the repressed, to the cultural lingerings of a fragmented past that

continually weigh on the contemporary moment. The “ghosts” in these mystery narratives are thus the manifestations of the marked pasts that they recall. Using these terms as a methodological foundation for my study, each chapter provides a layering of literary and contextual examples that furnish a space-based deconstruction of cultural productions through a historical gaze. Each chapter begins with the consideration of a particular space in the city that serves as a symbolic landscape for the ghosts that haunt the narratives that I examine. Like the Presidio and its graveyard, these spaces act as historical markers and memorials that both abstract and complicate the historical legacies that the texts I examine engage with. Using these markers as points of departure, each chapter then works through examinations of cultural products through contextual and historical moments that question the space of race in San Francisco. Through this type of reading, I suggest that cultural productions emerge from historical moments and the chronological markers that furnish the complex identities of or within spaces. Each chapter is thus concerned with not only a text, but with the historical context that produces the ghosts that haunt the space of cultural production.

In particular, the San Francisco mystery narratives and spatial hauntings of race and identity construction that I examine are symptoms of the tension among blood, social mixing, and miscegenation that work to deconstruct dominant histories by giving voice to cultural ghosts that illuminate racialized violence, conflict, and conflation in California history. What is left behind are the ghostly lingerings that result from collisions of people and spaces—the abstractions that are left between different versions of history that construct the space that we call “San Francisco.” As a genre, then, the mystery provides a rich case study for how a diverse past gets buried, hidden, masked, and locked away.

Placing the mystery genre at the center of this historical lens provides a re-reading of methods of cultural empire in San Francisco, California, and the American West that underscore a relationship to national conceptions of whiteness as related to constructions of racialized “others.” In deploying this analytical schema, the purpose of this project is twofold. On the one hand, “Mysteries and Miseries” offers a regionalist study that engages with the racial politics of the American West through close attention to the politics of blood that have shaped the physical and ideological landscapes of empire. On the other hand, this project extends these critical regionalist paradigms to suggest that San Francisco literature complicates discussions of California’s relationship to the American ideology of the frontier by re-reading racial/ethnic formation in relation to past and present forms of American empire building.

While the “mysteries” of the city provide insight on the racial tensions of empire in the West, the “miseries” are equally as important to this tale. In a play on the “mysteries and miseries” dime novel tradition from the mid-nineteenth century, “Mysteries and Miseries” is not only concerned with establishing the function of the mystery genre in relation to the rise of Western culture and empire, but also with the “miseries” that were symptomatic of urban life and the “instant city” phenomenon of San Francisco. Establishing itself as an urban center at a time when America was beginning to think about the end of the western “frontier,” San Francisco represents an American city wherein, as the narrative of the Presidio illustrates, the indigenous, Mexican, and Spanish pasts; the American present; and the immigrant future collide. This trajectory is a direct result of the rapid growth that San Francisco experienced from the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 to the years following the Gold Rush that produced

an “instant city” that simultaneously constructed a future and a narrative past. It is this young, and oftentimes violent, history that marks San Francisco as a rich case study for the cultural and geopolitical spectrality of the American West. At the center of this lies the inherent racial, ethnic, and national diversity of the Bay Area and *Alta California*. By engaging questions of blood and problems of race, the texts that I examine provide important insights about not only the way that Californians have represented themselves, but also the images that they projected to the rest of the country and the world. These narratives have thus become the modern myths that continue to “haunt” our perceptions and understandings of the Golden State and American empire.

“Mysteries and Misereries” is thus concerned with the intricate web of relationships among conceptions of space, race, spectrality, and genre, suggesting that manifestations of space go far beyond geographical concerns. Rather, “Mysteries and Misereries” proposes that space is a multi-layered and historically constructed *imagining*—a loaded representation of collective expression. While an abstraction, however, the power of space and the memories that construct it lie at the base of our cultural mythologies that are foundational to conceptions and definitions of nation, identity, and “American.” Necessary to these formations, then, is a critical discussion of race and ethnicity. In their landmark study, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant discuss the processes by which race is a socially constructed category that serves to create ethnic-specific hierarchies of social and economic capital. Their work has been foundational to the growth of critical race studies and to the formation of projects like “Mysteries and Misereries.” In seeking to understand constructions and definitions of race along the spatially specific lines of California and the rise of empire in the American

West, this project is concerned with processes of racialization that are inextricably tied to shifting definitions of whiteness and colonial hierarchies that are linked to doctrines of conquest and visions of Manifest Destiny.

In situating my argument about the relationship among haunting, space, and historical imaginings, I also borrow Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny to suggest that the racial imaginings that are traced through these cultural products have a lingering familiarity, a mimetic presence that continues to signal historical fractures. While Freud cautions that the uncanny "cannot be transferred to the uncanny in literature without substantial modification," – and despite the fact that he engages in such practices in his essay— I want to suggest that these modifications are not only possible, but key to unveiling the collective haunting that marks San Francisco in relation to racial abstractions in the American West (155). While Freud's notion of the uncanny is rooted in latent sexual desire, I believe that Freud's discussion of sexual repression can be adapted to deconstructing repressed racial tensions in the West. The uncanny "is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once known and had long been familiar" (124). The uncanny signals a *return to* memory; it is the act of encountering the past in the space of the present. This, Freud argues, provokes a great sense of anxiety to the individual who struggles to harness the ability to forget and move forward. He explains, "The uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny" (125). In thinking about the American West, these anxieties inherent in the uncanny can be transferred from a study of the inner psyche to the study of landscape in modernity. San Francisco, for example,

is itself uncanny—an urban formation that must constantly return to its own memory. As citizens struggle to sift through the tensions of race and space in the city, there is a constant anxiety of the past and all its unstable racial constructions that lingers in the background. Freud's conception of the *doppelganger* pushes this idea further. While Freud is referring to personal characteristics such as facial features and destinies through successive generations in his definition, this project pushes the notion of the *doppelganger* to consider what other *culturally collective* traits are passed on through generational divides. If, as Freud proposes, the *doppelganger* is “an insurance against the extinction of the self,” we must necessarily consider what type of collective self is being continually reproduced *and* what the stakes are for keeping such narratives alive. This process of forgetting, remembering, and then struggling to bury the past can be both damaging and terrifying. The uncanny, then, ultimately is an abstraction that, like the mysteries and ghosts that are symptomatic of it, “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (123).

In order to help consider these notions of the uncanny in relation to nation building, I deploy Jacques Derrida's notion of *hauntology* to consider the space of haunting in the American West. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida outlines his notion of *hauntology* to reconcile the haunting shadows of Marxist theory that continue to loom over Europe. In his study, Derrida claims, “The future can only be for ghosts. And for the past” (37). While his study is focuses on the socio-political lingerings of Marxism in Europe, his ideas offer an interesting and insightful translation to the western American landscape and the haunting of multiple empires. Part of Derrida's project is to collapse the cultural meaning of the past and the present into a single space that is continually

“haunted” by the shadows of political discourses. For Derrida, this haunting is foundationally linked to trauma, to the scarring of the social and physical landscape of a place. In *Specters of Marx*, he names three types of trauma: Psychological, Biological, and Cosmological (which he describes as the process of the Earth ceasing to be at the center of the universe) (98). In the case of San Francisco, these categories become important to our deconstruction of historical memories and the haunting of racialized ghosts that haunt the space of empire in the West. Psychological trauma becomes the personal lingering of the past that haunts the mind and the body through space and time. It encompasses the anxieties that lie at the crux of the noir texts that I examine in Chapter 4, including *Vertigo* and *The House on Telegraph Hill*. As Chapter 4 suggests, both of these texts deploy psychological thriller narratives in order to grapple “blood problems” that lie under the surface of personal identities and collective histories. The “blood problems” are the racial and historical markers that “other” characters in the narratives. The second mode, biological trauma, can be thought of as the politics that lie behind these “blood problems.” For example, Chapter 1 begins with an exploration of uncertain blood lines and foundational threats of ethnic amalgamation and racial mixing. These anxieties create strands of biological trauma that continually haunt the memory of a space. In terms of cosmological trauma, I want to suggest that in this mode the West becomes the focal point for American formations of nation and identity during this period, rather than the traditional orientation of the eastern United States. In looking west on the continent, my project suggests that racial formations and tensions in the west have a great bearing on nation building and American presence in an emerging global landscape. Through this analytical schema, Derrida suggests, “Haunting belongs to the

structure of every hegemony” (37). In questioning the hauntings that belong to the structure of hegemony of San Francisco, I want to suggest that it is the space of race that haunts the American West.

Like Freud’s notion of the uncanny and Derrida’s theory of hauntology, the conceptions at the heart of Avery Gordon’s book *Ghostly Matters* have been instrumental in considering these theories of haunting doubles in relation to American cultural studies. Gordon defines haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unsolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (xvi). Gordon’s definition of haunting is deeply related to Freud’s notion of the uncanny. Gordon defines Freud’s notion of the uncanny as, “the return, in psychoanalytic terms, of what the concept of the unconscious represses: the reality of being haunted by worldly contacts” (55). For Gordon, this notion of the uncanny, this haunting by “worldly contacts” is directly related to conceptions of racism and capitalism (4). Part of this is connected to a perceived racialized past and its inherent connection to present-day discourses of race and memory. Gordon notes that this “oppressed past” in neither “linear . . . nor an autonomous alternative past” (65). Rather, it is foundational to the way that we consider contemporary formations of race and class—a system where the past very much exists in the present. Gordon complicates this through the use of ghosts in her argument, arguing that, “Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (xvi). In other words, ghosts are “haunting reminders of lingering trouble” (xix). While Gordon links her analysis to not just race, but constructions of sex and gender that are in line with Freudian theory, her ideas in *Ghostly Matters* are both highly significant to and



illustrative of, racial formations and historical hauntings in the American West. At the heart of the relationship between the past and the present in *Ghostly Matters* is Gordon's concept of *rememory*, the idea of "bumping into somebody else's memory." Here, Gordon describes an encounter with a "ghostly imprint" (165). In "Mysteries and Miseries," I suggest that this act of *rememory* is one that is tied to the landscape of the city itself. In "Mysteries and Miseries" the texts and characters are continually "bumping into" the memories of racialization that they are a product of. In addition, the landscape of San Francisco itself furnishes iconic examples that link these texts to a lineage of racial discontent. The city and the individual cultural locations that I discuss at the beginning of each chapter furnish evidence of the "ghostly imprints" of race and class that Gordon describes. For example, as with the Presidio graveyard, the Golden Gate, the Ferry Building, John's Grill, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and Alcatraz Island all function in this project to illustrate this concept of ghostly imprints that continually illustrate the simultaneous influence of the past and the present in the cityscape of San Francisco.

In departing from the foundational work of Freud, Derrida, and Gordon, I engage the following questions: what is haunting the cultural production of the American West? What specters continue to shape the courses of empire and the culture it produces? In recent years, critics such as Tomás Almaguer in *Racial Fault Lines* and Nayan Shah in *Contagious Divides* have considered the continually changing scope of "race" in California history and cultural studies. In their work, Almaguer and Shah have considered the impact of racialization of Mexican-American and Asian cultures, respectively, in relation to national conceptions of whiteness and the significance of

American empire in the West. In addition, these works consider issues of immigration, labor, and cultural capital as part of the analytical matrix that deconstructs racial formations in California. They also draw attention to the negotiation between race and space and interrogate the formations of capital investments in “whiteness” in nineteenth-century California culture. These moments point to larger discourses concerning racial hierarchies, race science, and social capital linked to racial constructions. Through illuminating shifting cultural discourses, these works highlight the unstable and politically constructed notions of race that have historically shaped social, public, and urban architectures in California. In using the work that scholars like Almaguer and Shah have done as a point of departure for my case study of San Francisco’s racialized space, I argue that such racial formations are not only social, but physically constructed modes of design that work to create a specific type of American urbanism in the West that is concerned with who does and does not fit into the urban landscape.

As part of this trajectory, I am necessarily concerned with national formations that form discourses of empire in the American West. Lisbeth Haas’s study *Conquest and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* and Maria de Guzman’s book *Spain’s Long Shadow* are significant predecessors to the formation of this project. Haas’s text considers the racialization processes through Spanish, Mexican, and American control over California. Through descriptions of these historical shifts, Haas builds a strong case for the social construction of race and the political and cultural capital investment in whiteness that was essential to Spanish, Mexican, and American empire construction in

California. In particular, Haas's discussion of the system of *limpieza de sangre*,<sup>2</sup> or "pure blood" race categories, as "flexible concepts" that helped shape the frontier is especially important and provides a solid foundation for my introduction of California blood politics in Chapter 1 (31). In *Spain's Long Shadow*, Maria de Guzman claims that constructions of whiteness and Anglo-American identity in the American West are dependent on the legacy of Spanish empire in the Americas. In her introduction, de Guzman suggests, "Figures of Spain have been central to the dominant fictions of 'American' exceptionalism, revolution, manifest destiny, birth/rebirth; to Anglo-American's articulation of its empire as antiempire; and to its fears of racial contamination and hybridity. Figures of Spain have been indispensable to the constitution, elaboration, and even interrogation of these dominant fictions" (xii). In considering her historical timeline in *Spain's Long Shadow* as a point of departure, I focus my attentions on the legacy of Spanish empire as part of the American empirical project in California and challenge these categorizations of space and time through a more nuanced reading of indigenous presence in California. Together, these texts provide a solid framework for my consideration of the colonial legacy of California.

In addition to tracing the legacy of empire in the American West, "Mysteries and Miseries" also considers politics of blood as related to nation formation and cultural constructions of whiteness. In considering the role of blood in racial discourse, I am interested in three main constructions: biology, heredity, and violence. Together, these three modes suggest a complex relation between the blood and the way that race is

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<sup>2</sup> This is a concept in Spanish that roughly translates to the idea of "cleanliness of blood" or what we can think of as "purity of blood" for the context of this discussion.

socially and culturally defined. Because this project pays special attention to issues of indigeneity in California, a discussion of the discourses of blood is crucial to understandings of empire and ethnic and racial subjugation in the American West. Indigenous scholars have often turned to discussions of blood in order to sort through the political, social, and economic locations of native peoples in the United States. In addition to the Spanish doctrines of *limpieza de sangre* and *gente sin razon*,<sup>3</sup> contemporary indigenous scholars have produced some insightful work on the significance and problematics of blood politics in colonial and contemporary history. J. Kehualani Kauanui's *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* traces the idea of blood quantum to the roots of European cultural paradigms concerning the relationship among race, class, and power (52). Using the case study of indigenous Hawaiians to construct an argument about the politics of blood, Kauanui argues, "As a colonial imposition, the blood quantum model of identity is a demeaning alternative to Hawaiian kinship and genealogy as inclusive and expansive indigenous models of belonging. Moreover, the governmental uses of the blood quantum mode aim to alter and displace the indigenous forms of identification" (38). The systems of blood quantum that Kauanui describes not only reduce ethnicity and culture to a measurable and quantifiable abstraction, but also serve to racialize groups through a "scientific discourse" that serves to erase their presence in dominant hegemonic structures. This produces a "genocidal logic of disappearance" (25). In addition, Circe Strum's work on Cherokee blood politics in *Blood Politics: Race, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee*

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<sup>3</sup> This is the Spanish phrase for "people without reason" that was primarily used to describe indigenous nations in the Americas.

*Nation of Oklahoma* considers the historical legacy of blood quantum in one of the most diverse tribes in the Americas. In framing his analysis, Strum asks some difficult and complex questions: “To what degree can multiracial individuals claim Native American identity and still be considered socially ‘authentic’? In other words, what markers of Native-American identity outweigh the dominant tendency to classify according to phenotype?” (3). In answering these questions, Strum suggests that there are two major competing ideologies for thinking about race: 1) race as nation and 2) race as blood quantum (53). Both of these conceptions of race play an intricate role in the racial hauntings that “Mysteries and Miseries” engages.

In considering the significance of blood in racial formations of California, this project is necessarily concerned with issues of indigeneity, whiteness, and urban citizenship. While these authors examine indigenous politics in other locations, their work is significant to a study of the indigenous political discourse in California that is foundationally concerned with issues of blood. As many of the texts that I examine suggest, in San Francisco social and cultural citizenry are dependent on the quality of blood and the secrets that it may harbor. Chapter 1 begins this discussion by problematizing the relationship between Spanish and indigenous bloodlines in California and deconstructing the mythos of Spanish California and Indian absence through an examination of the “post Indian warrior,” Ishi, the perceived last of the Yahi. While this is not a conventional mystery narrative, the case of Ishi offers a reading of the cultural mysteries that are tied to confusions over identity in San Francisco during this period. From this initial examination of blood politics through indigenous presence and absence, I build a foundation for the examination of more complex blood tales that appear in the

rest of the dissertation. Each subsequent chapter thus considers and attempts to reconcile various “blood problems” that were instrumental to formations of west coast culture and racialization processes in the national landscape of “American” identity.

While “Mysteries and Miseries” is obviously indebted to these works, my goal is to link the conceptions of haunting, race, and empire through the mystery genre that is occupied with popular cultural production. Thus, this project is highly concerned with the popular genre—with popular, mass-produced modes of exhibiting and experiencing culture. During the rise of the American West, popular texts and cultural moments were central to not only how the West was defined as an “American” space, but also were significant to the image of the West. California itself was already a cultural icon—it was symbolically and geographically the end of the American frontier. With this title came a large cultural responsibility that was not only laden with pressures to “tame the wilderness” of the land, but was also strained with an extreme sense of anxiety concerning how Americans would define themselves without the promise and excitement of a frontier to explore, develop, and dominate. Dime novels were central to how this cultural moment was illustrated and represented. Chapter 1 of this project focuses on the first mystery dime novel set in San Francisco, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian (1853). This novel began a tradition of popular mystery narratives in the West that attempted to grapple with constructions of race as related to shifting ideological spaces of San Francisco and American identity. Later, my project considers several popular films, including John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), as extensions of this dime novel legacy that attempts to engage with questions along racial and national lines.

In returning to my opening example, various historical sites in San Francisco (the Presidio among them) illustrate the tension between these concepts regarding the haunting aspects of memory. The Presidio itself is an example that vividly illustrates the multiple forms of empire that have taken root in San Francisco and that have helped dictate racial imaginings and ethnic identity formation in the West. While American control of the Presidio came late in the fort's long history, it is significant to the struggles over race and space that "Mysteries and Miseries" is concerned with. This legacy is one that is riddled with war and filled with discourses of dominance. In attempting to solidify the land under American control, the Presidio was used as an organizing locus of the Modoc Indian Campaign from 1872–1873, playing a significant part in the last large-scale U.S. Army operation against Native Americans in the far west. This exercise in dominance was only the beginning of the history of the American Presidio's involvement in issues of American empire. From this point, the Presidio was involved in most of America's military engagements in the Pacific. Significantly, it was the assembly point for Army forces that invaded the Philippines in the Spanish-American War, America's first major military engagement in Asia and a colonial expansion into the Pacific region. Specifically, from 1898 to 1906 the Presidio became the nation's center for assembling, training, and shipping out forces to the Spanish-American War in the Philippine Islands and later became the strategic locus for the subsequent Philippine-American War. With this involvement, the Presidio became a focal point of *international* American interests. Despite the lure of non-continental expansion, the concerns of the Presidio came beckoning home with the devastating 1906 earthquake and fires that destroyed the newly powerful and wealthy western metropolis. The events of April 1906 led to an immediate

Army response directed by General Frederick Funston, who had earned the Medal of Honor for his work in the Philippines. Army units provided security and fought fires at the direction of the city government. After the fires, Presidio soldiers gave aid, food, and shelter to refugees. Temporary camps for refugees were set up on the Presidio, furnishing one of several temporary “tent cities” while the urban landscape was rebuilt. Later in 1915, part of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which announced the reemergence of San Francisco to the world, was located on the Presidio waterfront. Soldiers supported the Exposition with parades, honor guards, and artillery demonstrations.

The period between World War I and World War II once again shifted the focus of the city and the American West to issues of national security, empire, and, necessarily, race. With the racial anxiety that resulted from the wars came the need to redefine American space once again. The order to intern Japanese-Americans, German-Americans, and Italian-Americans, including citizens, during World War II was signed at the Presidio. The Commanding General of the Western Defense Command, General John L. DeWitt, responded to public hysteria directed against all Japanese on the West Coast. He recommended removing all Japanese, including citizens, from the Western Seaboard. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and some Western United States politicians also expressed alarm, although no incidents of sabotage occurred. President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, to direct removal of ethnic Japanese residents to internment camps. In addition, World War II saw intense activity at the Presidio. It continued as a coordinating headquarters, deployment center, and training site, making significant contributions to the war effort both abroad and at home. The



Presidio again was crowded with temporary barracks and training facilities. After World War II the Presidio shed its war-torn image and was reinvented as a symbol of compromise and diplomacy. President Harry Truman had offered the Presidio as the site for the future United Nations Headquarters. A United Nations Committee visited the Presidio for the purpose of examining its suitability for the site, but the UN General Assembly ultimately voted in favor of its current New York City location instead. Additionally, the Presidio hosted ceremonies for signing the ANZUS Treaty, a security pact among Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The Japan-U.S. security treaty was signed at the Presidio, while the Japanese Peace Treaty was signed in downtown San Francisco. These events again showed the Presidio's role in America's growing involvement in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>4</sup> As these moments suggest, San Francisco exists as a cosmopolitan space that has not just local but global significance. From its early imaginings as a "Modern Rome," which I discuss in Chapter 2, to its role in global political and economic markets, as I discuss in relation to *The Maltese Falcon* in Chapter 3 and *Vertigo* in Chapter 4, San Francisco is imagined as a global site that stands for U.S. enterprise, power, and exceptionalism.

In order to unpack this complex historical legacy, my examination is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, "Indian Presence (and Absence) in California: Cultural Memory, Sovereignty, and 'Mysteries of the City'," examines the 1853 dime novel *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian against the rise of anthropology in California and the significance of the Ishi case. As part of the dime

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<sup>4</sup> Today the Presido contains a number of environmentalist groups, technological think-tanks, and art-based tourist attractions. "New" landmarks include the new Disney family museum and offices of Lucas Films.

novel tradition, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* offers an image of the city that is contingent on the social and racial mixing of Spanish Californios and white immigrants. Yet, this cultural projection is one that attempts to erase any presence of indigenous culture as part of the emergent American California landscape. By reading this novel in conjunction with the rise of western anthropology that included tropes of the “vanishing redman” and “salvage ethnography” and that shaped the course of Alfred Kroeber’s study of Ishi, the “last of the Yana,” I challenge the suggestions of native absence by recontextualizing the narrative in a colonial context. In *Mysteries and Miseries*, then, the “ghosts” that haunt the “mysteries of the city” are the racial politics of a city struggling to reconcile an abstracted Native presence as it re-imagines its Spanish past and envisions a white future.

Chapter 2 departs from the question of Indian presence and absence to consider shifting definitions of whiteness that result from this type of systematic negation. “Ghostly Ruins: Disaster and Collective Memory” examines narratives of the 1906 earthquake and fire, including Gertrude Atherton’s 1919 novel *The Avalanche* and Alan Crosland’s 1927 film *Old San Francisco*, in relation to the tension between erasure and memory, between destruction and reinvention. In focusing on this pivotal moment in the city’s history, I examine the racial politics in play as the city transforms from a frontier settlement to a center of American empire. These “disaster romances” offer a style of representation that reveals deep anxieties about the future of American citizenry and suggest a “type” of Californian who is “most fit” to survive in the urban, and definitively “American,” landscape of post-quake San Francisco. While these texts collectively suggest that, in order to build a stronger city, this “type” must be necessarily “white,”

they also work to destabilize and problematize definitions of and assumptions concerning whiteness and the cultural capital that comes with it. This chapter thus traces evolving definitions of whiteness in relation to key urban moments, including the rebuilding process of the city, the American eugenics movement, and the centrality of race at the Panama Pacific International Exposition.

In Chapter 3, “Finding the ‘Falcon’: Hammett and Hard-Boiled San Francisco,” I expand these lingering questions of race and whiteness to a global context. In one of his first novels, *The Dain Curse* (1929), Hammett raises questions of “blood problems” that he later complicates through global imaginings in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930, 1941). By grounding my readings of Hammett’s novel and John Huston’s filmic adaptation in these conceptions alongside the shifting states of ethnicity in California between the Great Depression and World War II, I read race through Hammett’s and Huston’s veils of gender. I suggest that masculinity in *The Maltese Falcon* is used as a code for racial categories that determine citizenship. Through a process of negation, Hammett and Huston create an American male archetype who rejects an association with Europe, differentiates himself from racialized bodies like those of Joel Cairo, and is insistent on a heterosexual—and, consequently, hegemonic—identification. To highlight the enduring influence of these inter-war works, I end with a brief examination of *Bullitt* (1968) and *Dirty Harry* (1971) which reconsider the masculine tropes that Sam Spade embodies.

While Chapter 3 reads race through the veil of unstable myths of masculinity, Chapter 4, “Uncanny San Francisco: Urban Space and Haunting Iconography,” problematizes the feminized landscape of race through a study of Alfred Hitchcock’s classic noir film, *Vertigo* (1958). *Vertigo* engages with not only the contemporary

landscape of the city, but also must contend with the ghosts of the city's past. By focusing on key "historic" sites such as Mission Dolores, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and the California Redwood Forest, I argue that, as Scottie attempts to refashion Madeleine, the film attempts to call the viewer's attention to the constant refashioning of the city and its history. *Vertigo* attempts to recover a version of San Francisco history for the viewer, one that is occupied with the Spanish and Mexican ghosts of the past. In the film, Madeleine becomes an object of colonial desire, a ghost of an imagined past. Yet while critics like Laura Mulvey have read Madeleine as an object of the male gaze, I argue that through her multiple presences—Carlotta and Judy—she, in fact, is a character who *gazes back* in that she asserts a strong sense of agency that underscores the complex racial legacy of California that she encompasses. It is through Madeleine that we see that these racialized ghosts never really go away. As the characters in the film visit San Francisco landmarks, they suggest that "vertigo" in San Francisco is a symptom of a type of uncanny haunting, one that is a confusing mix of historical narratives and mythic fabrications.

My afterword, "New Ceremonies for Racialized Ghosts: Activism and Enduring Presence," brings my project full circle by re-examining the question of Indian presence and absence. After considering various narratives of racial and ethnic projections and constructions, I examine Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights Era moments that attempt to both rewrite and reconcile the violent history of racialization in California. Through a brief reading of the American Indian Movement's 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island, I suggest that American Indian literary texts, such as Gerald Vizenor's novel *Chancers* (1999), serve as a continuation of protest and an assertion of Indian presence in

California. With this final analysis, I attempt to reconcile the “blood problems” of the previous chapters through an examination of contemporary forms of cultural resistance.

**Chapter 1: *Indian Presence (and Absence) in California: Cultural Memory, Sovereignty, and “Mysteries of the City”***



*The Golden Gate.* Andrea Dominguez. 2009.

**The Golden Gate: Opening and Imaging California**

*Have engineers built anything more triumphant, or for that matter more beautiful, than the Golden Gate Bridge? – Bernard DeVoto<sup>5</sup>*

The Golden Gate Bridge arches across the bay, its bright towers rising above the fog, creating a deep contrast to the steel blue of the Pacific. Few can imagine San Francisco without calling on the image of this architectural and cultural icon. In a sense, the Golden Gate Bridge begins our San Francisco “origins” story; it symbolizes the history, the setting, and the physical qualities of the city we call “San Francisco,” creating

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<sup>5</sup> See “The Western Paradox,” ca. 1955.

a cultural referent. As a symbol, the Golden Gate Bridge serves as an allegorical icon for the way that we imagine the history of empire in the American West. In reality, the familiar image of the bridge complicates the origin story of the Golden Gate Strait and the Bay Area by systematically and effectively rewriting history through erasing a period that precedes “American” presence in the West and translating “other” histories into uncanny, ghostly absences. Just as critics like Derrida and Gordon have asked scholars to consider the haunting remnants of a fractured past, as I have noted in my introduction, the historical context of the Golden Gate Bridge asks those of us who study the West to come to terms with the ghosts of California’s past. In considering the space—the physical and cultural presence—of the Golden Gate Bridge in the West, I want to suggest that looming behind the mist that often engulfs the International Orange tower of the bridge lies a systematic erasure of racial memory. In this way, the Golden Gate Bridge illustrates the same struggles that the narratives I examine in this chapter—*The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian and the memory of Ishi, the “last of the Yahi”—grapple with. These narratives and the bridge itself illustrate the tension between presence and absence, narrative and reality, and myth and memory. I read the narratives in this chapter against questions of Indian presence and absence in California, against the violent realities of an indigenous past involving what Gerald Vizenor describes as “survivance” and the stories that have been constructed to challenge such enduring abstractions. By considering the iconography of the Golden Gate Bridge alongside *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* and the case of Ishi, I illustrate a double narrative: first, that the space of the Golden Gate highlights a context of explorations, myths of “discovery,” and the legacy of conquest in the West; second, that these histories

are foundationally related to acts of erasure and the cultural production of racial difference in the West. In considering these two threads, the Golden Gate prompts us to think about “origins,” or about the space of “native” California.

The Golden Gate Bridge spans the strait that marks the entrance to the bay, marking the modern incarnation of the city. When construction on the bridge began in January of 1933, the \$35 million budget not only promised to change the physical landscape of San Francisco and the Bay Area, but also to solidify the power and wealth of the city by aiding access, enterprise, and expansion. Prior to the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge, the only practical route between San Francisco and the North Bay was by ferry, making San Francisco the largest American city that still relied primarily on ferry services. Furthermore, the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge marked a new era in the Bay Area that promised to usher in new economic and social opportunity for local citizens and venture capitalists. By connecting San Francisco with Marin and the South Bay, the bridge would continue to facilitate the relationship between the wealth of the city and its surrounding areas. When the bridge finally opened for business in 1937, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world and became an internationally recognized icon.

While the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 is reflective of the context of development during the construction period, it also physically and ideologically transformed the space of San Francisco. The bridge thus not only suggests that practices of empire are a positive construct, but also rewrites the violence that manifestations of empire spread through the West from the time of contact. In reality, the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge illustrates the inconsistencies among the historical context of the



space that the bridge occupied, the moment of the bridge's construction, and the icon itself. While the origin story of the Golden Gate Bridge rewrites the presence of multiple imperial histories, it celebrates narratives that bury more complex and violent racialized pasts. As William Deverell notes, "One of the region's greatest characteristics is its ability to inspire the hyperbolic. 'This is America!' exultation of a master painting or stunning photograph that memorializes freedom and equality simply by reference to space and landscape. On such assurances are imperial confidences formed" (37). The assertion of an American "hyperbolic" builds imperial confidences as well as re-imagines history along those imperial lines, providing a cultural and sympathetic justification for the less glossy portraits of history that reflect conquest in the West.

The use of the Golden Gate Bridge as a symbol to mark space and time masks this history. In this way, the icon becomes a locus to discuss and uncover the tensions between race and space, between the shifting histories of indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, and Euro-American California. An investigation of the Golden Gate Strait—and its history in relation to empire in the West—helps uncover the racialized ghosts that lurk in the history of empire. The area surrounding the Golden Gate Strait was originally inhabited by Ohlone Indians, who bordered the south of the strait, and the Miwok, who bordered the north. As colonial forces began to come into the area, many of these indigenous populations were displaced into other parts of the region and faced additional acts of colonial rule. For example, at Mission Dolores in the city, there is a large record of Karkin-e band Ohlone Indians being baptized. In addition, as ancestral lands were co-opted and distributed as Spanish, and later Mexican, land grants, intermarriage became a more common practice that served to marginalize indigenous cultural practices and

memories in the area. This legacy of European exploration and commodification began in 1595 when the Portuguese merchant-adventurer Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno anchored the *San Augustin* in what is now known as the Golden Gate Strait on November 6 and formally claimed the region for Spain (Starr 26). This region, however, remained unexplored until the *San Carlos* sailed through the strait and the Anza settlement docked on June 27, 1776. That October, Father Francisco Palou founded and dedicated Mission San Francisco de Asis, and with this the strait became known as part of “San Francisco.”<sup>6</sup> It would be almost twenty years before other nations followed Spain to the west coast of the “New World.” In November of 1792 an English naval expedition under the command of Captain George Vancouver anchored in the bay. In April of 1806 the Russian ship *Juno*, under the command of Count Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, docked in the bay. By 1840, the Spanish christened the strait “la Boca del Puerto de San Francisco.”<sup>7</sup> The more familiar “Golden Gate” name stems from Captain John C. Fremont. On an expedition for the Topographical Engineers of the U.S. Army in 1846, Fremont likened the strait to the Byzantium harbor in Istanbul named *Chrysoceras* or “the Golden Horn.”

This newly invented “Golden Gate” announced a U.S. presence in the San Francisco Bay that was contingent on the absence of a past involving imperialism and conquest. This legacy of exploration and fables of “discovery” veils the reality of indigenous presence in the area surrounding the Golden Gate Strait. The Ohlone, Miwok,

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<sup>6</sup> Mission San Francisco de Asis is named for St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church. Today, San Francisco remains the “sister city” of Assisi, Italy.

<sup>7</sup> “The Mouth of the Port of San Francisco”

and other tribes continued to use the land and adapt along with the emerging and ever-changing city skyline. For example, in the 1880s, the Hearst family purchased a large tract of land that included the Alisal Rancheria (located near present-day Pleasanton). Mrs. Hearst allowed the band of 125 Muwekmas of the Ohlone to remain on the land and offered them employment at the estate. A little over twenty years later, Phoebe Hearst would play a large role in the advancement of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California and Dr. Alfred L. Kroeber's work with Ishi, "the last of the Yahi." This history complicates the moment that Ishi became of ward of the Berkeley Anthropology Museum. As Ishi stood in the museum located in Parnassus Heights,<sup>8</sup> I must wonder if he visualized this complex colonial history as clearly as he saw the Golden Gate Strait and the bay before him.

These tensions are obscured by popular imaginings of California as a blank slate ripe for American settlement and development. Californian historian Hubert Howe Bancroft recalls in *California Inter Pocula* (Volume XXV, 1888) entering the "high bluff-bound portals of the Golden Gate," declaring:

So I am in California, the lovely, the golden dreamed, the wonderful!  
Looking over the water toward the east, I see through the subtle void  
haze, the land before me like a land of promise; mountain, vale, and  
bay glimmering in a flood of saffron sunlight, zoned and studded with  
bright emerald hills—gold and green, significant of the royal metal in  
its veins, and the elements of the rich harvest hidden in its breast. (224)

Bancroft's recollection of sailing into the Golden Gate Strait in March 1852 calls attention to the "golden dreamed" version of California. In this passage, Bancroft imagines San Francisco as "a land of promise," a blank slate that is not only ripe for

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<sup>8</sup> Parnassus Heights is located in the Western Addition section of the city, above the area that now serves as the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park.

America's taking, but also full of endless possibilities. These sentiments were already solidified by the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. During this early American period, figures like Bayard Taylor and John Charles Fremont were imagining San Francisco and the Golden Gate not just as a harbor or a geographical point of interests, but as a place with high stakes for American enterprise, expansion, and cultural ideals. In *El Dorado; or, Adventures in the Path of Empire* (1850), Bayard Taylor describes the Golden Gate: "At last we are through the Golden Gate—fit name for such a magnificent portal to the commerce of the Pacific! . . . Around the curving shore of the Bay and upon the sides of three hills which rise steeply from the water, the middle one receding so as to form a bold amphitheatre, the town is planted and seems scarcely yet to have taken root, for tents, canvas, plank, mud and adobe houses are mingled together with the least apparent attempt at order and durability" (52). Taylor describes the Golden Gate as "a magnificent portal," an opening to not only to the emerging city of San Francisco, but also to the world that Americans were looking toward now that the continental frontier was coming to a close. In *Geographical Memoir Upon Upper California, an Illustration of His Map of Oregon and California*, John Charles Fremont (1848) writes: "The bay of San Francisco has been celebrated, from the time of its first discovery, as one of the finest in the world, and is justly entitled to that character even under the seaman's view of a mere harbor . . . with its geographical position on the line of communication with Asia, it rises into an importance far above that of a mere harbour, and deserves a particular notice in any account of maritime California" (32). By glossing over the historical presence of indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican moments, these illustrations of the Golden Gate Strait create a tension between presence and absence that

continues to shape California culture. The Golden Gate Strait, and the bridge that would later follow, have become constant reminders of this history and its systematic veiling.

Through these imaginings the Golden Gate strait became a “frontier zone,” a liminal space that simultaneously illustrated and questioned the possibilities and limits of the tropes of Manifest Destiny. In *The Forgotten Frontier: Urban Planning and the American West Before 1890*, John W. Reps considers what he calls “Zones of the Frontier.” Building on Fredrick Jackson Turner’s landmark study on the myth of the frontier in America, Reps defines various “zones” of westward expansion along the frontier that include: the domain of the fur traders, the domain of the cattlemen, the domain of the miners, the domain of pioneer farmers, the domain of equipped farmers, and the final frontier zone of urbanization (2). These domains, however, detail instances of economic and geographic expansion. What Reps marginalizes in his conception is the powerful cultural capital that fueled these “zones” in the West. The frontier, then, cannot be reduced to expansive moments and actions but must be reconceptualized in terms of the *ideological expansions* that were part of the process creating an “American” West. These ideological expansions are not merely about the conquest of land but concern the social and cultural composition of the landscape in relation to empire. The Golden Gate is such a space and has been such a space throughout various stages of California history. In California, multiple and ever-emerging “frontier zones” continued to shape urban development, public policy, economic mobility, and the cultural imaginary. These zones, I argue, are fundamentally linked to conceptions of race and space in California. In Thomas R. Hietala’s discussion of Manifest Destiny in *Manifest Design*, he suggests, “By denying the likelihood of a permanent black and Indian population on the continent,

antebellum Americans had difficulty preparing themselves and their descendants for racial heterogeneity in the United States” (267). Race became a part of the mythological past—a remembered conflict veiled by the promise of the present. While this was the case in the city by the Golden Gate, erasure has been unsuccessful. As the texts examined in this chapter and throughout this project suggest, the tension between the past and the present, between the modern presence of the Golden Gate Bridge and the violent history of expansion and racial tension along the Golden Gate Strait, can never fully be erased or forgotten.

All of these tropes shape the way that critics read cultural imaginings of the racialized and nationalized West. It is with these histories in mind that I approach the paradox of Indian presence and absence in California. What does it mean to be simultaneously present and absent? In the cultural landscape of San Francisco during the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the simultaneous desire to erase and preserve the indigenous past of California in the emergent American West complicated these questions of presence and absence. This is perhaps most visible in products of popular culture and an attention to current events of the period that had the sensationalized power to captivate audiences. Through a comparative study of the 1853 dime novel *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian and the case of Ishi and his relationship to the trope of the “vanishing American” and the practice of salvage ethnography, I question these mythical narratives about the history of California and San Francisco by uncovering a complex indigenous past that has been buried in the name of conquest.

In the tension between the Golden Gate Strait and the Golden Gate Bridge, we see the multiple and significant geographical reconfigurations that have shaped the way that we imagine race in the West: Spanish “discovery” and exploration, Mexican California, 1846 statehood, the 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco, and World War I and World War II. These historical moments illustrate shifting geographical, political, national and cultural boundaries. Likewise, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* and the case of Ishi’s re-emergence illustrate the lingering anxieties that haunt these shifts in space and time. These moments not only signify doubts about the unitary cultural identity of the American West, but also serve to challenge conceptions of race and nation. The example of the Golden Gate prompts us to think about these texts in three major ways: 1) as reflective of the contexts that these moments of production suggest, 2) as manifesting or creating transformative cultural moments in and about the collective imaginary of the space of San Francisco, and 3) as illustrations of the inconsistent gaps between the contextual moment and its production. In other words, these texts and their contexts reveal a history that is haunted by ghosts that cannot be reconciled, buried, or erased.

### **Unraveling “Mysteries of the City” in the American West**

Much has been written about the moment that Ishi, the “last of the Yahi,” emerged from the forest in northern California in 1911. What does this emergent “other” suggest about developing spaces in the West at the supposed end of an era of empire? How does this moment signal a shift from the imagined space of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier and all the mythic tropes of the West that come with it, to the urban

landscapes that begin to mark spaces of California as part of the landscape of national identity? While the veil of urban growth and development effaces Indian presence in the U.S. West, upon closer examination, the case of Ishi's (re)emergence and the resistance that it illustrates creates a rupture in the *simulated absence* of American Indians in Northern California during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These simulated absences imagine Indian presence as an absence wherein native peoples are relegated to a wilderness that lies outside the scope of the emergent national landscape. Yet these narratives of simulated absence are also able to disrupt powerful mythologies of national empire building and racial conquest that serve to create discourses of power in the West. It is through the rewriting of Indian presence and absence that an origin story of U.S. Empire and nationalism was formed in the West. As a result, we are presented with a web of origins—narratives that together form the construction we recognize culturally as the California frontier. Through framing my reading of the anthropological case of Ishi with a close reading of the 1853 dime novel *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian, I illustrate that in California the reality of Indian presence is obscured in popular cultural productions that serve as stewards of empire. Popular cultural artifacts such as *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* act as agents of cultural normalization that serve to share collective mythologies that become national memories of space. While I do not mean to suggest that all popular products are monolithic, they are strong examples of collective imaginings that becomes integral parts of how we represent and remember places and peoples. As raids on Indian communities, massacres, and systematic erasures of native communities reached their height, San Francisco and its residents worked to construct a vision of Californian and U.S.



modernity in which the Indian is a simulated abstraction. By situating this chapter in the years between 1853 and Ishi's emergence in 1911, I interrogate not only various modes of racialization that were at the core of empire building in the West during this period, but also consider the role of urban development and city planning in the West in relation to citizenship.

In considering the notion of indigenous simulated absence and presence, I use American Indian critic Gerald Vizenor's work on "the narratives of native absence as *Indian presence*" (23), as a point of departure to consider the space of race in California. I begin with an examination of key historical and colonial moments in the fractured past of California to establish a precedent for Indian presence and absence. I then conduct a reading of *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* that is dependent on relegating Indians to a shadowed background in order to place acceptable forms of racial amalgamation at the foreground of emergent U.S. identity formations in the West. The focal point of my reading is the relationship between Inez and Monteagle that I suggest is presented as a mode of assimilation that makes space for whiteness in the emergent urban landscape of San Francisco. I then shift to the anthropological case of Ishi in order to illustrate the holes in this type of mythological ordering of race and space. Through a consideration of Ishi's agency through a re-reading of the symbolic power of origin narratives and names, I examine texts such as Yana oral narratives, the works of Theodora Kroeber, and T.T. Waterman's reports of Ishi's death in order to reframe questions of agency in relation to the categories of presence and absence. As part of this, I deploy Vizenor's conceptions of "survivance" and "post-indian warriors" to consider the contributions that figures like Ishi make to the landscape of indigenous and race

studies in California and the West. I end with a close reading of Vizenor's play *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* to consider the way that stories shape our collective memory of space and race. In reading this against the case of Ishi, I argue that these cultural goals of abstraction ultimately fail. Rather, the absence that is imagined in texts such as *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* is a simulated construction that, in an attempt to rewrite history, obscures the complex historical context of racial and urban formations in San Francisco and the West.

### **Negating Native California: The Indian and Abstractions of Cultural Memory**

History tells us that narratives about California begin with Spanish discovery, with the presence of whiteness in the West. This simple cultural assertion indicates that history is written by dominant forces—by those who shape the course of colonialism. But what these narratives fail to recognize is that history is not a singular entity; rather, there are complex and conflicting plural *histories* that construct the past. Part of this plurality is the diverse past(s) of indigenous California that encompasses a wide variety of tribes, languages, cultural and religious systems, and oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> Poised at the “end” of the western frontier, California has historically been a place of cultural collision. From the Spanish mission system, to the Russian fur trade, to the encroachment of white settlers from the east, California is a place that harbors the memories of multiple types of colonial encounters and empires. This history of empire in California is thus not defined

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<sup>9</sup> I do not wish to suggest that all California Indian tribes are lumped together as a single unit. The diversity of native California has been well documented. My aim here is to discuss indigenous California in relation to multiple forms of empire in the West rather than perform an exhaustive catalogue of the various tribes that these movements impacted.

by discovery but stretches far back into the collisions of cultural memory that result from encounters between colonial expansion and indigenous experience and resistance.

In 1510 Garci Orrdonez Montalvo first describes California as an island that is “very close to the region of Early Paradise” and inhabited by powerful natives in his novel *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandian*.<sup>10</sup> The novel traces the exploits of the knight Esplandian as he travels across the ocean to the mythic island of California that is inhabited by native woman warriors who gain their power through the vast amount of wealth derived from the island’s gold and gems. In the novel the women of California are described as possessing “energetic bodies and courageous, ardent hearts, and they were very strong. Their armor was made entirely out of gold” (457). Led by Queen Calafia, the female natives of the island seem to embody the untamed wilderness that they inhabit. But the power of their bodies is overshadowed by the “otherness” of their status as “natives” who are “similar to that of the Amazons” (457). As the novel tells the story of Queen Calafia’s struggle to retain a sense of power and honor in her changing world, Montalvo makes it clear that native life on the island of California must bend to colonial power and will. Even more telling is the fact that the colonial conflict of the novel is reconciled through the issue of marriage. Calafia desires to make Esplandian her husband, but this idea is quickly extinguished, rendering the union between the native woman warrior and the Spanish knight a firm impossibility. Despite her title of “Queen” and because of the native blood that runs through her veins, their union simply cannot be. In attempting to describe and decipher their failed union, Queen Calafia explains, “In

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of California as an island has a long history that precedes Montalvo’s epic novel. See *The Island of California: A History of the Myth* by Dora Beale Polk.

accordance with my grandeur and surpassing wealth—both of which usually confuse and snare most people—I had reason to hope that, by converting to your law I could win him for my husband” (502). While Queen Calafia is rejected as an unsuitable wife for the European exemplar of masculinity, the knight Esplandian, she must still take a Christian husband and assimilate into the white society that Esplandian represents in order for her narrative to have a “happy ending.” In a key passage, Queen Calafia declares:

I am the queen of a large seigniory, where there is a vast abundance of what the whole world prizes most, which is gold and precious stones. My lineage is very high, for my royal bloodline is so old there is no record of its beginning. I am justly famed for the moral perfection of my chastity; and the same purity holds for my honorable birth. Fortune brought me to this region, from whence I expected to carry off many captives; but I am the captive . . . I want, if you please, to take another husband; preferably, a king’s son who is as courageous as a good knight ought to be; and I will become a Christian. I do this because I have seen that your law is very orderly and well organized, whereas others suffer great disorder. Therefore, it is clear that the law you observe is the truth, while ours is a false lie. (503)

While the passage begins with a list of Calafia’s favorable traits such as her abundant wealth, her “royal” bloodline, and her “moral perfection,” her speech quickly gives way to a heartfelt acknowledgement of her cultural shortcoming. From this passage it seems that no amount of royal blood could equal the blood of Christianity. It is not only the “laws,” then, that Calafia deems to be superior to her own native ways, but rather she critiques the very blood that runs through her veins. It is thus only through conversion to whiteness that she can hope to survive in the New World. Only a cultural conversion and an erasure of her past can secure a “happy ending” for her tale. In the story of Queen Calafia we see shades of *la limpieza de sangre*, the notion of blood purity that was a powerful ideological force behind Spanish exploration and colonialism in the Americas.

*Sangre*, or blood, was a trait linked to reason, divinity, and the very seeds of humanity. Blood quickly became a factor in distinguishing the *gente de razón* (people of reason) from the *gente sin razón* (people without reason), or the *indio*. Emerging from the works and debates of Bartolome de las Casas, the designations of *gente de razón* and *indio* stemmed from questions over whether New World natives had souls. These questions of *razón* and *sangre* would fuel colonial relations for centuries to come.

As Montalvo's novel illustrates, in California the Indian became the antithesis of whiteness, a racial abstraction that purified others. In *Conquest and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936*, Lisbeth Haas argues, "The *indio* was nameless, while the 'Spanish Californian' was not only named but also clearly recognized as the possessor of property" (129). The categories of *sangre* and *razón* became not only measures of blood, but measures of ability to self-govern as well. As Tomás Almaguer explains in his landmark study on racial constructions in California, *Racial Fault Lines*, "Beginning in the colonial period, America's English settlers drew upon these value-laden notions to craft a collective identity based upon the categories *English, Christian, free*, and, above all, *white*, and specifically defined in opposition to another, nonwhite category of people, initially Native Americans and Africans" (21). This had especially significant implications for California that shaped both constructions of whiteness and constructions of the "other" in the state. Almaguer explains, "The claimed or real European ancestry of the Californio elite provided an important basis upon which they differentiated themselves from the more déclassé indigenous mestizo and Indian population of California" (54). With the expansion of the Spanish empire in California, a claimed European ancestry trumped any amount of "royal" blood like that of Queen Calafia.

Blood was thus not only a mark of character, but an avenue of access. Perhaps the most significant was access to the past. In California, then, Indians were viewed not only as an obstacle to white settlement and land development, but also as a relic of the past.

Attempts to reconcile the threat of the Indian were manifested in three key cultural institutions in California: the Spanish mission system, the Californio and Mexican Ranchos, and the American reservation system. The mission was the oldest colonial institution that attempted to “civilize” and assimilate Indians. The first mission, San Diego de Alcalá, was founded in 1769 by Father Junipero Serra. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Mission San Francisco de Asís was founded less than a decade later in 1776.<sup>11</sup> While the missions are a hallmark of the California colonial experience, we can actually trace their ideological roots far before of the establishment of an organized system in California. As an empire, Spain had long called on the words of God to help wage its cultural wars. In the Old World, Spanish missions and Christian doctrine were used as a way to assimilate and colonize Mohammedan Moors in Spain (Bean and Rawls 18). Thus, the mission had long been an institution designed to aid the “advancing and consolidating frontier” that began in the Old World and had finally come to the New (18). The second major colonial institution in California was the Mexican Ranchos. On Ranchos, Indians were contained as labor forces. While the rancho system began under Spanish rule, it was primarily an institution of the Mexican government. The Mexican answer to the California Indian problem was to re-create the feudal systems of Europe and continue to oppress the natives while filtering resources and wealth to Mexican land owners. The typical California rancho depended on between 20 and 100 Indian workers

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of Mission Dolores in San Francisco.

that included both mission Indians and new Indians who had been captured or solicited by the ranchos (54). After the Mexican-American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1846, the “Indian Problem” was to become a distinctly “American” one. After the ranchos began to fade into the newly minted pages of California history, American California turned to military reservations as a possible solution to the “Indian Problem” in the West. As Joseph Ellison details in *California and the Nation, 1850-1869: A Study of the Relations of a Frontier Community with the Federal Government*, “In California there were always many who deprecated the reservation policy. In 1855 the *Alta* pronounced it a failure. In 1857 Governor Johnson urged the legislature to demand the removal of Indians from the state. The *Sacramento Union* and San Francisco *Herald* advocated the abolishment of the reservation system, for it neither protected the whites nor the Indians; it only withheld from white settlers over two hundred thousand acres of the best farming land” (104). These three colonial processes highlight two major points of significance in the indigenous California experience. First, they suggest a stark difference between the Indians of California and the Indians of the east that have been so often canonized and commodified in the pages of early American literary and historical texts. The Indians of the east could be removed, could be pushed west. In California, colonial forces had to contend with a lack of westward space coupled with a rapid influx of settlers. Second, these institutions highlight the multiple colonial forces that penetrated California indigenous life through various attempts at establishing empire through eradication.

The failures of the missions, ranchos, and reservations signal a significant problem for empire and enterprise in the west. The geographical location of California

ensured that Indians could no longer be pushed west. The “final frontier” is thus not only significant to doctrines of “discovery,” but become of central importance in relation to the displacement of indigenous peoples. The federal “removal” policy of the 1820s<sup>12</sup> as a viable solution to the “Indian Problem,” was simply not an option in California.

California crossed the “Great American Desert” and pushed the boundaries of what had been described as the “permanent Indian frontier” of the Great Plains (Beans/Rawls 137). In the minds of many Americans, eradication – extinction – became the “final frontier” for the Indian Problem. California Governor Burnett (1849-1851) publicly called for the eradication of Indians in California, stating that a “war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct” ( qtd. in Ellison 81). While a report issued by the Indian Commissioners on January 13, 1851, urged the people of California to continue to hope for assimilation, it also acknowledged that eradication was a possible answer to the Indian Question because of the scarcity of land (85). A letter from Col. Francis L. Lippitt to Major R. C. Drum dated March 5, 1862, expresses these sentiments through violent frustration: “You can readily imagine that in this state of things no Indian can show his head anywhere without being shot down like a wild beast. The women and children, even, are considered good game” (qtd. in Heizer and Almquist 31). The policy of extinction promised to tame the California wilderness by eradicating the “wild beast” that was thought to threaten white settlers and their

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<sup>12</sup> Removal had been an unofficial practice for decades prior to its formal institution as a governmental policy, particularly through the 1830 Indian Removal Act.



emerging communities.<sup>13</sup> Extinction thus became the way to image and problematize the issues of expansion and empire.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> But this violent attempt of erasure was not simply a matter of bodily destruction, but of cultural and legal destruction as well. To eradicate the Indian was thus not merely to erase populations from the physical landscape, but to erase them from the social and cultural pages of *American* history in the West. While the 1846 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised that “special care shall . . . be taken not to place its Indians occupants under the necessity of seeking new homes,” removal of indigenous peoples from public life continued with a vengeance (See Article XI, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1846). In 1850 the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians passed and legalized indenturing Indians (Heizer and Almmquist 39). In 1851 California passed a law prohibiting Indians from serving as witnesses or on a jury for cases against whites. Three years later, in 1854, it became illegal to furnish firearms and ammunition to Indians. In 1863 and 1864 the state passed laws barring Indian children admission to public schools. In 1870 it became legal to segregate Indian children in California schools (Almaguer 133). Together these measures attempted not only to keep Indians separate from the white public sphere in California, but also to slowly eradicate Indian culture and peoples from the landscape itself. This institutional attempt at eradication would continue well into the twentieth century. While Indian people in California began to gain access to rights with legal granting of the right to vote in all elections in California in 1879, it would not be until 1924 that the U.S. Congress would finally grant full citizenship rights to American-born Indians across the country.

<sup>14</sup> As horrifically unbalanced as this history may seem, it was not met without resistance. Since the first Spanish settler came to the California coast, Indian tribes have resisted attempts to encroach on their lands and disrupt their culture. Indian attacks were common in California, though they were far from the bloodthirsty representations that are so prevalent in western genre films. Rather, these raids were part of organized forms of resistance that Indian peoples used to protect their land and assert their cultural autonomy. In addition, religious sects such as the Toloache and the Kuksu began to gain momentum in California as a form of organized religious and cultural resistance. The central figure of the toloache religion was Chingichnish, who emerged amongst tribes in Southern California around the time of the arrival of Portola and Father Serra (Schwartz 32). Followers of Chinigichnish continued to observe the cultural practices of resistance in places like the Rincon and Pauma reservations in San Diego until the late 1970s. The story of Ishi is part of this long history of resistance. In the Ishi case we see the ideologies of the “Vanishing Redman” rejected. Designated as “the last of the tribe,” the life of Ishi and the work of Kroeber illustrate a narrative not of extinction but of survival. But they also illustrate something else, something far more chilling—the story of Ishi and his body reveals that the colonial imaginary, and the very real hierarchies of power that come with it, are far from extinct in Native California.

### ***Mysteries, Miseries and Ghostly Apparitions***

This is a history that is often hidden behind multiple veils of racial and ethnic conquest. Rather than consider Indians as a cornerstone of California history, cultural products of early American California worked to bury the history of Native California in order to craft and advertise a mythic and inherent American identity. As this history and the case of Ishi illustrate, the Indian presence lies behind the cultural hallmarks of Indian absence. *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* is the first text I will examine in this complex trajectory. An anonymously written dime novel that imagines the history of San Francisco early in its settlement, the novel is part of a long tradition of cultural erasure. Published in 1853 by Garrett Press in New York, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* was part of long trans-Atlantic traditions of dime novels and the “mysteries of the city” sub-genre. Texts such as *Mysteries of Washington City* by A Citizen of Ohio from 1844, *Mysteries of City Life, or Stray Leaves from the World’s Book* by James Reese from 1849, and *The Secrets of the Great City: a Work Descriptive of the Virtues and Vices, the Mysteries and Miseries and Crimes of New York City* from 1868 illustrate the phenomenon of the mystery genre that spread across U.S. and European cities during this time period that revealed anxieties about emerging urban spaces.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* attempts to reconcile the problems of race in the emerging urban San Francisco by combating Indian presence with fictional alternatives. Taking place only a few short years after the Gold Rush, the novel attempts

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the tradition of these types of narratives was a trans-Atlantic phenomenon that had numerous European counterparts, including *The Mysteries of Paris* by Eugene Sue from 1843 and George Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* from 1844. Critics Michael Denning and Peter Brooks have written extensively about both traditions.

to take an inventory of the diversity that was shaping a newly forming metropolis. It narrates the experience of a wide variety of characters and types and imagines both high and low social and economic classes, European immigrants, people moving westward, the legacy of the Californios, and the citizens of the future. In its central narrative, the novel follows the love affair between Scottish immigrant Lorenzo Monteagle and Californio maiden Inez del Castro. As the two attempt to come together in the space of the new San Francisco landscape, they endure Wild West kidnappings, horse rides across the California wilderness, and the villainous libertine Blodget's dark plan to keep them apart through a narrative of carnal desire. Yet through all this, the Indian remains a simulated and marginalized abstraction, a forgotten and veiled figure that is part of a "pre-American" moment.

This novel is not set in a vacuum. Rather, such texts are symptomatic of both the cultural trends of the time and the construction of a mythic West and California in relation to the emergent national identity of the mid-nineteenth century. The novel serves to create the conditions of possibility for the emerging city's citizenry and to cast the boundaries of who does and does not belong in a developing metropolis. As part of this, I argue that these "mysteries of the city" concern ethnic and racial identities that imagine and re-imagine possible futures of emergent urban space in the West. By marking the Indian as a simulated abstraction that lingers in the background of the ever-threatening wilderness, the novel articulates the space of Native peoples by limiting their sense of physical and social mobility. In *Minoritized Space: An Inquiry into the Spatial Order of Things*, Michael S. Laguerre writes, "The 'other' cannot be minoritized unless he/she is situated or located in a social position apart from that of the majority and the space he/she

occupies is minoritized by the majority” (8). By refusing to acknowledge Indian presence within the scope of the city, this cultural product illuminates the deep anxiety over social and racial mixing with indigenous people. *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* systematically works to erase an Indian presence in California because it is only through Indian *absence* that a white, “American” California can emerge in the cultural imaginary.

### **“Instant Cities”: Constructed Realities and Imaged Spaces**

Essential to understanding the cultural stakes of this project is a consideration of the young but rich history of the city itself. The time period that encompasses *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* and the case of Ishi was a period of immense urban growth and development. Cities became the new organizing centers for communities in the U.S., providing both new infrastructures and opportunities. After 1820, cities grew at a rapid rate: “in 1790 one out of every thirty Americans lived in places of eight thousand or more; in 1820 one out of twenty; in 1840 one out of twelve; and in 1860 nearly one in every six” (Schlesinger 20). In 1880, 28.2 percent of people in the country lived in cities; by 1890 35.1 were urban occupants, by the turn of the century it reached 39.7, and in 1910 45.7 percent or roughly 44,639,989 people lived in cities (Miller 72). These statistics illustrate the vast amount of urban growth that took place across the country and raise new sets of questions about diversity in the United States. As urban growth continued to dominate emerging urban communities like those in the Bay Area, the wilderness became a “minoritized space.” In this sense, “The space of the majority is constructed as having a superior substance vis-à-vis the space of the

minorities, and it is produced as a result of power play” (Laguerre 9). American Indians—and their cultural and historical presence—became relegated to this minoritized space in the emerging urban imaginary of early San Francisco. The city became the “superior substance” of the space of the Bay, theoretically placing Indians outside the boundaries of urban culture and architecture and subordinating them through this new hierarchy that, while making claims to notions of “civilization,” was a racially motivated form of segregation.

The early history of San Francisco as an American city tells us much about this systematic redefining of space. In *Imperial San Francisco*, historian Robert Lotchin explains, “In short, California had evolved from a frontier area to a settled state between 1848 and 1860. It is not surprising, therefore, that this booming community produced one of America’s first instant cities” (5). The rapid growth that San Francisco experienced from the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, to the years following the Gold Rush in 1860, produced a city that was forced to simultaneously build a future and construct a narrative past. This produced the “instant city” identity that Lotchin describes, one that seems to have emerged overnight despite its long history of mythic narratives that allowed the city to initially develop and then continue to grow.<sup>16</sup> This mythic “instant city” ideology is important because it both masks and alters the way the history of San Francisco is perceived and remembered. According to the United States Census Office, by 1900 San Francisco was the eighth largest city in the nation,

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the “instant city” phenomenon is not unique to San Francisco. Other Gold Rush towns, like Sacramento also underwent such processes. Los Angeles, becomes an “instant city” of sorts after that 1915 San Francisco earthquake. In addition, the West seems build on these spatial uprisings; places like Seattle and Denver have also been written about in relation to “instant” urban spaces.

earning it the title of “the commercial metropolis of the Pacific Coast” (Issel 23). By this time San Francisco had already established itself as the leader of manufacturing, finance, and export trade in the American West (Issel and Cherny 23). As historians William Issel and Robert Cherny explain in *San Francisco, 1856-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development*, “The city had more manufacturing establishments, more employees in workshops, greater capitalization, larger value of materials, and higher value of production than all the other twenty-four western cities combined” (23). In fact, San Francisco had more people than Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle, its three Pacific Coast rivals, combined. This immense growth in the region helped solidify San Francisco as an “instant city” in the urban U.S. landscape because it suggested that “[w]hat had taken other cities years to collect San Francisco created almost instantaneously” (Lotchin 136). While this may be statistically true, it also obscures these early conflicts that centered on the tensions between racialized bodies and emerging forms of whiteness that helped shape the modern landscape of San Francisco. The “instant city” was thus not instant, but a place that evolved from a long line of social and ethnic conflict, from the tensions between marked “American” and “minoritized” spaces.

Popular cultural products echoed these sentiments and anxieties concerning the origins of the mythic frontier. In particular, dime novels like *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* illustrated such ideological shifts and created mass-produced cultural and *national* narratives that imagined a complex connection between race and space. In this narrative, San Francisco becomes a mysterious place, constantly trying to reconcile the ghosts of a racialized past while systematically planning for an imagined future. As a genre, then, the mystery is a formation that is deeply embedded in the urban landscape.

Texts such as *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* (and countless others that follow the conventions and narrative structures of the novel)<sup>17</sup> are not only narratives *about* the city but *are* the city—they become narratives that are hallmarks of that space. By reading the city and understanding the foundations of the mysteries that it produced, citizens learn lessons about space and place, about history and memory, and, perhaps more importantly, about their role within those spaces. The city, thus, became a text of both entertainment and education.

As one of the earliest dime novels set in San Francisco, *The Mysteries and Miseries* is indicative of the genre, illustrating the conventions of the mysteries of the city format. The dime novel was “the commercial, mass-produced, sensational fiction of the nineteenth century” (Denning 10). Dime novels signaled one of the first types of the “commodification of culture,” creating a new industry where readers could consume narratives. In consuming urban spaces, we are consuming narratives *about* those places. The identity of San Francisco is not merely about property values, neighborhoods, and historical landmarks (although all those components are no doubt important), but is also about the way we *imagine* that space, the narratives that we construct around it in order to help organize and reconcile that space. As Michael Denning notes in his landmark study, *Mechanic Accents*, “the dime novel industry is a central component of the emerging culture industry” (16). As mass-produced cultural products, these texts created a distinct “industry” that was designed to both explore and control the space of the city. As the

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<sup>17</sup> The mystery genre has long been associated with San Francisco. The Bancroft Library has recently catalogued over one thousand mystery novels, ranging in publication date from 1853 to the present, that take place in San Francisco. For a complete list please see <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/sfmystery>.

first mystery novel published about San Francisco, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* exemplified this type of mass-produced “culture industry” to which Denning is referring.

The sub-genre of the “mysteries of the city” fully illustrates this type of consumption in the case of early San Francisco cultural production. The mysteries of the city narratives “unveiled the city’s mysteries by telling tales of criminal underworlds, urban squalor, and elite luxury and decadence” (Denning 85). Plagued by a drastically urbanoid view of the city spaces, these texts considered all sensationalized forms of life in the city, from the squalors of the struggling lower classes to the overt and luxurious greed of the wealthy. In a sense, these novels served as “sensational guide books to the city” (92). While they did not necessarily illustrate the landscape and topography of urban space in full detail, they took an inventory (however skewed and incomplete) of the range of “characters” and “types” that constructed urban life. In other words, these novels were not about the city per se, but about the *production* of the city. Denning explains that “the mysteries of the city were not the ‘sights’ of the city, but the social relations that lay behind closed doors; success in the genre required the creation of a figure which embodied those relations or a character who could move through them” (93). These novels are also part of what we conceive of as “ethnographic literature”—narratives that, as Ter Ellingson explains in *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, engage with the threats of the conversion of “savage” to “civilized” through a projection of the frontier that is linked to the gothic tradition (126). The mystery of the city sub-genre became a way to link the racialized body both with larger mysteries and allegories of the city. Included among the vices of the city were the bodies that plagued the city and its



economic, social, and moral success. Histories—and, thus, cities themselves—become mapped on the bodies of the people who inhabit those spaces. In *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, this mapping is achieved primarily through constructions of ethnicity and race. Imagining whiteness through the new immigrants and racialized others through blacks and Asians, as well as abstracting the very contemporary presence of Indians and indigenous forms of resistance, these texts suggest that the real mystery of the city is that of ethnic identity, about deciphering who is a citizen of that space—and the nation—and who is not. In reading *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, then, I argue that the abstraction of racialized others creates the model citizen. In this sense, whiteness and citizenship are productions of negation. At the center of this lies cultural imaginings of the “vanishing” Indian.

### ***Mysteries and Miseries of Spatial Identity: Rewriting the Frontier***

At the heart of *Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* are possibilities—and necessarily, anxieties—over collisions between race and space in the city. Many of these anxieties stem from conceptions of Manifest Destiny in the West during this period. Western historian Benard DeVoto explains that Manifest Destiny “expressed and embodied the peculiar will, optimism, disregard, and even blindness that characterized the 1840’s in America” (9). Much of this was related to fears and anxieties over Indian populations. DeVoto goes on to explain, “Fear of Indians was chronic with every train that went west . . . All of them blended with their anxiety a compound of rumors, legendary, and the desperate loneliness of the wilds” (157). Part of the project of relegating Indians to the dangerous frontier was keeping them out of the boundaries of

the city. In this way, the simulated absence of Indians in the urban landscape that *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* illustrates points to the very real threat of presence that was a hallmark of the California wilderness. The novel's perception of racialized bodies thus provides an early glimpse into these anxieties, vividly illustrating the relationship among ethnicity, race, and the city.

Within this schema lies the importance of “types”—stereotypical characters that simultaneously imagine and remind the reader of social norms.<sup>18</sup> In *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* the reader encounters a parade of “types,” characters that embody abstract constructions riddled with social prejudices from the period. In the novel we meet “the robber,” “the Irishman,” the beautiful woman with the “heaving bosom,” “the negro,” and “wealthy people,” among other characters who create the diverse landscape of the city. Yet the Indian is seemingly absent in this collection of types. Rather, he is imaged as a type of shadow character who lingers in the background of the wilderness that lies beyond the boundaries of the emergent city. This simulated absence signals deep anxieties concerning the potential presence of Indian blood and history. While, the “type” characters set the narrative stage of San Francisco, they serve as a mere backdrop to the sensationalized encounter between the mythic Californio past of the city—embodied by Inez del Castro, the beautiful Spanish maiden linked to the Wild West narrative of the text—and the future of the modern empire—represented through Lorenzo Monteagle, the Scottish immigrant who has quickly risen to a prominent

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<sup>18</sup> The idea of “types” was a common convention in dime novels from this period, whether the author of the text was known or not. However, in the case of *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, the city as a character becomes a key construction that this convention both highlights and helps to unpack.

social and economic position in the city. This is a love story that is dependent on a firm rejection of Indian presence, despite the physical and cultural threat that constantly looms over the narrative.

Inez and Monteagle become allegorical formations that narrate the struggle between imagined past and present spatial constructions of San Francisco. As Almaguer argues, “the nineteenth-century transformation of Mexican California . . . provides a unique opportunity for exploring the complex process whereby newly racialized relationships are forged and contested historically” (3). The relationship between Inez and Monteagle in *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* vividly illustrates this forging of new ethnic and class-oriented relationships that Almaguer is describing. Their romance becomes a key construction in the building of national fantasies and national mythologies about the relationship among space, ethnicity, and race. Furthermore, their relationship foregrounds the relationship among mystery, sexuality, and gender—it is only through their heteronormative merger that the space of the city, and all its mysteries of racial anxiety, can be discovered and revealed.<sup>19</sup> Almaguer explains, “European-American immigrants in nineteenth-century California inherited and routinely relied on Eurocentric cultural criteria to hierarchically evaluate and racialize the various cultural groups they contended with in California” (8). In addition to the process of racialization that Almaguer is describing here, *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* also illustrates the new and complex ethnic and social categories that were being produced

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<sup>19</sup> There is a long trajectory of critical work on this subject of Latin American racialized romances and the role that they share in colonial projects and American nation building. Work by Antonia Castaneda, Rosaura Sanchez, and Doris Sommer speak to these issues in more depth.

during the period. Monteagle and Inez illustrate a process of “whitening” both immigrants and those closely associated with the mythic California past. This “whitening” becomes an essential feature then of San Francisco identity and citizenry.

These concerns about race and space are manifested in the novel through the construction of Inez. It is in her rejection of any “native” Californian or even Mexican identity that her character becomes a tangible—and acceptable—possibility for new racial formations in the West. Inez is not an *indio*; she is not a member of the *sin razón* category that had been systematically racialized and marginalized in Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. California. Central to this argument is also the issue of class. Her class allows Monteagle to desire her not only because of her exotic beauty, but also because she is a *tangible* fantasy, a woman with whom Monteagle could actually form a lasting union because of their common social status in San Francisco.

Shortly after Monteagle rescues Inez from the flames of a destructive fire that has destroyed half of the city in the opening chapters of the novel, he has a vivid dream about her. In his dream he sees that “*Inez Castro*, riding on an elephant, came that way, attended by a large number of very black slaves . . . Such was his dream, and now he pondered upon it deeply, for it seemed to be fraught with meaning, as if it was something more than the effects of his night’s adventures” (42). In this odd fantasy, Inez is imagined as both an exotic other and a figure of potential whiteness. The images of the “burning sun,” the elephant that she rides on, and the “very black slaves” give the dream undertones of an African past and the legacy of slavery in the United States. But Inez is distinguished from these slaves. The slaves are “attending” her, and she is clearly in control and separated from their status of servitude. The “very black slaves” whiten her

by creating a stark contrast with her and illustrating what she is not. By separating her from the racialized bodies of the slave in this passage, the author underscores her accessibility and her importance in the emergence of a new California identity. In Monteagle's attempt to become a citizen of the emerging metropolis of San Francisco, he must align himself with Inez, and the sense of whiteness that she embodies, in order to forge a new sense of "Americanness." In this moment, Inez becomes a symbol of the Spanish Californian past, one that not only differentiates itself from Indian and Mexican constructs, but one that also details an imagined European legacy. It is only through a union with her that Monteagle can abandon his own Scottish immigrant status in order to craft a new sense of national identity.

But this union is not without its anxieties. The villain, Blodget, provides a polar opposite for Monteagle's character in the novel. While both men strive to sexually possess Inez and have a deep-seated attraction to exotic beauties, Blodget is only interested in these unions for the carnal sense of desire, pleasure, and mastery that they pose. He is a carnal figure, a "savage" who is incapable of denying his desire. As a libertine or seducer, Blodget does not serve the future of California, but rather disrupts it with his desire. He is thus imagined as a figure aligned with not the emerging city but the unknown and the danger of the surrounding wilderness. When he captures Inez, he takes her not to a secret den in the city that symbolizes *urban* vice, but rather retreats into the wilderness. By departing into the wilderness, Blodget severs ties with the urban landscape of the city and aligns himself with a sense of savagery and the unknown that the wilderness represents in the narrative. In an echo of early captivity narratives, Blodget—like the "savage"—abducts Inez on her moral mission and holds her captive in

attempts to sexually and ideologically conquer her. In a moment of exasperation, he exclaims, “[T]he perverse woman . . . she must be subdued;—she must be subdued” (169). Blodget must “subdue” her in order to convert her to his ways, the ways that rule the frontier of the “wild west” that he symbolizes. Furthermore, Blodget’s captivity of her and his constant threat of rape serves to highlight the anxiety over racial identity and space that she suggests in the novel. In this way, he becomes an allegory for the shadowed and simulated absent Indian in the novel, an imagining of the “savage” who haunts the city. The union between Inez and Monteagle signals an end to his days of sexual freedom and the power of the wilderness because it signals new social rules for a new space. In the context of the spatial construction of the novel, the anxieties that Blodget represents about the union between Inez and Monteagle extend to anxieties about space in the “wild west.”

The only solution to the problematic triangle of desire that Inez, Monteagle, and Blodget form is marriage. It is only through a sanctioned, Christian union that all doubts about racial and ethnic origins will be erased. The final lines of the novel inform us that “the little church at the Mission was soon after gaily decorated, and before its humble altar the hands of Inez and Monteagle were united” (208). Their union signals the birth of a new type of city, one in which certain kinds of acceptable ethnic mixing (with all its anxieties) is necessary for creating a new type of space in the American West. In some ways their union signals the ultimate conquest, the ultimate destruction of the past, in order to forge a future. Paradoxically, their union also signals a type of rebuilding, of recoding and re-signaling history. Their spiritual merger signals a new era for San

Francisco and for race in a developing national identity. As they stand together at Mission Dolores, they themselves become a type of historical marker.

### **Re-imagining Origins: Stories, Survivance, and the Significance of Ishi**

The case of Ishi, the “last of the Yana,” is a narrative that contradicts this mythic collective memory of Indian absence by illustrating a deep and enduring presence of Indians in California and their relationship to the political landscape of the American West. Unlike the *Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, the story of Ishi places Indian presence at the center of identity construction and racialization in California and challenges the mythical emergence and origin myths of urban space in the Bay Area. While works like *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* ask readers to be complicit in a simulated absence of Native American presence and resistance in Northern California, the history of survival and resistance that Ishi’s very visible presence in the city presents a narrative of California space in which the Indian is at the center of cultural imaginings. In this way, the case of Ishi asks us to rethink origin stories, to reimagine the history of race and place in California by effectively rewriting the colonial history and mythology that shapes the landscape. Where *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* asks readers to imagine a landscape in which the Indian has become the “vanishing American,” Ishi illustrates an enduring presence that forces us to rethink the mythic origins that we associate with San Francisco and American empire in the West.

We must begin by thinking about Ishi’s “origin” story. At the beginning of her book *Ishi in Two Worlds*, Theodora Kroeber, the wife of anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who cared for and studied Ishi during the final years of his life, writes: “The story of Ishi

begins for us early in the morning of the twenty-ninth day of August in the year 1911 and in the corral of the slaughterhouse. It begins with the sharp barking of dogs which roused the sleeping butchers. In the dawn light they saw a man at bay, crouching against the corral fence—Ishi” (3). With these words, Theodora Kroeber prompts us to think about the “beginnings” of stories, to problematize origins. Her statement implies not only that Ishi’s story begins at the moment of contact, but also suggests that California history begins with the presence of European “discovery.” As she attempts to tell Ishi’s story, she simultaneously highlights and erases an enduring legacy of colonialism in California. Rather than a narrative of discovery, Ishi’s “emergence” is a testimony of enduring Indian presence, a firm declaration against colonial myths of absence. This presence suggests that Ishi’s story highlights what Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor refers to as an act of survivance. In blending the promise of survival with active resistance, survivance at its core is concerned with an enduring Indian presence that looks toward both the past and the future in order to deconstruct colonial mythologies. In considering Ishi’s story, survivance provides a methodology to reexamine the history of Indian presence and the stakes of Indian absence in the California cultural and political landscapes. Thus, in considering origins, we must reconsider the way that history is told and remembered. Ishi’s story presents a counternarrative to the doctrines of Manifest Destiny and the illusion of Native American absence in the construction of modern California. Instead of being remembered as the “last of the Yahi,” as the “vanishing American,” Ishi’s reemergence disrupts this idea by reinterpreting the trope of the “vanishing” Indian through displacing simulated absence with a strong, enduring, and, at times, haunting presence.



As part of this revisionary work, his story reconsiders the “origins” of Indian-white relations in California by questioning the very history that was constructed for him—his very presence changes the narratives of his origins and challenges the abstraction of Indian absence in California. In other words, Ishi’s “reemergence” in San Francisco marks a rewriting of the mythic visions of the West that his absence was thought to signal. In this context the Yana’s imagined extinction produced a sense of “native absence” that resulted in a mythologizing construction of “*Indian* presence,” in which the *Indian* is an imagined abstraction. According to Vizenor, *Indians*: 1) have no native ancestor, 2) are Columbian in origin, 3) are simulations that highlight the absence of natives, 4) transpose the real, and 5) suggest that the simulations of the real have no referents, memories, or stories (15). In this schema, Native American history becomes opposed to constructions of the *Indian*, in Vizenor’s sense of the word, and the vanishing American. By tracing Ishi’s journey from reemergence to urban dweller, his narrative restores a sense of “native” presence that contradicts these myths of the vanishing *Indian* that Vizenor details. Furthermore, Ishi challenges every one of these categories through modes of emergence and reemergence—through a revision of origin stories.

The indigenous origin story of Ishi begins with the Yana people that he was part of. The Yana was a group of Indians who lived in the Northern California gold territories. Divided into four distinct branches that corresponded to the four cardinal directions, the Yana comprised a large population of Natives that Ishi’s subgroup, the Yahi, were a small part of. Sustaining themselves mostly on wild game, salmon, fruit, acorns, and roots, the Yana occupied a territory that was 40 miles by 60 miles and contained mountain streams, gorges, boulder-strewn hills, and meadows. Their

knowledge and use of the environment had sustained them for hundreds of years prior to Euro-American settlement in the area. When gold was discovered in the region in 1848, prospectors, settlers, and ranchers flooded into Yana territory, dramatically altering the environment and food supply. Over the next several decades, the Yana suffered great losses that resulted from acts of violence and the introduction of various diseases. By 1865, there were fewer than fifty Yana thought to be still living in the area. The “Three Knolls Massacre” of 1865 left only thirty survivors and forced the remaining Yana to retreat into the wilderness and conceal their existence. It would not be until 1911 that Ishi—and the history of the Yana—would reemerge.

This violent history prompts us to think about the centrality of emergence and reemergence in the context of origins. “The Creation of the Yana” origin story offers key insight into how to reread the presence and absence of Ishi. In this story, Cottontail Rabbit and Lizard create the Yana people by placing twenty sticks in each of the four sacred directions—north, south, east, and west. The animals then use their power and the power of the earth to transform the sticks into the four branches of the Yana people. The various groupings of sticks then emerge as human beings out of the four directions to form “the people.” This story is occupied with the motions of emergence, of humans coming into the world. This idea of emergence is complicated in Ishi’s *reemergence* from the forest, altering this traditional story through his moment of contact in 1911. In *Alfred Kroeber: A Personal Configuration*, Theodora Kroeber writes:

On August 29, 1911, the city papers headlined the taking into custody of a wild Indian found naked, emaciated, and lost outside Oroville, a mining town on the Feather River in northern California. Kroeber telephoned the sheriff at Oroville who confirmed the story; the sheriff had put the Indian in jail not knowing what else to do with

him since no one around town could understand his speech or he theirs. Kroeber arranged to have Professor Waterman go to Oroville the next day. With the help of a vocabulary gathered some year earlier, Waterman was able to make himself understood. It was as he and Kroeber had surmised before he left; the wild man was a Yana Indian . . . Within a few days the Department of Indian Affairs authorized the sheriff to release the wild man to the custody of Kroeber and the museum staff. Waterman arrived in the city with him and Ishi was soon settled in one of the museum rooms . . . The whole staff concentrated on learning how to communicate with him, meanwhile trying to reassure him and to protect him from the curiosity of the crowds who daily tried to get a closer look at him. (81)

In this passage, Theodora Kroeber illustrates a different type of emergence story, one in which Ishi is imagined as a man emerging from the old world of the wilderness and into the new world of modernity. Here, Ishi emerges to join a new “tribe,” to become part of the community of the museum. This narrated moment is chilling in the sense that it articulates the racial dynamics of powerful American myths such as the frontier and the “vanishing American.” However, it more importantly marks the passage of time through white “discovery.” Like the “discovery” of America through Europe, Ishi and his story only become known when he encounters whites in the California landscape. This Euro-American-centric marking of time points to large questions of emergence and the value of origin stories. Ishi is thus perceived through the lens of the ideology of the vanishing Indian, identified as a remnant of an earlier, extinct American landscape. As Kroeber suggest, this image of his emergence makes clear that “Ishi was the last of his tribe, the others having been exterminated by the white men who first penetrated Yana land at the time of the Gold Rush, either killed outright by shooting or hanging or indirectly by forcible removal from their villages to die en route or to be sold singly as slaves and to lose all identity” (82). However, Ishi’s reemergence from the forest is an active rewriting

of not only his own origin narrative, but is also a moment that questions and fundamentally alters the conceptions of Indian presence and absence in California. Ishi's narrative, his "origin" story, thus challenges the conceptions of salvage ethnography that Kroeber and others engaged in that highlight an enduring presence of Indian survival and resistance.

The case of Ishi is an illustration of Vizenor's conception of *survivance* because it exemplifies presence as a rejection of imagined absence and a form of resistance. In *Manifest Manners, Fugitive Poses, and Narrative Chance*, Vizenor has sought to formulate and problematize working definitions of survivance in relation to Native American cultural production. Vizenor suggests that, at its most basic level, "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction . . . survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name" (1). At its core, survivance is a simultaneous presence and absence, a reality and an abstraction. The post-Gold Rush history of violence in the Yana territory suggests a significance of both Indian presence and absence in the case of Ishi. In her description of his reemergence, Kroeber speculates, "With a handful of his people—all that were left—Ishi had spent forty of his fifty years of life in hiding from the whites, three of those years wholly alone, the last of his companions having died, probably, in 1908" (82). While Kroeber's explanation is intended to elicit sympathy and shock from the reader, it also draws attention to the significance and level of violence during the period before Ishi's reemergence. The violence that Ishi must have witnessed is fundamentally linked to the systematic marginalization of Indian peoples in relation to land. Marginalization—and the violence that almost always accompanied it—was rooted

in disputes over conceptions of “uninhabited” land. Questions of land use became issues of racial difference that oftentimes translated into bloody battles over resources and power. The Mexican land grants of 1844 brought a community of people into Yana territory that was there to “tame” the wilderness through land development and the establishment of ranches. When the Gold Rush hit in 1849, a flood of people from all over the nation and the world came to the edges of Yana territory to seek their fortunes. With the mining also came new discussions about how to solve the “Indian problem in California. In 1858 the Yana and other tribes in the area were forceably removed to the Nome Lackee Reservation. The following year, in 1859, the struggles over land culminated with the violent Massacre of the Mill Creek Indians (Waterman 52). This chain of events illustrates the systematic and epidemic violence that Ishi and his people endured.

This sense of survivance is also tied to a systematic use of the land. While entrenched in a battle for control over the California landscape, Ishi and other Indian agents of survivance used their knowledge of the land to their every advantage. Kroeber’s partner, Waterman, reminds us, “The Yana seemed to have differed from all other Indians in this part of the region in having opportunity, or seizing opportunities, for the revenge they considered themselves entitled to. In my opinion their opportunity lay in this, that they inhabited a very rough region, little traveled and unknown, with endless possibilities for hiding; and moreover, having been pressed from generations by the valley Indians, they had learned the art of ‘hit and run away.’ Every account refers to their extraordinary skill in getting clear” (43). In knowing the land, in tracing the world before *and* after the population increase and the rise of urban communities, Ishi was able

to not only survive, but to keep his cultural secrets, to combat all notions of the “*Indian*” that settlers brought with them.

The Yana’s use of the land points to the significance of a *hidden presence* and a *simulated absence*. Considering the violent events in Yana territory between 1844-1859, Waterman writes,

These events were considered at the time to have put an end to the Yahi people. The destruction however, was not absolute . . . several men and women escaped . . . [T]hey were still living “somewhere” in the mountains. We now have positive knowledge that a group did survive. As a matter of fact I have found accounts of a good many episodes, in the period between 1865 and 1908, in which white men are described as having happened upon these Indians. I may remark that practically throughout all the latter half of the nineteenth century very persistent stories were in circulation concerning the continued existence of “wild” Indians just east of the Sacramento Valley. (53)

The abstraction of “somewhere” in this passage points to an intimate relationship between the Yana and the landscape that also signals a lack of such knowledge for colonial forces in the area. The “persistent stories” of a “continuous existence of ‘wild’ Indians” were not frontier tales, but rather illustrate both the enduring *hidden presence* and *simulated absence* of indigenous populations in the Sacramento Valley and illuminate the continuing anxieties over such presence and absence. Perhaps more importantly, I read this hidden presence and simulated absence as a moment of survivance in the history of Indian presence and absence in California and Western Empire in America.

For Vizenor this revelation is found in historical and mythological stories. He explains, “Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” (1). In *Fugitive Poses*,

Vizenor elaborates on this idea by considering the stories and narratives that point to these relationships between survival and resistance: “Native motion is sovereignty, and native stories of survivance are transmotions, not mere imitation of motion or action in the tragic mode of literature . . . The native, an inscrutable persona, is a referent in stories: the *Indian*, a mimetic representation of the other as scapegoat” (33). Ishi’s life story is such a story of survivance. Unlike the necessity of Indian absence that we find in *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco*, the narrative told about Ishi serve to reimagine Indian presence in California during a period where state and national mythmaking was dependent on systematic racialized erasure. These stories of survivance create what Vizenor refers to in *Manifest Manners* as postindian warriors. Vizenor defines the postindian warrior as a “simulations of survivance in new stories” (11). While still a construction, the postindian is a “simulation,” an abstraction and a fabrication that can only be a mere shadow of the real thing. It is this simulation that haunts conceptions of American Indian presence and absence in California. In examining the story of Ishi, I want to suggest that his presence combats the “simulation” of absence, and thus the creation of postindian figures, in the Bay Area during this pivotal period of racial imaginings. Ishi is an example of both survivance and a simulation—his story is a dual narrative that illustrates Indian presence *and* absence, survivance *and* simulation. While Ishi may have been “the last of the Yahi,” he was not the last Indian in California. His survival and his reemergence serve as vivid testimony to the fact that Native peoples were surviving and adapting to the changing landscapes around them. Through his presence, Ishi becomes an abstraction of cultural imaginings *and* combats such blatantly false simulations of absence. By being a simultaneous symbol and inversion of the

postindian warrior, the narrative of Ishi is a rich example of the liminal space that Native peoples occupy in the history and mythology of California and the American West.

At the center of this is the importance of names. The idea and power of names furnishes a foundational example in the deciphering acts of agency and survivance in relation to Ishi, his reemergence, and his role in the urban San Francisco landscape while at the University of California's anthropology museum. "Ishi" furnishes a narrative of survivance in the sense that his presence is an active testimony of resistance. However, "Ishi" is a simulation in the sense that his identity is formed by a name that was given to him by Kroeber upon his second emergence. As he was born into a sense of white modernity, "Ishi" became the definition of what he was perceived as. As the Yana word for "man," "Ishi" becomes a signifier that both masks and strips indigenous identity through the paradox of its own absence. The fact that Ishi gains his "name" from Kroeber and not from his tribe is an example of a colonial reimagining of his world. But "Ishi" is not a passive bystander to culture. Rather, the name "Ishi" signals the struggle of colonial myth to fully conquer the sense of Indian presence that he represents. Ishi never revealed his native name to Kroeber, Waterman, interpreters, or any of the visitors and scholars that he encountered after his second emergence and during his stay at the museum. Like many other scholars, I read this as a significant act of resistance that speaks to the very essence of survivance. Vizenor explains, "Ishi, the native humanist, endured by survivance and natural reason in two worlds. He was named by an academic, not by vision, a lonesome hunter rescued by situational chance. Native names are collective memories, but his actual names and sense of presence are obscure, yet his museum nickname more than any other archive nomination, represents to many readers



the cultural absence and tragic victimry of Native American Indians in California” (3).

“Ishi” is a symbolic creation representing otherness, yet, in keeping his secret, he becomes a hallmark of survivance against tropes of racialized dominance.

### **At the Museum: Preserving Culture and Postindian Warriors**

These ideals of survivance are reflected in the numerous attempts to commodify Ishi’s body through politics of display. As a colonial subject, Ishi became a curiosity who was viewed under a veil of simulated absence. The seduction of the “vanishing American” trope was compelling to audiences who desired to gaze at the “last of the Yahi.” This tension is primarily revealed by Ishi’s experience and role at the University of California Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology. In considering both Ishi’s agency and the commodification of his body as a symptom of enduring colonial hierarchies and sentiments, a discussion of Ishi’s time at the museum is essential to deciphering the role of survivance in California’s and the nation’s empire building. The original museum was funded by Phoebe Hearst, who worked as a feminist, philanthropist, and women’s suffrage leader in the west. Perhaps more importantly, she was a major benefactor of the University of California, Berkeley, and served as its first woman Regent from 1897 until her death in 1919. The museum of anthropology was perhaps one of her most significant contributions to the intellectual community of California. While the museum now stands as part of Kroeber Hall on the Berkeley campus, the original museum was located across the bay in San Francisco in Parnassus Heights’ Tin Building near the University of California Medical School and Hastings Law School. This location served as the university’s museum until 1931 when the medical school needed the land for their

growing campus, at which time the museum permanently relocated to its home campus at Berkeley. In addition, the San Francisco site was initially a research museum and did not open its doors to the public until October of 1911, shortly—and conveniently—after the arrival of Ishi (Kroeber 73).

The display of Ishi both reinforced and challenged images of Rousseau’s “noble savage” by placing him at both the center and on the margins of the emerging modern urban life around him through systematic display. This display helped relegate Indians to an imagined space in the Euro-American imaginary and an imaged time as part of a mythic past. As Ter Ellingson explains in *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, “[P]rojecting the Indian as a mirror image of the European past . . . excluded them from a cultural present in which laws, books, and judges, and above all the property distinctions of ‘mine and thine,’ were the indispensable foundation blocks of civil society” (26). This exclusion from the cultural present was a key ideological stance in shifting native presence into the abstraction of Indian absence. For Ishi, this relationship was complicated because his very presence seemed to simultaneously reinforce notions of presence and absence.

Ishi provided a “living exhibit” for the museum. In addition to living at the museum and being under the care of Kroeber and Waterman as a “ward” of intellectualism, Ishi provided the central display for the museum on weekends, making arrows and fishing spears for large crowds of visitors who could not wait to get a glimpse of the “vanishing American” who had come to San Francisco. In addition to his work at the museum, Kroeber arranged for Ishi to appear at the Panama Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915. The fair, which counted “race betterment” as

one of its major themes and hosted the American Eugenics movement, aimed at conceptualizing San Francisco as a “better” city through the design of better citizens. Indians such as Ishi were clearly not part of this design. As one of the many artistic displays echoing this sentiment, Earl Fraiser’s sculpture “The End of the Trail” vividly illustrated for thousands of fair-goers the Indian as a relic of the imagined past. As these examples illustrate, the display of Ishi was a significant expression for a city that was attempting to fashion a Western American identity that departed from frontier narratives through new conceptions of history and definitions of whiteness. However, despite the work that these exhibits engaged in to reaffirm the “vanishing” myth of Indian-simulated absence, Ishi’s presence at these moments suggests a more complex relationship between the competing themes of presence and absence. In one sense, the exhibits vividly demonstrate Ishi’s survival—and thus create an expression of survivance—in the “modern” metropolis of San Francisco. In another sense, they reveal a highly constructed and mediated representation that was systematically designed to match sensationalized expectation of Indian otherness in relation to the national myth-building agenda of the period.

Ishi’s remains were transformed into an object of study, a commodity and curiosity, a cultural relic that came to symbolize so much more than the man that he was. After living at the museum for several years, Ishi became ill and died on March 16, 1916 (Kroeber 92). In the Yana story “The Origins of Sex, Hands, and Death,” the sacred creatures Coyote, Cottontail Rabbit, and Lizard agree that, while people die, they will weep for all who perish on the earth that they share (Sapir 89-91). Those whom Ishi left behind at the museum marked Ishi’s death, as well. In his report on the medical history

of Ishi that the University of California later published in 1920, Saxton Pope wrote, “His body was carried to the undertakers, where it was embalmed. No funeral services were held. Professor T.T. Waterman, Mr. E.W. Gifford, Mr. A. Warburtob, Mr. L.L. Loud, of the museum of anthropology, and I visited the parlor, and reverently placed in his coffin his bow, a quiver full of arrows, ten pieces of dentalia or Indian money, some acorn meal, his fire sticks, and a small quantity of tobacco. We then accompanied the body to Laurel Hill cemetery near San Francisco, where it was cremated. The ashes were placed in a small Indian pottery jar on the outside which is inscribed: ‘Ishi, the last Yahi Indian, died March 25, 1916’” (213). Ishi’s death became part of the story of his people and the story that was unfolding in San Francisco. While these meditations on Ishi’s death illustrate a true sense of mourning, a loss that transcends culture, what happened after Ishi’s death continues to haunt the questions of Indian presence and absence in California.

What happened to Ishi after his death is an incident in a long line of scientific racist practices. Stemming from works such as Samuel Morton’s *Crania Americana* (1839), scientific racism was quick to establish an imagined correlation between physical attributes and behavioral and intellectual capacity. Upon his death Ishi’s body was autopsied, and his brain was removed by Dr. Saxton Pope (quoted above), a man who had considered himself a friend of Ishi and had been in close contact with him since his second emergence and through his illness. After the services, Kroeber wrote a letter to *Aleš Hrdlička*, the physical anthropologist who studied Qisuk’s brain: “I find that at Ishi’s death last spring his brain was removed and preserved. There is no one here who can put it to scientific use. If you wish it, I shall be glad to deposit it in the National Museum Collection.” Following a brief correspondence, Ishi’s brain was shipped to the

Smithsonian Institution on January 5, 1917, just a few months short of the first anniversary of his death. From 1917 until about 1980, the remains were kept at the museum in a jar and identified in the catalogue. Around 1980 the brain collection at the Smithsonian was moved to a series of large, sealed tanks in which each set of remains was individually identified. Around 1992 the tanks were moved to the Museum Support Center, a research and collections complex wherein the majority of the anthropology collections are preserved (Speaker 73-4).

Despite these long periods of inertia, Ishi continued to be an enduring hallmark of American Indian testimony of presence and an exercise in resistance. This motion thus illustrates not only a continual marginalization, but also an enduring sense of survivance that lived on long after Ishi had passed. The “last of the Yahi” did not signal an end to American Indian resistance and active presence in the American West. When tribal leaders from the Maidu and other tribes affiliated with the Yana called for the repatriation of Ishi’s brain after the passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, it took museum officials over two years just to locate the brain in the Smithsonian’s vast collections of human remains (Weaver 45). When Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), Indians gained the right to literally and figuratively bury their dead. NAGPRA is a federal law that requires that all Native American human remains and sacred funeral objects be identified and repatriated to appropriately designated indigenous groups. However, as the Ishi case reminds us, it is also so much more than that. NAGPRA is a method that empowers Indian people to combat continuing attempts at ethnocide. In 2000 Ishi’s brain was reunited with his cremated remains and buried privately at an undisclosed location near

Mt. Lassen in northern California (Biestman 152). With this final act of survivance, Ishi once again proved himself a postindian warrior. This narrative of Ishi's brain illustrates a continuation of the problems of Indian presence and absence that Ishi encountered through his second emergence and during his time at the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology. No known records suggest that Ishi's brain was ever on display at the museum. However, the legacy of its storage at the Smithsonian Institution highlights the commodification of human bodies and illustrates systematic ideological wars against doctrines of survivance.

Through the struggle to locate and eventually repatriate the remains of Ishi, native peoples in California reaffirmed the legacy of Indian absence and the enduring determination of Indian presence in the American West. As Vizenor has suggested in his many writings about Ishi, "Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory" (11). Ishi was an agent of active survivance, and much of his life was an exercise in Indian agency in the West. Despite the events of the Ishi case, native legal Scholar Karen Biestman reminds us that "Ishi's real legacy, ultimately, can best be remembered as that of a human being whose selective disclosure of knowledge and experience constituted active resistance . . . He was an imaginative survivor of one of the most lethal chapters in American history, but never a victim" (153). Part of this legacy is the legislation that set him and countless other postindian warriors free.

### **Conclusion: Rewriting Presence in Vizenor's *Ishi and the Wood Ducks***

At the crux of both of these narratives—*The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* and the case of Ishi—lies the power of stories. In these cases anthropological

and historical narratives are stories because they encompass mysteries and mythologies of the space of the far west. In considering this power we must necessarily ask who gets to tell stories, why stories are told, and what effects these stories have on powerful ideologies that shape national consciousness of race and space. These sentiments and also expressed by contemporary postindian warriors, by men and women who continue along the paths of resistance and presence that Ishi so vividly illustrates. One such example is Vizenor's play, *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*. In the play, Vizenor imagines Ishi on trial for his "Indian" character. While Kroeber plays the judge, Ishi is forced to prove his humanity to the colonial court. In this setting, Vizenor is primarily concerned with the question of evidence—with what qualifies as evidence in the rigid academic and legal systems that have become preoccupied with proving (and disproving) Ishi's true humanity. Vizenor crafts Ishi not as a silent witness, but as a strong voice with a compelling presence that Deborah L. Madsen describes in *Understanding Gerald Vizenor* as one that embodies "the genocidal trauma and cultural appropriation experienced by Ishi" (106). The play has had limited performance and exposure. It was produced as a staged reading directed by Randy Reinholtz at the Red Path Theater Company of Chicago in March 1996, and a production of the play was performed by the Lakeside Theater at the University of Essex in June 1999 (Madsen 108).<sup>20</sup> Despite its limited release, this contemporary drama captures some of the key ideas regarding presence and absence that the case of Ishi and *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* illustrate.

*Ishi and the Wood Ducks* refers to the lengthy and complex story that Ishi attempts to tell throughout the course of the drama. Throughout the play, Ishi is

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, the play was never performed in San Francisco.

searching for a moment to tell the story of the wood ducks. In Act 4, Ishi is put on trial in the “First District Court of Character” for a “character judgment” (326). His own “self-defense” of sorts is silenced when he does not get to tell the story of the wood ducks because the court has designated it “oral literature” and categorizes it as “hearsay not evidence” (333). In this act, the notion of evidence is defined and challenged by Vizenor. In the world of the court that Kroeber presides over, evidence is definable in a western legal and academic sense. Kroeber is obsessed with finding the “truth” that lies in the essence of Ishi’s character. What he does not understand is that this question of character is one that, for Ishi, is directly related to his ability to tell the stories of his people. While this “ethnographic” testimony may lack the certainty of the academy that Kroeber is looking for, it illustrates Ishi’s commitment to his people, his past, and the very character for which he is on trial. When Kroeber finally does concede to hear them in the court, Ishi rescinds his offer because of the ceremony that the stories involve. At one point, Ishi laments:

Ishi: No one listens

Pope: Not so, we record your stories.

Ishi: My stories are heard in a museum.

Pope: The women in the hospital listen to your songs and stories. (308)

In the play Ishi is able to vocalize the forms of resistance that scholars have imagined in him; he becomes a vocal agent against his own commodification. As critics in a different time, with new tools for colonial discourse, we can only speculate what Ishi might have said and thought about the questions of presence and absence that continue to haunt his legacy, that continue to haunt the imagined racialized landscape of California and the American West. At one point Vizenor’s representation of Kroeber states, “Ishi is our



ward, and we are responsible for the way in which the public sees him” (309). Yet this comparative reading of *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* and the case of Ishi suggests otherwise. What the public does *not* see proves to be equally as important as what they do see. What they imagine becomes a product not only of presence, but also of stark and looming absence that never fully fades away.

**Chapter 2: *Ghostly Ruins: Disaster Romances, Collective Memory, and the 1906 Earthquake and Fire***



*The Ferry Building.* Andrea Dominguez, 2006.

*A famous city's most famous landmark. – Herb Caen, describing the San Francisco Ferry Building*

At the end of Market Street looms the Ferry Building. Its tall, stark-white clock tower emerges from the waterfront, looks up toward the financial district, and welcomes countless visitors to the city every year. As *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Herb Caen acknowledges, it is a legendary landmark in a legendary city. But the Ferry Building is more than a mere landmark; it is a symbol of history—of physical and social destruction, of adaptation, of growth, and of change. In the Ferry Building we see the narrative of San Francisco itself. The structure provides a brilliant interpretation of the historical legacy of the city—a vivid representation of the past, present, and future, collapsing time

and space in favor of mythic narratives and collective memories. The stories that the Ferry Building has come to represent are essentially about movement, transcendence, and flux. In this way, the Ferry Building is a conduit, the central port and terminal of one of the most significant waterfront cities in the United States. In San Francisco, the Ferry Building is a structure that fosters and visualizes movement in and out of the city, a place where goods and people continuously flow in and out in at dizzying speeds. It is through this urban location that people and goods flow both *out* to national and global markets and *in* to the city. More significantly, it serves as an ideological port, a conduit for social movement that traces people and politics, narrating the transformation of San Francisco's cultural landscape. The construction of San Francisco as an ideological port designates the city as a *global* location, a composite space wherein people and places collide. With this context in mind, the iconic structure of the Ferry Building is not just a symbol of San Francisco; it is a symbol of the city's diverse and complex cultural history that has been fueled by physical, spatial, and social movements.

Like the narratives that are the focal point of this chapter, the Ferry Building is primarily linked to questions of lineage, motion, and reinvention. As a physical and ideological port, the Ferry Building makes the notions of mobility and access central concerns when considering the relationship between the city and its inhabitants. At the core of this relationship lie constructions of race, ethnicity, and blood in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. The Ferry Building's inspiration and its legacy of reinvention create a narrative that is primarily concerned with origins. Originally erected in 1898 and designed by San Francisco architect A. Page Brown, this grand structure served the

commuting needs of the rapidly growing city and expanding region.<sup>21</sup> The need for a terminal was more pressing than ever during the late nineteenth century as immigration swelled and the city began to establish itself as the center of the western United States. As people from all corners of the world flowed into San Francisco, the architecture of the Ferry Building served to set and welcome them to the racial and ethnic parameters of the city. Crafted in the Beaux Arts style that was so popular in California during this period, the design featured steel construction with concrete foundations that established San Francisco as an American city with European sophistication. But the most recognizable feature was the 245-foot-tall clock tower. Modeled after the twelfth-century Giralda bell tower in Seville, Spain, the Ferry Building's clock tower serves as a constant reminder of the Spanish and colonial past of San Francisco, laying claim to a European legacy that the entire city strives to embody. In explicitly linking its heritage to Europe, San Francisco makes a claim not only to a sense of antiquity, but also to a legacy of power that places it at the center of American cosmopolitanism in the West. The clock tower thus mirrors the layered histories of the city itself, serving as testimony to the multiplicity of narratives that have created the cultural entity that we call "San Francisco."

While the 1906 great earthquake and fires destroyed the constructed landscape of San Francisco and all the glory that the Ferry Building had come to symbolize, it did not destroy the symbol itself. When the earthquake hit in April of 1906, the Ferry Building shook and swayed with the rest of the city, but it did not crumble.<sup>22</sup> When the shaking

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<sup>21</sup> The new Ferry Building was a result of a \$600,000 bond issue that was passed by the voters of California in 1892 (Olmstead 16)

<sup>22</sup> At the time of the catastrophe, the Ferry Building was considered a "Class A" structure, one with a steel frame that was designated fireproof. Supported by a concrete

ceased and the air cleared, the Ferry Building remained poised on the edge of the Bay, signaling that San Francisco would again be a great city. Among the ash and the rubble, it stood outside the fire path as a beacon of hope, a shining white tower in a land of utter chaos and destruction. Despite the symbolic meaning of the Ferry Building, the rapidly developing post-quake city had less and less of a need for it. As the popularity of the automobile descended upon San Francisco, the Ferry Building began to lose its once-prominent place in the city. The completion of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 dramatically reduced its traffic.<sup>23</sup> By the 1950s, the Ferry Building had all but been rendered obsolete by the modern desires and demands of the city. The final blow came in 1957 when the double-decker Embarcadero Freeway was built across the face of the Ferry Building, obscuring it from view for thirty-five years. Where the violent movement of the earth in the 1906 earthquake failed, modern construction prevailed. The Ferry Building was rendered obsolete, its history and significance erased from the San Francisco skyline. As these cultural moments suggest, the Ferry Building is a visualization of the cycles of memory and erasure that were put in motion by the 1906 earthquake and fires.

Ironically, this modern marginalization would end through the destructive force of another earthquake that would once again render the Ferry Building a focal point in the city and lend it new importance in San Francisco's physical and cultural landscape. In

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foundation—one of the first and only structures in San Francisco to boast such—the Ferry Building's core features were designed to withstand major trauma. The structure of the tower included a steel-braced frame with diagonal steel bars that were attached to the frame by gusset plates, providing resistance to lateral force.

<sup>23</sup> At the height of its use, as many as 50,000 people per day commuted through the doors of the Ferry Building and across the Bay to various destinations.

1989 the devastating Loma Prieta Earthquake struck the city, resurrecting the ghosts of 1906. After suffering extensive damage from the quake, the Embarcadero Freeway was torn down in 1991, revealing the once-forgotten view of the Ferry Building and prompting a new phase for San Francisco architecture and urban (re)development. No longer marginalized and obstructed by the dark concrete of the freeway, the Ferry Building once again emerged as the center for reinvention in the city. The 1989 earthquake, like the 1906 one before it, thus created a new sense of possibility in the city, a new chance for San Francisco to reinvent itself, a new opportunity to reimagine the past. The re-visibility of the Ferry Building created the opportunity for the city to reconstruct its history through fragmented memories and reimagined narratives.

After 1989 the decision to renovate the Ferry Building and to revitalize the San Francisco waterfront district was thus an ideological notion that is deeply rooted in conceptions of power and memory. The Ferry Building's fate was symbolic of the fate of the city, an allegory for what San Francisco stood for. The controversy was not merely about the Ferry Building but about the power over how San Francisco's past—and thus its future—would be narrated and designed. The structure thus became a new type of conduit, one that was more concerned with the traffic of cultural ideology than the traffic of people. This ideological movement was a way to (re)narrate the lineage of the city. Control over the destiny of the Ferry Building and the narrative it would project was symbolic of control over the city and the historical legacy that the city would collectively reconstruct and retell. Because of this cultural significance, the remodeling efforts proved to be an epic undertaking. After all the proposals had been submitted and reviewed, the city commissioned three architectural firms to collaborate on the

remodeling design and project.<sup>24</sup> But the preservation and renovation efforts were not simply left to the whim of these three firms. Because the Ferry Building is a registered historic site with both the National Register of Historic Places and the City of San Francisco, all plans for the remodel had to be reviewed and approved by the City's Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, the California State Office of Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, the Port of San Francisco, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the State Lands Commission, and a handful of other state and local agencies and committees. The goal was not only to preserve history, but to preserve the power structures that dictate history. The reconstruction of this historical legacy of the city was thus as important in 1989 as it was after the trauma of 1906.

Renovations began in 1999 and were completed in 2003. Through the renovations of the structure, the Ferry Building reestablished itself as an ideological port that was concerned with the transportation of the ideal of the city, with the representation of that space that San Francisco imagined itself to be after such a disaster-riddled history. Renovation highlights include the Nave, which had been partially filled and demolished during the lull of the 1950s but was restored with features such as marble mosaic floors, steel arched trusses, celestory windows, and extensive skylights. Another renovation was the Ground Floor Marketplace that once housed the baggage claim area and was redesigned to accommodate the 65,000-square-foot public market that the Ferry Building is now famous for. These changes to the structure of the Ferry Building have allowed it to fluidly transition from a functioning port to a geographical icon, from a waterfront

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<sup>24</sup> The three San Francisco architectural firms included Simon Martin-Vegue Winkelstein Moris (Architects), Baldauf Catton Von Eckartsberg Architects (Retail Architects), and Page & Turnball (Preservation Architects).

landmark to an urban landmark that simultaneously highlights the city's past and signals its future. The Ferry Building is thus no longer a physical or practical port, but rather has been transformed into a metaphorical one.<sup>25</sup> The renovation of the Ferry Building was not a mere structural renovation; it was a *reinterpretation* of the physical, social, and cultural values and history of the city.

The works discussed in this chapter consider and complicate the spatial and ideological conduits of San Francisco that the Ferry Building embodies. Sara Dean's *Travers* (1917), Gertrude Atherton's *The Avalanche* (1919), and Alan Crosland's silent film *Old San Francisco* (1927) all consider the concepts of motion and movement in the context of the infamous 1906 earthquake and fire. These texts represent different periods and mediums, including, a popular novel, "canonical" Californian literature, and film. In addition, each narrative examines a different temporal relationship to the disaster: *Travers* takes place during the quake, *The Avalanche* looks at San Francisco life after the rubble has been cleared, and *Old San Francisco* looks back to the moment preceding the disaster. Despite these significant narrative and genre differences, the collective narrative that they create provides insights to perceptions of race in the city after the 1906 earthquake. These texts are examples of what I call "disaster romances." I define disaster romances as narratives in which the horror and trials of natural disasters are resolved through a romantic plotline. These narratives use disaster themes to mobilize romance plots that attempt to comment on social mixing. Often popular culture texts, films such as *San Francisco* (1936), *Earthquake* (1974), and *Titanic* (1997) all offer

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<sup>25</sup> Port activity is now primarily conducted at the Port of Oakland across the bay. Cruise ships carrying passengers and tourist now dock elsewhere in San Francisco.



examples of the genre that attempts to make social commentary on the state of humanity through heart-pulling tales of love and devotion in the face of adversity. *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* are perhaps some of the earliest examples of disaster romances that take place in the American West and attempt to deal with the fragments of society in ruins. Through a consideration of the types of racial blending, mixing, and performance that occur in the film, I argue that these texts illustrate a new type of citizenry for post-1906 San Francisco that is dependent on socially constructed conceptions of whiteness. I am primarily concerned with reading the blood and racial tensions through the sexual tensions that the texts illustrate. In deconstructing the complex love triangles and tensions over sexuality and sexual power that are dependent on historical processes of racialization, the 1906 moment can be read as a catalyst for erasure that has allowed for the creation of new narratives about “old” San Francisco.

Spanning a production period of twenty years, from 1907 to 1927, these narratives complicate the story of the 1906 quake by considering them in relation to the port city that San Francisco has historically been. They do this by exploring possibilities for movement and motion that the earthquake created in and for the city. While these narratives vary in form and focus, each is primarily concerned with problems of blood, lineage, and the question of how to (re)invent the past. In these texts, the circulation of the port at the Ferry Building becomes embodied in the movement of the questionable blood that travels through the bodies of immigrant characters who question the definitions and boundaries of whiteness in the city. In *Travers*, Sara Dean tells the tale of Keith Travers, an exiled British military doctor who must overcome the blemishes of his past as he attempts to reinvent himself through the destruction of the great quake and fire.

*The Avalanche* takes place several years *after* the earthquake and chronicles the fragile marriage of all-American Price Ruyler and his wife of questionable lineage, Helene. As Ruyler struggles to uncover the truth about his wife's shadowy past, he uncovers a colorful side of San Francisco history, as well. Crosland's film *Old San Francisco* considers the conditions that preceded the quake, placing the destruction in the context of a complicated California history that is based on the importance of blood and the simultaneous necessity for and anxiety over social mixing. Through the union of Terry, an ambitious Irish immigrant, and Dolores, a beautiful and vulnerable Californio maiden, *Old San Francisco* makes a clear case for certain types of racial mixing. The texts in this chapter represent the confusions, conflicts, and climaxes that these movements create. Blood thus becomes the port or conduit of the city that creates new, diverse, and sometimes devastating complexities for San Francisco.

While the similarities among these three texts are highly significant, their differences in genre are also central to deconstructing the ideological conduits that are central to understanding post-1906 narratives about San Francisco urbanity. Together, *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* represent three distinct narrative forms: popular "lowbrow" fiction, classic canonical California literature, and silent film, respectively. These texts and the narrative genres that they represent are central to a spatial analysis of post-1906 San Francisco because they illustrate a wide-reaching scope of cultural, intellectual, and ideological sentiments concerning the 1906 moment. In other words, they suggest that the 1906 moment was not merely part of the culture and history of San Francisco; it *defined* the culture and history of the city. These texts then are not merely cultural representations; rather, they are ideological ports themselves that

have the narrative power to transport the reader or viewer into the complex and fragmented history of San Francisco. They allow us to witness the acts of rewriting history, of rebuilding the city, and of selectively remembering the shadows of a multi-layered and diverse past. The differences of narrative genre between these texts then create a bridge in narrative and memory, providing a more diverse image of the post-disaster city.

As these narratives and the story of the Ferry Building illustrate, the history of destruction and resurrection in San Francisco is one that is about the privilege of history, the right of reinvention, and the possibility of movement. *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* illustrate that the motions of the city and its history are complex, diverse, and multi-faceted. Like the Ferry Building, these texts each offer an ideological reinterpretation of the narratives of invention and reinvention that are a hallmark of post-1906 San Francisco. As the history of the iconic structure of the Ferry Building indicates, San Francisco history and cultural production depends on the relationship among disaster, the possibility of (re)invention, and the fragmentation of destruction.

### **City of Ruins: History and Mystery in the 1906 Great Quake**

As the narrative of the Ferry Building suggests, it is the relationship between circulation and reinvention (both physical and metaphorical) that is at the center of spatial formations in San Francisco. In the case of San Francisco, constructions of the past are fundamentally linked to issues of race and problems of blood. The 1906 earthquake and fires fully unearthed problems of race and blood in the city, bringing them to the exposed surface of social and cultural consciousness. With the quake came new sets of social

tensions: on the one hand, the earthquake had acted as a type of equalizing agent, leveling everything from the luxurious structures of Nob Hill to Chinatown and the Barbary Coast; on the other hand, the rebuilding efforts demonstrated a systematic attempt to highlight and restore certain parts of the city—namely, those that were wealthy, deemed “historical” or “symbolic” to the city’s past and future, and white—and erase others. This tension between remembrance and erasure illustrates a desire to *whiten* California, to continue the quest of American empire. *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* testify to these complex responses to disaster and the struggle for the power of memory in the city. Together, these texts serve as cultural reminders of the fragmented narratives that 1906 recalled and then quickly buried.

Problems of blood and issues of race stand at the center of this tension between memory and erasure. In attempting to rebuild the city along better, stronger lines, San Franciscans had to decide who had the power to redefine the past and visualize the future. This power struggle was closely related to the issue of blood in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. As social historian Philip Frandkin explains in *The Great Earthquake and Fire Storms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself*, “San Francisco was in flux. Underneath the surface, where the zone of fracture lay, ethnic, racial, and social tensions vibrated. Of the four hundred thousand estimated inhabitants in 1905, three out of four were either immigrants or the children of immigrants” (34). With the city segregated into ethnic neighborhoods like Chinatown, the Latin Quarter, North Beach, and the Mission, the ruins of the 1906 quake created the need to unify the city under a single narrative while continuing to marginalize certain citizens. For city leaders, the earthquake became not only an opportunity, but also a “cleansing agent” that wiped the

undesirable slates of the city, and its infamous underworlds and ethnic enclaves, clean. In *The Culture of Calamity*, historian Kevin Rozario asks “are ‘dominant American ideas of progress’ even imaginable without disasters?” and asserts that, “the very idea of ‘progress’ became unimaginable in the absence of catastrophes” (3, 32). For 1906 San Francisco the struggle to rebuild itself was driven by “dominant American ideas of progress” that were closely linked to race and blood purity. As *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* suggest, only a very particular type of citizen—one with the right blood, from the right class, and with the right lineage—would be able to rebuild the city along better, stronger lines.

These notions are deeply related to the ideals of American imperialism and empire in the West to which San Francisco is foundational. Both prior to and after 1906, San Francisco was imagined as the American Rome—a center of empire and power. In *Imperial San Francisco*, historian Gary Brechin argues that Rome was the “proper role model for San Francisco” (19). This likening of San Francisco to Rome is directly linked to the colonial history of the young city. As the center of indigenous resistance, Spanish colonialism, Mexican uprising, and Eastern European and Asian immigration, San Francisco was an inherently diverse city that had been quickly transferred to American hierarchies of power. Brechin explains: “the course of Empire, of Christianity, of Civilization, of Trade and of Race were repeatedly and interchangeably invoked as justification for the city’s conquest of the Pacific . . . With that wealth, San Francisco would leapfrog New York to become Rome’s rightful heir” (7). Through its identity as an “heir” to both Rome and the ideas of empire that it stood for, San Francisco became, both figuratively and literally, the “gateway to the Pacific,” a port for American

enterprise and expansion. San Francisco's ideal location and its concentration of wealth stemming from the land development that succeeded the Gold Rush, offered a foundation for military and financial enterprise. These new organizing structures situated the city at the center of American imperialist ventures and global export and expansion. As the case study of the Ferry Building vividly illustrates, San Francisco was the center of mobility in the American West. With the establishment of San Francisco as the "heir to Rome," the city embodied a new idea of empire that would fuel U.S. imperialism for decades to come.

*Travers, The Avalanche, and Old San Francisco* attempt to reconcile the moment at which this modern empire fell. These narratives all share the same point of departure: 5:13 a.m. on April 18, 1906, when the earth shook the very foundations of the city and fires ravished what remained of its fractured frame. The earthquake that struck the city was a devastating 8.3 on the Richter Scale (Barker 19).<sup>26</sup> While the 1906 quake was not the first disaster to befall San Francisco in its short history, it was by far the most iconic.<sup>27</sup> As the earth shook under the young city, buildings, lives, and hopes quickly disintegrated and crumbled to the ground. Perhaps the greatest victim of the quake, however, was the sense of history that the young city had struggled with. As a creation of Spanish, Indian, immigrant, and American design, San Francisco has always been a play wherein multiple histories collide. While this can be viewed as a sense of

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<sup>26</sup> This original number was first published in 1958 when seismologist Charles F. Richter calculated the values after evaluating similar quakes in Europe since no such measurements were available from local data. This number has since been revised by later seismologists, and the generally accepted value of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake now rests at 7.8, rather than the initial 8.3 (Barker 19).

<sup>27</sup> Sizable earthquakes also occurred in San Francisco in 1836, 1838, 1865, and 1868 (Kurzman 33).

opportunity, a moment that beckons reinvention, it also poses extreme dangers concerning the boundaries of citizenship. With the city unrecognizable, with its histories severed from the landscape, the notion of reinvention became an opportunity for dominance, assimilation, and erasure. Like aftershocks and fires that devoured the city after the initial rattle, these political, social, and cultural “quakes” created a level of destruction far greater than any other disaster of the period. In observing the fires and physical devastation of the city, one of the earliest published accounts of the quake explained:

The terrors of the earthquake are momentary. One fierce, leveling shock and usually all is over. The torment within the earth has passed on and the awakened forces of the earth’s crust sink into rest again, after having shaken the surface for many leagues . . . The demon of fire followed close upon the heels of the unseen fiend of the earth’s hidden caverns, and ran red-handed through the metropolis of the West, kindling a thousand unhurt buildings, while the horror-stricken people stood aghast in terror, as helpless to combat this new enemy as they were to check the ravages of the earthquake itself. (Morris 39)

In this passage, the author personifies the earthquake as a crazed demon, determined to bring down the shining pillars of the great western empire. The city’s prominence and promising future made the disaster all the more devastating. The fires raged from Wednesday through Saturday, creating new ruins at every turn. Observing the destruction around him, General Funston telegraphed the War Department on Friday, stating, “The city is doomed . . . Everything will burn” (qtd, in Kurzman 190). And with the streets, buildings, and monuments that became unrecognizable, so to were the multi-ethnic pasts of the city covered, buried by ash, dust, and the desire to forget.

While the cultural damage of the quake and fires cannot be emphasized enough, the physical damage that the disaster inflicted cannot be ignored. When the earth stopped shaking and the fires stopped smoldering, the damage that was assessed was staggering. According to the *San Francisco Relief Survey*, published in 1913, the burned area covered 4.7 square miles, which included 521 city blocks, 508 of which were burned. 28,188 structures were destroyed, leaving nearly half of the population of the city homeless.<sup>28</sup> The *San Francisco Municipal Reports* from the fiscal year 1905-1906 acknowledged that “the loss of property cannot be more than approximately estimated. Compilations made put the fire loss at \$250,000,000.00” (703). General Creely reported the loss of life as 498 dead with over another four hundred seriously injured (*San Francisco Relief Survey* 5). Though these numbers are staggering alone, the impact reached far beyond the physical destruction of buildings and the body count. The city, the modern Rome on the edge of the Pacific empire, had fallen to a pile of rubble. Reporting for *Collier’s Magazine*, Jack London wrote, “Not in history has a modern imperial city been so completely destroyed. San Francisco is gone!” (qtd. in Jeffers 39). A telegram sent to New York by the Chief Officer at the telegraph office on the corner of Market and Montgomery said:

The city is practically ruined by fire . . . Fire all around us in every direction. Destruction by earthquake something frightful. The City Hall dome stripped and only the framework standing . . . Lots of new buildings just recently finished are completely destroyed. They are blowing up standing buildings that are in the path of flames with dynamite. No water. It’s awful.  
(Thomas and Witts 122)

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<sup>28</sup> The *San Francisco Relief Survey* estimated that 200,000 of the city’s 450,000 residents were rendered homeless by the destruction of the quake and fires (4).



San Francisco had been destroyed, and, even more quickly than the dazzling infrastructure that emerged in the years following the Gold Rush, it collapsed into a smoldering pile of ash and dust. *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* are cultural representations of this devastation that attempt to come to terms with the destruction and the ghosts that it has left behind. The representations are only a few in the vast collection of published works on the 1906 quake (Frandkin 277). These texts and the romances that are used to code anxieties concerning confluences of race and space have become a record of the cultural production of disaster. Imagining space both before and after the 1906 quake, these texts seek to reconcile the destruction of the past by imagining a new future for the city.

### **Surviving the City: Blood, Renewal, and Redemption in *Travers***

*“And now for my toast. Here’s to San Francisco! May she be true to her founders; may she rise above her follies!”* – General Merriton’s Toast, *Travers*<sup>29</sup>

Published in 1907, Sara Dean’s *Travers* was the first mystery novel to tackle the very real horrors of the 1906 earthquake and fires and the unsettling social complications that it revealed.<sup>30</sup> A fast-paced adventure story of survival and dark secrets, the novel was an entertaining interpretation of the 1906 earthquake and fires that relied heavily on sensationalizing the aftermath of the quake and the conventions of the disaster romance plot. The novel was well received by popular audiences and critics alike, quickly translating the 1906 quake into a literary icon. In a review from 1908, *The New York*

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<sup>29</sup> P. 27

<sup>30</sup> Distributed by the Frederick Stokes Company, the original hardback edition sold for \$1.50.

*Times* anticipated a new edition of *Travers*: “Knowing that it is to deal with the great seismic shock of San Francisco, the reader begins with much the same feeling that a small boy in a theatre gallery watches the deep-dyed villain creep, knife in hand, toward the unsuspecting heroine” (Aldrich para. 3). In this review *Travers* is established as far more than a simple adventure story. Rather, it is imagined as a type of dramatic performance with the feeling of a “theatre gallery,” a spectacle. *Travers* thus designates San Francisco as a stage and the Great Quake as the climax of the history of the city. A 1908 edition of *Publishers’ Weekly* states, “Although primarily a novel of action, its interest is deepened by the human problems presented. It shows the overturning of characters that occurs in a great catastrophe” (107). This spectacle-mystery, then, is primarily about crimes of character and representation. As *Publishers’ Weekly* suggests, the San Francisco earthquake destroyed and reconstructed character, just as it destroyed and offered the hope of reconstruction for the landscape of the city.

Constructing this type of complex commentary was for Dean an exercise in self-reflection.<sup>31</sup> Dean herself had experienced, and survived, the Great Quake. She had lived through the horrors, bearing witness to both the physical and mental disintegration of the city. She had seen the character—and characters—of the city constructed, destroyed, and

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<sup>31</sup> Dean was an unmarried woman who preferred to spend her time developing her interests and dedicating her life to the arts, serving as a prominent fixture on the San Francisco literary and cultural scene during the early twentieth century. Other than *Travers*, her greatest cultural achievement was perhaps her founding of and presidency over a women’s club in San Francisco called “The Spinners.” The Spinners was a club of women writers, musicians, and other literary figures that included and promoted “women of extensive reading and travel.” The goal of The Spinners was to “assemble young women working along artistic lines who would be willing to present the work they were doing to fellow workers for criticism and for encouragement.” After *Travers* was published, Dean spent her life trying to rebuild a better social and literary culture for the San Francisco that she had once watched burn to the ground.

reconstructed. *Travers*, Dean's only and often-forgotten novel, actually provides key insight into the cultural legacy of the 1906 earthquake and fire. The fact that it was a popular novel available for mass consumption is key to understanding its relevance as a cultural artifact. *Travers* was *accessible*. Designed for quick, easy, and cheap consumption, it could reach a wide audience of both literary buffs and common citizens alike. The novel could speak to readers in San Francisco who were still reeling from the horror that they had experienced, to readers in New York who were curious about the disaster in the far West, to readers in small towns who longed for the adventure that city life seemed to offer. As a popular text, *Travers* was able to speak to all of these readers, imagining a version of San Francisco that was marketable to a mass audience. But by classifying it as "popular," I do not mean to suggest that it is insignificant. Rather, as a popular text it illustrates how the quake was imagined for a large population of readers. Because *Travers* engages with questions of blood and race, this is even more significant. In many ways, *Travers* offers an avenue for important discourse about the aftermath of the quake. Directly following the Great Quake, countless narratives of the calamity were published by various citizens reliving their experiences in vivid—and often sensational—accounts.<sup>32</sup> *Travers* offers a reimagining of these accounts. As a popular fictional text, it could rely on the historic incidents of the quake and fires but had the ability to depart from these narratives and sift through the social consequences of the quake through an artistic medium, masking anxiety with entertainment.

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<sup>32</sup> One estimate suggests that over eighty accounts of the earthquake and fires were published in 1906 and 1907 alone. For a list, see the Bancroft Library's San Francisco Mystery Collection Bibliography at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/sfmystery/>.

The novel begins at the infamous Palace Hotel, as Mr. Bell, a prominent San Francisco businessman, and Colonel Merriton, a distinguished British officer, discuss the plight of Major Keith Travers, who fled from his post in India after being accused of stealing the prized jewels of socialite Lady Maud. With these characters, Dean establishes *Travers* as a global narrative, one that imagines San Francisco as a locus for complex social, cultural, and, consequently, spatial diversity. The significance of the novel, then, is its ability to place the 1906 earthquake in a global context, one that imagines the type of international effort that would be required to rebuild the city. As we are introduced to San Francisco “society,” the reader also become entwined with the lives of Mrs. Addington, her niece and charge, Gwendolyn Thorton, and her young and handsome fiancé, Chester Drexel. Gwendolyn is the possessor of not only great beauty, but also the “famous Thorton diamonds,” a collection of magnificent jewels that Travers plots to steal. Locked away in a safe at the center of the city, it is these diamonds that first attract Travers to Gwendolyn that night at the Palace Hotel. Once the festivities of the evening are over, Travers slips into Gwendolyn’s room in search of her jewels. Awakened by his presence, Gwendolyn confronts the burglar, but before she can call for help apprehending Travers, the Great Earthquake of 1906 shakes Gwendolyn’s bedroom and the landscape of San Francisco.

Escaping the ruins, Travers and Gwendolyn arrive at an emerging tent city at Twin Peaks. While at the tents, Gwendolyn discovers that Travers is a doctor as he begins to help other victims of the quake. Travers’s new purpose signals a shift in the narrative from Travers the thief to “Dr. Travers,” the reinvented man. Travers’s transformation is contrasted to Drexel’s cowardice. Drexel hides from the flames—and

responsibility—of the burning city with his secret lover, Erma. Together, they plot the theft of Gwendolyn's estate as the city burns around them. Back at the tents, Travers and Gwendolyn decide to go in search of the safe on Sutter Street themselves to help secure a future for Gwen. Hoping to redeem himself in her eyes, Travers offers to help her find her missing fortune. Racing against both Erma's plot and the flames that are destroying the city, Travers and Gwendolyn arrive at the Sutter office only to find Drexel searching for Gwen's money. Gwendolyn finally sees Drexel for what he really is—a coward and a thief. As Travers and Gwen escape, they realize that their lives are in peril as the flames have reached their location. As they desperately search for a way out of the fire's path, Travers confesses his love to Gwendolyn in a moment of passion before she loses consciousness due to the thick smoke that surrounds them. Just before they are about to perish, Travers and Gwendolyn are rescued by Colonel Merriton and his search party. In the end, Travers is revealed as a “man who sacrificed himself nobly and unselfishly for others” rather than the thief that he was imagined as at the beginning of the novel (274).

At the center of the narrative is the failed union between the two main characters, Travers and Gwendolyn. As they struggle to rebuild their lives in a period of chaos, the relationship between Travers and Gwendolyn becomes an allegorical expression for the anxiety over the future of the fallen city. As Dean wrote and published her text, she, and the vast majority of her readers, were all too aware of the anxiety over rebuilding the city. The infrastructure and wealth that had once ranked San Francisco among the global elite haunted the desolate streets as they were cleared of rubble. Dean's witnessing of this anxiety allowed her to create characters who not only were emblematic of the romantic heroism imagined about these days of destruction in 1906, but also ones who were

plagued by the troubles of an uncertain future. As a result, the story does not end the way we *think*—or hope—it should end. There is no passionate union, no joyful marriage, no happy ending to *Travers*. There is only the lack of resolution that results in the failed union between Travers and Gwendolyn. This unpredictable finale signals an end to predictability for the city itself, highlighting the deep-rooted anxieties that the quake jarringly unearthed. This break from traditional narrative convention through a rejection of the “happy ending” questions and complicates the earthquake’s cultural impact on a city that was desperately trying to simultaneously remember and reinvent both its past and its future.

The space of San Francisco itself acts as a catalyst for these dramatic events and unpredictable endings. From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that San Francisco is the stage that creates the spectacle—the space where the lives of the characters collide, where the secrets that they harbor are kept and discovered. As Colonel Merriton’s toast “to San Francisco” suggests, the city is projected in the novel as a place of both truth and folly, a place of contradiction, uncertain excitement, and mystery. In the first chapter, pre-quake San Francisco is described as “The Golden Gate . . . all aglow with the gold that flowed about and through it, to the open and opening Orient. San Francisco, proud in the possession of its high-piled buildings and growing opportunities, was doing its best to spell in purple and fine linen—security, advance!” (8-9). Dean imagines San Francisco not just as the center of the narrative, but as the center *of the world*. Like the Ferry Building, the city is constructed as a global abstraction, a center of pride and power. This description suggests that San Francisco is perhaps significant as a port, as a center where goods and people continuously flow in and out. Describing the city as “the

Golden Gate” and the “gold that flowed” is essential to understanding the movement of the narrative itself. The “growing opportunities” of the city are those concerned with movement and mobility, with not just the city itself but with all the possibilities that it opens.

The pre-quake society that the novel imagines serves as testimony to this sense of endless opportunity. We first encounter Gwendolyn at the Palace Hotel. In the Palace, San Francisco is imagined as a place that bridges people, continents, and ideas.

Constructed in 1875, the Palace “was perhaps the leading symbol of San Francisco’s leap from wild, isolated frontier town to sophisticated metropolis” (Kurzman 108). That the novel opens with this emblematic cultural setting signals San Francisco as the embodiment of a cosmopolitan life, as a center of global culture in the wild American West. That *Travers* uses The Palace as the site of its opening setting should come as no surprise; the Palace Hotel was a grand accomplishment in engineering and city planning that elegantly illustrated both the beauty and financial stability of San Francisco as an American metropolis.<sup>33</sup> In his memoir of the quake, *San Francisco Examiner* photographer Harry J. Coleman describes an average evening at the pre-quake Palace: “At the Palace Hotel, loungers sprawled in the lobby’s luxury and outside silk-robed Chinese porters with plush-coated manure scoops followed horse cabs through the vast drive-in Palm Court. Guests at the Palace looked down upon a lovely patio from their balconied rooms” (qtd. in Barker 59). The Palace is a place of luxury, symbolizing the

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<sup>33</sup> Designed and constructed by William C. Ralston, the Palace was considered one of the safest and strongest structures in the city, boasting both fire and earthquake “proof” features that would ensure its survival—and that of its guests—through any disaster (Kurzman 109). The message of the structure was clear—if The Palace were ever to fall, it would signal the complete destruction of the city (Thomas 22).

elevated status of San Francisco culture. But more importantly, as Coleman's description suggests, the Palace represents a central demarcation of San Francisco's space—it racializes the space of the city. By placing the Chinese porters outside the door to the luxurious haven and the (presumably) white and wealthy guest on the inside, the Palace mimics the cultural landscape of the city that clearly differentiates the social and racial classes of the city. With this vivid separation, San Francisco had advanced from “a strange collection of humanity in those days . . . [where] there was courage here, grit, and a willingness to take as to receive blows” to a sense of “arriving” (Dean 25-26). From the opening pages of *Travers*, Dean makes it clear that to be a citizen of San Francisco is to embody the right kind of blood, drawing a line between racialized and “cosmopolitan” identity. Despite the elegant cosmopolitanism that The Palace signals in the narrative, by the time avid readers were consuming Dean's novel The Palace had been reduced to another modern ruin in the wounded city. Dean's description, then, is little more than a vivid memory. Yet Dean's use of The Palace as a key setting also reveals the importance of its rebuilding that was already underway by 1907.<sup>34</sup> On December 15, 1909, the city held a banquet to officially announce the successful rebuilding of San Francisco. The gala, of course, took place at the seat of San Francisco society that Dean's novel imagines, The Palace Hotel. At the gala, Mayor Taylor declared that “San Francisco is rebuilt” (*Chronicle* 11), and *The San Francisco Chronicle* asserted, “It seemed that every man present felt that the occasion was different from the opening of any other hotel in the world could be and that the hour belonged to them and to the city, and, in fact, that The Palace Hotel belonged to San Francisco and that the city was celebrating her own” (11).

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<sup>34</sup> Work on The Palace took three years to complete.



From this passage it is clear that, in many respects, The Palace *was* the city. As a benchmark for society and culture, The Palace became as sign of San Francisco's success, wealth, and power.<sup>35</sup>

These tensions between memory and erasure and race and cosmopolitanism that The Palace signals are drastically complicated by the new physical landscape that the quake and fire produce throughout the pages of the novel. The moment of the 1906 earthquake is the pivotal event in the novel that serves to both reimagine the plot and its characters and, perhaps more importantly, the city itself. Of the quake Dean writes, "The earth twisted, withered [sic], jarred on like a creature in torture; then suddenly all was still" (53). In *Travers* the city is personified as a "creature in torture," a living being that is capable of feeling pain, of experiencing despair. This line reveals that the city itself is the main character of the novel, the cornerstone that holds the rest of the narrative together. In the new and crumbling landscape of San Francisco, "this earthquake had turned all rules, moral and social, topsy-turvy" (Dean 71). This "topsy-turvy" world that Gwendolyn and Travers have been thrown into is the true mystery of the novel. How do they make sense of this new "moral and social" order? How can the characters recover from an event that has "turned all rules"? With no rules, how will the city survive? These questions point to the central mystery of the narrative: *How will San Francisco survive?* This confusion is perhaps most vividly signaled through the question of class and social mixing about which *Travers* reveals deep anxieties. There is a constant

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<sup>35</sup> Today The Palace still stands at the corner of Market and New Montgomery, a testimony to the sentiments that were felt in 1909. After a hundred years, The Palace still serves as a symbol of San Francisco culture and a reminder of the triumphant ghosts of the past.

tension in the novel between seeing the earthquake as a type of great equalizer and the threat of social and class amalgamation that produces a sense of fear and anxiety. Shortly after the earthquake, Gwendolyn realizes that it had “shaken us all together—the poor with the rich, the evil with the good” (Dean 284). While this seems like an ideal opportunity to build a more socially equal version of San Francisco, it creates a mood of anxiety that is constantly reiterated in the novel. The notion that Travers and Gwendolyn have become equals in the midst of this chaos has created a type of identity crisis for the social structure of the city.

With this new social order of post-quake San Francisco, Dean makes a case for a new type of San Franciscan to emerge from the flames and rebuild the city. While *Travers* is on the surface primarily concerned with issues of class, the novel suggests a much more complex commentary on the possibility of racial mixing. In a Darwinian approach, it seems that only the “fittest” will survive the destruction of the quake and be able to redeem the fallen city. The problem of redemption for the city that the quake posits is thus one that is primarily concerned with blood. In *Travers* blood and race are signaled by the complexities of social breeding. While Gwendolyn and Travers seem an unlikely pair, the importance of their union is revealed through the failed character of Gwendolyn’s doomed fiancé, Drexel. Drexel is what the city must be cleansed of, an example of an “unfit” citizen for post-quake San Francisco. The “Man-like” Drexel is nearly as villainous as the quake itself because he is imagined as *subhuman*. Like the discourse of the time that was concerned with crania size and eugenic race modification, Drexel is presented a character whose blood lacks the necessary attributes to survive the physical and social devastation around him. Despite these jarring comparisons to a

subhuman being, Dean paradoxically establishes Drexel as a fundamentally “American” character from the moment we meet him. His overt connection to the eastern United States and its claim to a more “pure” sense of American heritage and identity are the attributes that hinder, and ultimately destroy, him in the text. Through his lineage, Drexel is able to force himself into key social circles, yet he cannot survive in the California urban landscape that he inhabits. While he may have impeccable American “breeding” running through his veins, he lacks the behavioral qualities to survive in the American West. The very blood that produces his success also hinders him in the ruined landscape of the devastated city. As he discusses his frustration with Mrs. Addington’s lack of acceptance, he complains, “If it’s blood she wants, my ancestors came over in the Mayflower and we have Admirals and Generals and Governors enough to satisfy even Philadelphia” (14). Drexel uses this comment both to lend himself a sense of legitimacy and to make a clear distinction between his ancestral blood and that of people in the West. Yet while Travers is able to adapt to his new surroundings in the city and forge a new type of identity, Drexel can only rely on his name, rather than on the present condition of his character. He cannot overcome his blood, cannot transcend the attributes with which he was born. Ultimately, the eastern American “blood” of his Mayflower ancestors fails him, and he is revealed as both a coward and a villain. The author implies that the strength of the city lies in its inherent diversity and its overt difference from cities in the east. Through Drexel’s cowardly suicide at the end of the novel, a new type of American is thus imagined. The bad breeding that Drexel represented symbolically dies with him in the novel. By eradicating the landscape of his blood, *Travers* is able to

imagine the possibility of a new type of city, of a new breed of American that the West signifies.

Yet the problems of blood that Drexel's character outlines have no easy solution. While a union between Travers and Gwendolyn seems to signal a new beginning for the city, the novel ends with rejection rather than a happy marriage. While *Travers* posits potential redemption for both its protagonist and the city that he represents, there is also the pervasive sense that such redemption is far from possible. It is *through* the destruction of the quake and fires that Travers—and thus San Francisco itself—must come to terms with and forge a new sense of (spatial) identity. Over San Francisco, “The flames sprang hundreds of feet in the air, while the fire raged, spread, devoured with horrifying speed, springing with hungry, sudden leaps, or burning steadily and greedily. It would go in one direction, then double in its course, creep defiantly about the path of the insufficient blasting and return” (Dean 92). The fire and its smoke literally engulf and mask the once-brilliant city. This transforms San Francisco into a veiled city, covered by the disaster that threatens to destroy it. The parameters and boundaries of the city become lost as the city is reduced to the flames that consume it. At the center of this erratic representation and spatial disorientation is Travers. As the fires rage on, “Travers had just emerged from one of the tents, and stood for a moment in the open. His eyes turned to her for an instant, then over towards the burning city. . . . [T]here was a serenity in his face that stood like a chasm between this Travers, and the Travers of that hideous dawn, which, though in reality it was but a few hours, seemed such a long time ago” (116-17). Here, Travers encounters a moment of baptism that allows him to rise from the ashes just as the still-burning city promises to do. It is through the conditions that the

fires create that Travers is able to “emerge” as a new man. Gwendolyn and the “burning city” then are intimately linked as they both represent a new sense of possibility for him. The “hideous dawn” in which Travers attempts to steal the Thornton diamonds and the devastating quake occurs has been cleansed in the fires of the city. Through the fires and the opportunities for redemption that they have afforded, Travers transforms into a man who emulates the strength of the structures that still stand in the burning city. But what is significant here is that Travers is not simply a man of San Francisco, but rather a man of the world. It is thus not the quintessential American Drexel who embodies San Francisco, but the global figure of Travers. As an English citizen and a refugee in America with connections to the Far East of India, Travers illustrates the global context of the city. Travers, then, embodies the diversity of the city itself. His global experiences, shadowed past, and immigrant status illustrate the mysterious collective identity that the city struggles to come to terms with both before and after the quake and fires. It is this tension that persuades Travers to come to California after his debacle in India. He explains to Colonel Merriton, “I couldn’t hide in the old world . . . I tried New York. It wasn’t much better. The story followed me and decent men avoided me. Then I went West to the Rockies” (268). The “old world” will offer Travers neither the shelter nor the opportunity that he seeks. In Travers’s quest for redemption, California becomes the final place of possibility. Sitting at the edge of the Pacific, San Francisco thus becomes Travers’s last hope. This statement mirrors the sentiments of Manifest Destiny itself. California—and in particular San Francisco—offer the United States a sense of finality, a sense of complete conquest. Travers’s venture to San Francisco as the frontier

of his salvation is thus no accident; rather, it is symbolic of all the promises that the West holds for nineteenth-century American expansionism.

The promises of the West—and the rejection of the East—are vividly brought to life through Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn is a type of hybrid American, her father being from the eastern United States and her mother a native Californian. This idea of a “native” Californian is central to understanding the importance of Gwendolyn’s character for the future of the city. By claiming a “native” lineage to the state, Gwendolyn’s blood is thus imagined as more pure than even Drexel’s with his Mayflower ancestry. Through her blood she is constructed as a character who is truly suited for the terrain of California and all its potential challenges. As a result, she, rather than Drexel or even Mrs. Addington, is more suited to survive the calamities of the quake and fires. Furthermore, the quality of Gwendolyn’s blood is manifested in the attributes of her character, socially, and perhaps racially, marking her just as the quake marks the landscape of the city. As Mrs. Addington considers her niece, the narrator explains, “There was an exuberant wealth of temperament in Gwen that puzzled her. At times she felt tempted to think it a taint of the wild, Western blood she inherited from her mother” (Dean 32). What makes this observation central to the novel’s claims about blood and lineage is that it also calls into question her specific heritage. The novel leaves Gwendolyn’s connections to the Old World veiled and unclear, acknowledging only that her mother was a “native” Californian but never fully considering the social and racial implications of this. The notion of “native” status is thus left appreciated but undefined in the scope of Dean’s novel. While Dean praises Gwendolyn’s spirit as a California woman, she leaves her reader with questions over Gwendolyn’s exact ethnic and racial makeup. We are left to

decipher not only Gwendolyn's past, but her race as well. In this passage Gwendolyn's "wild western blood" could racially mark her as Spanish, Californio, or some variety of Western European immigrant stock.<sup>36</sup> This threat of potential racialization marks Gwendolyn as a woman capable of surviving the harsh realities of disaster while creating tensions about the potential for racial mixing that a union with Travers could yield. Her lineage and claims to whiteness remained veiled throughout the novel, leaving difficult questions about the future racial makeup of the city unresolved.

While the disaster of the earthquake and fire seems to leave Travers and Gwendolyn with the freedom and the responsibility to rebuild the devastated city, it also uncovers key anxieties about class and social mixing. Through the narrative, questions of social and racial amalgamation link the failed union between Gwendolyn and Travers to an imagined future for San Francisco. While together they "must start over again," Travers and Gwendolyn are in the end unable to definitively save the city because of this failed union (219). While Dean suggests that Travers, Gwendolyn, and the other survivors must start new lives and build a new city, the question of how to accomplish this remains unanswered. Thus, while this notion appears hopeful, it also leaves a string of questions and anxieties in its wake. As they ponder their future—both together and separately—Travers asks Gwendolyn, "Can a man ever make a new start? Can he?" (159). Despite the progress brought through physical destruction, the question of the

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<sup>36</sup> Despite this claim to "Native" Californian identity, I do not imply that Gwendolyn was a Native American Indian. The mission system and overt attempts of genocide in California would have made this estimate an impossibility in 1907 California racial politics. In fact, the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition which celebrated the rebuilt city also formally marked an end of the "frontier" and of the Native race, vividly visualizing its message in sculptures like "The End of the Trail."

future of Travers—and San Francisco—remains. This uncertainty is illustrated in one of the final scenes of the novel. In their teary goodbye, Gwendolyn says to Travers, “Perhaps after a while, when we’ve both learned to work and to live—you won’t send me away again” (285). What will become of Gwendolyn, Travers, and the city that they inhabit remains a mystery that is never reconciled. In the attempt to combat the weakness that Drexel represents, it seems that the novel must end with marriage as a resolution. Gwendolyn, poised to marry Drexel, must now marry Travers in order to redeem the fallen city. Yet this union never happens. The end of the novel thus has no resolution, but rather leaves the reader full of questions and uncertainty. If Gwendolyn and Travers do not have a future, can the city have a future? The failed union between Gwendolyn and Travers thus casts a questionable future for the city that they are trying so desperately to save. As a place struggling to deal with the remnants of disaster, San Francisco must reinvent itself. But the possibility of reinvention is stifled when Gwendolyn and Travers fail to provide a clear narrative for the future of the city. Perhaps more importantly, their failed union comes with the shocking recognition that reinvention cannot be possible without reproduction. By not marrying, and thus not producing an heir—a new citizen for the city—Travers and Gwendolyn fail to reproduce their combined attributes, their diverse blood, in order to create a new model for San Francisco by producing “native” children in the West. The uncertainty that Dean leaves us with at the end of *Travers*, then, is a reflection of conflicting sentiments about the city and its potential survivability. As *Travers* and the rest of the texts that this chapter investigates illustrate, the 1906 earthquake and fire created a type of cultural memory that runs as deep as any bloodline.



***The Avalanche of San Francisco Society: Reconciling Blood and Redefining Space***

*“Scandal is bred in the marrow of San Francisco. Its social history is founded upon it, and it is almost a matter of principle to replace decaying props.”* – Price Ruyler, *The Avalanche*

Published in 1919, Gertrude Atherton’s *The Avalanche: A Mystery* complicates the relationship between blood and disaster introduced in *Travers*. The similarities between these two disaster romances are striking: both involve a young couple with questionable heritage and backgrounds; both use the gothic trope of a magnificent jewel; both consider the problem of marriage in the West where lineage and history are narratives of fact and fiction; and both express anxiety about the social mixing that the conditions created by the Great Quake and fire have manifested in San Francisco. But *The Avalanche* is a disaster romance that reveals a much more sinister side of survival in California. While *Travers* is concerned with Gwendolyn’s “spirit of the west” and its necessity for survival in the new landscape of the city, *The Avalanche* reconsiders this “mixed blood” notion in a radically new way that was a clear reflection of the American Eugenics Movement and the message of the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition. In advocating “better breeding,” American eugenics became “part of everyday white middle-class American life” (Stern 9, 11). Eugenics, at its core, is concerned with designing an “ideal” American—one who is strong, powerful, and necessarily pure of blood, or, more explicitly, white. But during a period when whiteness is in constant flux, this construction proves to be both complex and problematic. *The Avalanche* reflects the sentiments and problems of the American eugenics movement, creating a clear case for “better breeding” in the reconstructed—and reimagined—landscape of San Francisco. Imagining a world that has survived the 1906 earthquake and fire, *The Avalanche*

reconsiders the role of “survival” in the new, modern San Francisco landscape. As San Francisco struggles to rebuild itself, *The Avalanche* suggest that the past of the destroyed city creates an uncanny future, one that is a series of illusions, doubts, and mysteries.

In *The Avalanche* Atherton is primarily concerned with the question of what makes a model citizen in San Francisco. Who is part of the city, and who is not? On whom is the city’s future dependent? Citizens and civic leaders of post-quake San Francisco were obsessed with answering these questions as they strove to rebuild a better city after the devastating destruction of 1906. The rise of the city coincided with the rise of the American Eugenics Movement. In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson defines eugenics as “the *biological* engineering of the body politic” (77). Eugenics was the modern incarnation of nineteenth-century race “sciences” that included fields such as anthropology, craniometry, and phrenology. As citizens attempted to physically rebuild San Francisco, they also became intensely preoccupied with redesigning its citizenry. This was particularly important because of the great rise in immigration that the western United States experienced during the 1910s. As Elliott Barkan suggests in *From All Points: America’s Immigrant West*, “The fate of many newcomers was tied so tightly to how they were ‘racially’ identified—and not just as white but *how* white, if white at all—that it frequently determined whether they were welcomed or excluded, well treated or mistreated, equitably rewarded or simply exploited, tolerated or killed” (7). Helene’s fate in Atherton’s novel is directly tied to these types of sentiments. The narrative, then, is not simply about rebuilding a city, but about rebuilding a necessarily *white* city. As *The Avalanche* illustrates, this was a process that was concerned with nature and nurture, with blood and behavior.

A “native” Californian, Atherton is the best-known woman Californian author of this period, and she became an international figure who spent extensive time in the literary scenes of both New York and London. At nineteen she eloped with George Atherton, a mixed-blood American, and quickly became keenly aware of the identity politics that were a hallmark of California space. Perhaps it was her marriage that made her consider the problem of heritage in her work. With her husband’s death in 1887, Atherton was able to become the woman that she had always imagined herself to be. Through her writing and her travels, she became a quintessential California woman in every sense, exploring and transcending new frontiers that lay far outside the comfort zones of her bourgeois experiences. Her work as a suffragette, her passionate commentaries on World War I, and her novels with their adventurous (though sometimes admittedly misguided) heroines all testify to her “western blood” and the politics of identity that emerged from it throughout her life and career. As a well-respected, and arguably “canonical,” California author, Atherton was widely read and established at the time that *The Avalanche* was published. *The Avalanche* is Atherton’s only conventional mystery novel, making it a unique case study in her career of over sixty published works. While the mystery genre and its tropes were common conventions during the early twentieth century, Atherton’s representation of the genre in *The Avalanche* links the past and the present together in an uncanny way that simultaneously looks forward and backward. Using the 1906 earthquake as a backdrop, *The Avalanche* is more concerned with aftermath, suggesting that haunting and ghosts are results of such a devastating moment. But the ghosts that Atherton investigates are not the usual spooks and shadows. Rather, they are much more sinister specters of masked racial pasts and dark family

secrets. Atherton situates her tale in a temporal position that necessarily must consider the city and its characters both before and after the quake. Through this temporal trajectory, Atherton's novel is able to provide a critique of race and social mixing that is continually haunted by the shadows of the past.

*The Avalanche* was a refreshingly new form for the author, who vividly demonstrates that "plot and melodrama were in every life."<sup>37</sup> An early review of the novel from *The New York Times* explains this: "Readers and admirers of Mrs. Atherton owe her a double debt of gratitude for her latest book, 'The Avalanche.' First because it is a good story, and, second, because it is not a story of the war . . . Atherton's chief qualities had prompted her, in the midst of her own war activities, to turn her back on the stresses and anxieties of the time."<sup>38</sup> In turning "back on the stresses and anxieties of the time," Atherton turned to old stresses and anxieties that had been left unresolved. Steering away from the very pressing issue of World War I, Atherton considers the modern problems of collapse and destruction through a previous, familiar, and haunting moment in local history. In the case of San Francisco, these anxieties are manifested in the realities of identity that the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of the city has called into question. The novel offered an escape *into* history.

As part of this escape, *The Avalanche* investigates some familiar tropes of American mystery fiction and the gothic literary tradition. The novel includes a beautiful and mysterious woman with a shrouded past, a dashing and successful hero figure, and a

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<sup>37</sup> Atherton 68. Note on the pagination: The page numbers reflect a print out of the novel from the online archive at Project Gutenberg, found at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7863/7863-8.txt> (30 June 2004).

<sup>38</sup> See *The New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1919.

magnificent jewel. But this inventory is far from the actual mystery that lies at the heart of the narrative. The opening lines of the novel introduce the reader to a more complex problem: “Price Ruyler knew that many secrets had been inhumed by the earthquake and fire of San Francisco and wondered if his wife’s has been one of them” (Atherton 1). These mysteries of spatial and personal identity that *The Avalanche* suggests are, like *Travers*, concerned with survival, blood, and fragmented history. Ruyler begins the novel “hovering on the edge of a sinister and complicated drama whose end he could as little foresee as he could escape from the hand of Fate that was pushing him inexorably forward” (18). The “complicated drama” that Ruyler becomes invested in pushes him “inexorably forward” *into the past*. In other words, Ruyler must reconcile the history of San Francisco itself. Barkan explains the conflict as “Old West vs. New West; old-stock American versus new-stock immigrants; old patterns of accommodation versus new groups and new patterns; old threats versus new strategies of coping . . . This was the American West as it approached the twentieth century” (57). The earthquake of 1906 complicates this duality of the American West even further by creating a radically new landscape in which the characters must survive. Ruyler and the other characters in the novel can only move forward if they first look back; they can only imagine a future if they solve the problems of the past. Thus, from the opening lines, the novel establishes that the “mysteries of the city” that San Francisco embodies can only be solved through an examination and rectification of the past.

*The Avalanche* begins with the introduction of Price Ruyler, a young man from a prominent family in New York who came west to San Francisco shortly after the 1906 earthquake and fire to capitalize on the rebuilding process in the devastated city. While

west, Ruyler has fallen in love with and married Helene Delano. Despite their wedded bliss, Ruyler has begun to grow suspicious of his wife's behavior. At the foundation of Ruyler's anxiety is the question of Helene's lineage. Claiming she can trace their lineage to a silk-producing family in Rouen, France, Helene and her mother, Marie Delano, have a shadowy and questionable familial history, and the nature of Helene's birth and the identity of her father are mysteries. Standing in opposition to the uncertainty of the Delano bloodline is the magnificent Burma Ruby that has been in the Ruyler family for generations, signifying the family's strength and honorable heritage. The ruby vividly illustrates Ruyler's connection to colonial India and the "civilizing" mission of the Far East, illustrating Ruyler himself as a type of civilizing agent who has come to San Francisco to create a better city and, thus, better citizens. Not realizing its true significance and symbolic history, Helene is obsessed with the stone. As Ruyler contemplates his wife's increasing emotional distance and her interest in the prized jewel, he hires private detective Jake Spaulding to help uncover Helene and Marie's secrets. Atherton thus weaves the genres of mystery and detective fiction to form a unique disaster romance. As the investigation progresses, Ruyler begins to suspect a multitude of possibilities about Helene's lineage that include the scenario that Marie was a "lady of the night" in pre-quake San Francisco, a mistress of a well-known San Francisco "rich highfliers" (Atherton 81), or the estranged Mrs. Lawton, the wife of a prominent San Francisco lawyer who disappeared "back east" around the time of Helene's birth. The possibilities of Helene's lineage suddenly become endless, provoking Ruyler to become even more fixated on discovering the "truth" of his wife's family and, thus, her status in society. When Ruyler's panic reaches a peak in the narrative, he learns from Spaulding

that Helene's father is a man named James Delano, the son of a forty-niner who lost his fortune and respectability to a bad gambling habit. As the plot rapidly thickens with tales of disgruntled gambling partners and stolen jewels, Helene tearfully confesses her gambling addiction, her theft of the ruby from Ruyler's safe, and her shameful family history of gambling and woe. Despite her faults and the "bad blood" that runs through her veins, Ruyler forgives her, ending the novel with the promise that together they will build a better woman and a better California for their future.

As this summary suggests, the descent into the past that the novel deals with is essentially about uncovering the social crimes of San Francisco "society." In considering the novel, I will offer an examination of the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition as an intriguing context that reveals key insights into the period and urban climate from which *The Avalanche* emerged. In reading *The Avalanche* as an expression of racial tension that clearly privileges a *white* city for the new San Francisco, the prominence of eugenics in the West, and in particular at the center of the Panama Pacific International Exposition, cannot be ignored. Like *The Avalanche*, the Panama Pacific International Exposition could simultaneously rewrite the past and imagine a new—more "fit"—future for the city. When the fair opened its gates on February 20, 1915, the theme of the advancement of civilization was readily apparent. Eugenics took center stage at the fair, supplying the focal point for many of the exhibits and art pieces on display. Sculptures such as *The Fountain of Energy* that illustrated physically perfect male bodies at the center of the world, and James Earle Fraser's iconic *The End of the Trail* with its downtrodden Indian signaled the importance of both race and gender in the new city. The message was clear—new San Francisco, new citizens. At the fair, eugenics

discourse translated “bad blood” into better citizens. To help echo this, the fair played host to the Second National Conference on Race Betterment, providing a forum and a model for how to build better and stronger populations as part of the urban landscape (Rydell 41). For perhaps the first time, eugenics was portrayed, and perhaps more importantly *displayed*, as a fundamental part of American urban planning. As a port city, a center for trade, and a locus of racial mixing since its beginnings, San Francisco posed both possibility and a variety of threats to the uniformity of American identity that eugenics preached. This was the world that Atherton witnessed the construction of after the horrors of the Great Quake. As this context suggests, “the avalanche” of the novel lies in anxieties about the new social conditions that the earthquake has created and the social mixing that has changed the landscape of both the city and its social rules and codes. The publication of the novel coincided with strong movements in American nativism and global eugenics discourse that promoted “scientific racism.” As the characters in the novel attempt to reimagine the physical landscape of the city, they also attempt to rewrite the racial makeup of its citizens.

The relationship between Helene and Ruyler illustrates these sentiments in *The Avalanche*. While the union between Gwendolyn and Travers in *Travers* failed, leaving San Francisco with an uncertain future, the rehabilitated marriage between Ruyler and Helene problematizes the challenges of the rebuilding process. In the case of *The Avalanche*, Helene’s ghostlike mobility threatens the very social barriers that Ruyler and the echelons of San Francisco society stand for in the novel. Once she becomes Ruyler’s wife, the barriers of class ascension that once could have stood in Helene’s way are discarded. The marriage between Helene and Ruyler thus threatens a fragile social



contract between class structure and social rules because it masks the class distinctions of pre-quake San Francisco. Atherton explains that, after the marriage, “Helene’s social success was immediate and permanent. . . . She had married into ‘their set.’ They had accepted her. She was one of them. No secret order is more loyal to its initiates” (12). But Helene’s penetration of “society” seems to threaten the very construction of an exclusive social class in post-quake San Francisco. The rise in nativism and eugenics during this period carried with it an “increasing fragmentation and hierarchical ordering of distinct white *races*” (Jacobson 41). Helene threatens this hierarchical ordering because of her ghostlike qualities; her ability to float through the various levels of the social work, to infiltrate the ranks, creates a strong sense of anxiety for a city that is desperately trying to reorder itself. While the eugenics movements that Jacobson alludes to “emphasized the propagation of the ‘fittest’ and the elimination of those deemed degenerate,” the union between Helene and Ruyler threatens to break the hierarchies and create a new form of spatial chaos more devastating than the memory of the quake itself (Stern 30).

As Helene struggles to “learn just what it cost[s] to be a woman of fashion in San Francisco” (Atherton 2), she must also come to terms with the details of her past that had been exhumed by her newfound visibility in the city. The “cost” of this social fluidity lies in Helene’s very blood. Called into question from the beginning of the novel, Helene’s blood becomes a focal point in the novel to reveal the social anxieties produced by the quake and fire. This is the uncanny part of her identity; this is what transforms her from a normal woman into a ghost. From the opening chapters of the novel, it is clear that Helene is “a girl of whose family he had known practically nothing until his outraged

father had cabled to a correspondent in Paris to make investigation of the Perrin family of Rouen, to which the girl's mother claimed to belong" (Atherton 6). The outrage of Ruyler's family lies in the fact that they cannot fully trace the lineage of Helene's family. Helene thus seems to be a figure of the novel who is considered *without history*. Where Helene and her mother "claim to belong" from is thus established not as fact but as potential, and even likely, fiction, questionable and suspicious.

In contrast to Helene, Ruyler is presented as a benchmark of good social breeding. Atherton writes, "Breeding was a part of Ruyler's religion, as component in his code as honor, patriotism, loyalty, or the obligation of the strong to protect the weak . . . Ruyler was a 'good mixer'" (55). In this passage it is evident that "breeding" is not just about creating and protecting a better standard of living; rather, it has become a key component of the American "religion" that signals the virtues of honor, patriotism, and loyalty that Ruyler's character is supposed to signify for us in the novel. At the crux of this good breeding and all its characteristics is Ruyler's identification as a "good mixer"—as a social agent who is capable of spreading the virtues of his class and educating others, such as Helene and Marie, in order to build a better American city. The challenge in this is to create a better class of citizens while not forgetting the roots of his own social position. The "good mixing" that Ruyler embodies is emblematic of the ideal citizen in the new, post-quake San Francisco, one that is inherently complex and contradictory. Ruyler must simultaneously be "one of the masses" and transcend them.

This physical "avalanche" of the 1906 earthquake and fire creates a strong tension between the ideal that Ruyler is emblematic of and the reality of the ghosts that continue to haunt the rehabilitating city. As in *Travers*, the destruction from the 1906 earthquake

creates new conditions of possibility in the novel that the characters must navigate. Since the narrative takes place after the initial destruction of the quake and fires, however, the tale that we are left with is one that requires us to sift through the ashes and reconstruct a history just as Ruyler attempts to reconstruct the fallen city and piece together the clues of his wife's past. It was the opportunity afforded by destruction that first drew Ruyler to San Francisco:

The vast ruin with its tottering arches and broken columns, its lonely walls looking as if bitten by prehistoric monsters that must haunt this ancient coast, . . . the grotesque twisted masses of steel and the aged gray hills that had looked down on so many fires, had appealed powerfully to his imagination, and made him feel, when wandering the streets alone at night, as if his brain cells were haunted by old memories of Antioch when Nature had annihilated in an instant what man had lavished upon her for centuries. Nowhere, not even in what was left of ancient Rome, had he ever received such an impression of the age of the world and of the nothingness of man as among the ruins of this ridiculously modern city of San Francisco. (Atherton 5)

In this passage we view the destruction of the city through Ruyler's eastern eyes. The city is imagined as a place that had been "bitten by prehistoric monsters that must haunt this ancient coast." As a non-"native" San Franciscan, Ruyler sees the city only after its destruction, only after its fall from an imagined state of grace and grandeur. From the beginning of the novel—from the beginning of Ruyler and Helene's narrated tale—the city of San Francisco is imagined as a physically and symbolically haunted space. San Francisco is thus transformed into an American gothic landscape. The "monsters" and the "grotesque twisted masses of steel" mimic fundamental gothic tropes in order to illustrate not only the destruction of the city, but also the emotional imprint that it has left behind. These imprints have rendered San Francisco a modern ruin, imagined as more

powerful—more haunted—than those of the fallen Rome. Yet the physical changes in the landscape and the remnants of destruction are not the only things that haunt him. Rather, it is the *unseen* ghosts, the implied shadows that linger long after the destruction is over and the city has been rebuilt, that haunt Ruyler and his new life.

These ghosts are embodied in questions surrounding his wife's buried heritage. And if Ruyler is the *haunted*, then Helene is the *haunter*. Atherton's description of Helene is vividly telling:

Helene had a quick temper but a gay and sweet disposition, normally high spirits, little apparent selfishness, and a naïve adoration for masculine superiority and strength; altogether, with her high bred beauty and her dignity in public . . . But all this lovely equipment was blurred, almost obscured at times, by the shadow that he was beginning to liken to the San Francisco fogs that drifted through the Golden Gate and settled down into the deep hollows of the Marin hills; moving gently but restlessly even there, like ghostly floating tides. (Atherton 3)

Embodying both a “quick temper” and a “gay disposition,” Helene seems to illustrate a vast realm of possibilities. While Atherton crafts her character as a “high bred beauty” with a strong sense of “dignity in public,” she suggests that under the veil of the public gaze lurks a much more complex creature. Helene is instead a “blurred” figure, one who is not entirely clear to the reader. She is simultaneously represented as an “enchanted ideal” and “obscured.” This illusiveness directly ties her to the ruined and rebuilt landscape of San Francisco. In this passage the mystery of Helene's identity is as intangible as the San Francisco fog that drifts “through the Golden Gate.” The fog becomes a signal of Helene's movement in the social worlds of the city.

At the center of Helene's character is the “bad blood” from which she suffers. Helene becomes the center of the novel's overt anxiety over blood and social mixing.

What is perhaps most revealing about Helene's blood is her passion for gambling that nearly destroys her, her marriage, and her place of privilege in San Francisco society. When confessing her addiction at the end of the novel, Helene explains, "Oh, I'd like to excuse myself by blaming it on being bored, and tired of trying to amuse myself doing nothing worth while, but it's bad blood, that's what it is, bad blood, and you know it, if none of the others do" (Atherton 69). In this explanation, Atherton positions Helene's gambling habit far from her status as a woman of society. The boredom and amusement that comes with being a bourgeois woman in the West during this period does not—and more importantly, will not—serve as a reason for her troubling hobby. Rather, her sinister addiction can be traced to the very "bad blood" that runs through her veins. This bad blood is the crux of the mystery of the novel, signaling the problem of history in San Francisco that the quake created. As a product of this destruction, Helene is a woman with a "ruined" history, forced to come to terms with the symptoms and consequences of the "bad blood" that she thinks has been buried in the rubble of the disaster. As Helene confesses her dark deeds to Price, she cries, "I am a gambler. My father was a gambler. He kept a notorious place in San Francisco. My grandfather was a gambler. He was even more spectacular" (Atherton 72). With this statement, Helene's gambling problem is transformed from a mere bad habit to a symptom of her lineage. But the biggest crime that Helene commits is not her gambling habit, or her theft of the ruby and her betrayal of her husband. Rather, the true crime lies in the notion that she lets the ghosts of her heritage haunt her:

It was as if my father had suddenly come alive in my brain . . .  
I felt possessed. But I knew I must not be found out, and I made  
up my mind to stop playing as soon as I came out even. If I had

known that my father and grandfather had been gamblers I never should have touched a card. I'd far rather have drunk poison.  
(Atherton 73)

In her blood, Helene carries repressed ghosts. As they struggle to return to the present and drive her future, she becomes haunted by the shadows of her own past. In *The Avalanche* Helene's father, her grandfather, and the secrets of her mother are all transformed into ghosts that actively haunt her throughout the novel. The image of her father coming alive in her brain signals the appearance of an apparition, a ghostly image manifested through the shadows of the past. This is the "possession" that Helene experiences.

This "bad blood" is so powerful that it marks her very body, inscribing her features with the problems of her past. The obscurity of her heritage becomes physically imprinted on her body as indecipherable features. The physical description that Atherton uses to describe Helene suggests anxieties over her past, her blood, and even her national (and perhaps racial) identity. Though Helene is born in San Francisco, Atherton chooses to emphasize the foreign—French—and unknown attributes of her physical character, presenting her as an exotic beauty with "a top heavy mass of blue black hair" and a "general unlikeness to the gray-eyed fair-haired American" that Ruyler represents (Atherton 7). Her long deep black hair suggests not just a French heritage, but also a possible connection to the Spanish legacy of California's past. The doubt that Atherton casts on the purity of Helene's French blood is laced with questions of miscegenation and amalgamation, offering the chilling acknowledgement that California's racial identity is far more complex than that of the "gray eyed" East that Ruyler comes from. Thus, Helene's true heritage and her connections to California's past, and thus its future, are

vastly complicated through this new possibility that is never rectified or further addressed in the novel. Because of her indecipherable past, Helene is placed in both physical and thematic opposition to Ruyler and the social structures that he symbolizes.

In the newly emerging San Francisco the realities of the blood that flows through Helene's veins cannot hide beneath the surface of her seemingly perfect life. Helene's blood thus serves as a testimony to the notion that the past can never fully be erased or removed. Her blood will *always* be tainted, will always be a symptom of the past that she has emerged from. While the novel offers the potential for redemption through the form of rehabilitation, it is plagued with more questions than answers, with more uncertainty than promise. The rehabilitation of Helene's marriage to Ruyler at the end of the novel is central to understanding the unsolved mystery of the novel. By forgiving her of her "bad blood" and vowing to help her work through the marks of her past, Ruyler's character signals a new sense of hope not just for his marriage, but also for the city of San Francisco. The novel, then, is not only about rehabilitating their marriage, but about rehabilitating Helene's—and the city's—racial and social shortcomings. But the promise that Ruyler makes is an empty one.

With its uncertain ending, *The Avalanche* echoes the empty promises of a bigger, better city that San Franciscans had so vividly imagined. This can be seen both in cultural products like Atherton's novel and in urban planning measures like the City Beautiful Movement and the 1905 Burnham Report. In 1904, White City architect Daniel Burnham was commissioned by the city to develop a new urban plan for San Francisco. Unveiled in 1905, the plan featured details for a new city hall, the extension and development of the panhandle area, a new network of boulevards that would break

up the gridiron plan of the city, and an amphitheater for Ashbury Heights (*Chronicle*).<sup>39</sup> The 1906 earthquake created a state of debate and conflict over these celebrated plans. While many leading San Franciscans, including James Phelan, claimed that the quake afforded an opportunity—a clean slate—to thoroughly implement Burnham’s plans, others ultimately argued that what the city needed was a quick rebuilding process. In an article titled “No time for the Esthetic” the San Francisco *Chronicle* plainly stated, “[T]o attempt to carry out the Burnham plans would be a fatal mistake.”<sup>40</sup> Even after the landscape had been cleared by disaster the city was rebuilt along the same lines. This anxiety over the future of the city is revealed in the anxiety over Ruyler’s ability to reinvent Helene. Yet, even after Ruyler promises to rehabilitate Helene, the same blood will run through her veins. As Helene’s narrative of promised rehabilitation and the failed Burnham report prove, racial and social haunting is a hallmark of space in San Francisco, where the present is constantly dependent on the preservation and manipulation of the past. It is this haunted lineage that renders Helene—and perhaps the city—unfixable ghosts.

### **New Narratives for *Old San Francisco***

While *Travers* and *The Avalanche* consider the genealogical mysteries that the 1906 earthquake and fire produced, *Old San Francisco* (1927) complicates these “mysteries of the city” by illustrating the anxieties and tensions over citizenship in the racially diverse urban landscape by considering who is and who is not part of the city that would emerge from the flames. This disaster romance takes the narratives of physical

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<sup>39</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 Sept. 1905: 9.

<sup>40</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 May 1906: 15.



and cultural survival that *Travers* and *The Avalanche* attempt to illustrate and disrupts them by considering anxieties over more complex versions of racial amalgamation and class mixing by transcending the boundaries of Spanish/European and “white” mixing through the representation of an Asian “other.” *Old San Francisco* thus extends the conflicts of social classes and simple “blood problems” to the more complex issues of race classification and racial mixing through a vivid imagining of racial drag, deception, and desire. Through the medium of visibility, the film transforms the doctrines of “bad blood” and “better breeding” from *Travers* and *The Avalanche* by constructing an argument about the racial future of California, which cautiously necessitates particular types of racial amalgamation in order to preserve an acute investment in whiteness at the expense of articulating racial and cultural enemies.

As a retrospective look at the 1906 earthquake and fire, *Old San Francisco* complicates the anxieties and tensions over citizenship in the racially diverse urban landscape by considering who is and who is not part of the city that will emerge from the flames. The film follows the love affair of an Irish immigrant, Terry O'Shaughnessy, and a Californio beauty, Dolores Vasquez, as they attempt to carve a place for themselves in the new city. As Dolores tries to save her family's ancestral lands, she and Terry become part of the villain Chris Buckwell's twisted plot to steal land from Chinese residents and gain wealth and status in the newly emerging urban landscape. As Buckwell, a Chinese man passing for white, moves through the streets of the city, Dolores and Terry must also learn to pass into rapidly changing modes of urban citizenship. This is articulated through the sexualized discourses of the narrative that illustrate that the importance of Euro-American blending through marriage and the desire to protect “white” bodies from

racial “penetration” are the cornerstones of the film. The marriage plot in *Old San Francisco* thus narrates a future for the city and rewrites the past. In the film the union between the protagonists not only contains the threat of racialized rape, but also produces a thoroughly modern, and necessarily white, citizenry. The villain in the film is the “heathen chinee”<sup>41</sup> Chris Buckwell, who not only vilifies San Francisco’s Chinese population and Chinatown, but also erases the complex subaltern histories of that space. A predecessor of the noir films of the 1930s and 1940s, *Old San Francisco* illustrates a cultural legacy of memory and myth, attempting to create a future through a past of destruction. In the film, San Francisco is thus transformed into a complex allegory for the inherent racial tensions and anxieties of the city that are continually haunted by racially marked ghosts of the past. *Old San Francisco* offers a chilling new model that reimagines the past—and the future—of San Francisco and the American West.

Produced in 1927 and directed by Alan Crosland, *Old San Francisco* is a silent film that, as the opening title describes, tells the story of a “land locked harbor that was destined to become the metropolis of the Pacific.” In looking back to the 1906 moment, the film is able to make retrospective conclusions about the destructive past of the city and vividly visualize a newly imagined San Francisco that is more than twenty years removed from the infamous earthquake and fires. In a larger context, this film is also representative of “race” films that were popular during this period. After the release of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, film became a major means of culturally

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<sup>41</sup> See “The Heathen Chinee” by Bret Harte. The narrative poem was originally published as “Plain Language from Truthful James” in September 1870 in the *Overland Monthly* as a parody of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Atlanta in Calydon” (1865), and it satirized anti-Chinese sentiment in northern California.

conceptualizing race visually. *Old San Francisco* is an example of this type of genre that tells the particular tale of western American empire. Crosland had a particular interest in this type of genre, and *Old San Francisco* can be thought of as a precursor to the widely popular and much-studied *The Jazz Singer*, released in September of 1927.<sup>42</sup> The similarities between these two 1927 Crosland films are striking. *The Jazz Singer* takes place in New York and attempts to reconcile anxieties about post-bellum migration through the narrative of a Jewish man who, in order to pursue his musical passion, turns to “black-face” performance to negotiate the boundaries of his own racial and social position. The film thus complicates the traditional black-white binary by considering and questioning the limits of whiteness in America in relation to urban Jews. The limitations and boundaries of whiteness are also a central concern that Crosland grapples with in *Old San Francisco*. *Old San Francisco* applies the themes of racial anxiety that reemerge in *The Jazz Singer* to the particular circumstances of racial anxiety in the west. Through the tension among anxieties over the “yellow peril,” Chinese labor and settlement, and the desire to expand American enterprise to the “Orient,” *Old San Francisco* evokes “yellow-face” melodrama to mobilize and complicate earlier arguments about racial and cultural mixing by disrupting traditional racial binaries.

While not as popular as *The Jazz Singer*, *Old San Francisco* was a mildly successful film and one of the last silent melodramas that would be produced on the eve of the talkies. Produced and distributed by Warner Brothers Studios, the original premiere was held on June 21, 1927, in New York City. It was released nationally on

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Rogin has written an extensive comparison of *Old San Francisco* and *The Jazz Singer* in relation to racial performance in his book *Blackface, White Noise*.

September 4, 1927, and over the next three years appeared in many European markets, including Germany, Austria, Italy, and Spain. This release schedule suggests a fascination not only with the visual effects of the film (which were fairly advanced for the period), but also with the racial commentaries that drove the plotline. As an inter-war film, the anti-Chinese sentiments of the film focus attention away from the destruction of Europe and European immigration onto Chinese bodies. Produced in the aftermath of the 1924 Immigration Act (or Johnson-Reed Act) that placed further restrictions on immigration from Asian countries, the film emerged at a moment of global concerns over space and race. This visual “othering” of Chinese bodies deemphasizes the cultural differences among Euro-American populations by creating a sense of racial hegemony through a broader definition of whiteness. Despite these complex ideological constructions, the film itself is a relatively simple technical composition. Shot both in the studio and on location in San Francisco on 35mm film, *Old San Francisco* boasts simple cinematographic features and contains little camera movement.<sup>43</sup> These sensationalized tropes are illustrated in taglines from the original promotion posters, which included phrases such as “Beauty at a Price in Chinatown!” and “A Romance of the Days When ‘Frisco was the Paris of America! The Barbary Coast! The Fire of 1906! Massive! Unprecedented!”

The film’s plot is occupied with the tension between preserving a Spanish and Californio past and imagining an *American* future through “disaster romance.” In the case of *Old San Francisco*, and other texts that emerged after the 1906 earthquake and

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<sup>43</sup> The last remaining original copies of the film are housed at the Warner Brothers Studios Archives and at the University of California, Los Angeles. DVD copies of *Old San Francisco* are now also available through Turner Classic Movies at TCM.com.

fires, these stories also often depend on racial constructions that are symptomatic of the social anxieties of the period. Thus, these seemingly uncomplicated romantic tales are often complex webs of racial identity, assimilation, and miscegenation. To illustrate this complex history with which the film engages, *Old San Francisco* merges two narratives of racial performance. The first revolves around the relationship between the Californio woman, Dolores (Dolores Costello),<sup>44</sup> and her Irish immigrant love interest, Terry (Charles Mack).<sup>45</sup> The film begins with Dolores's struggle to save her family's land and ranch on the outskirts of the growing city and the villain Buckwell's (Warner Oland) attempt to claim her ancestral land—and her body—as his own. As the film progresses, Dolores gradually falls in love with the ambitious Terry as she attempts to save her family's land and survive in a San Francisco that has marginalized its Spanish past. This story is complicated by Buckwell's own performative narrative. Chris Buckwell, a Chinese man passing for white, attempts to secure a place in the city through a lucrative land development business that requires stealing land from his Chinese community for personal gain. Buckwell oscillates between his traditional Chinese lair—where he keeps relics of his heritage, sex slaves, and a “dwarf” secret brother that he keeps locked in a cage—and the world above—where he passes as a shrewd businessman cheating San Francisco Chinese of their land. These two narratives collide when Buckwell sees Dolores and decides to conquer her like the land he steals from his fellow Chinese,

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<sup>44</sup> Dolores Costello received top billing for this film and has often been referred to as “the goddess of the silent screen.” During her successful career, she starred in over forty silent films beginning in 1911. The casting of her as Dolores Vasquez in *Old San Francisco* undoubtedly contributed to the film's wide release and success.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Mack was a rising star during the period that *Old San Francisco* was made. He died before the film was released during a car accident on the set of his next film, *The First Auto*.

reading her body as a mode of assimilation on a path to obtainable whiteness. Through conquering both of these aspects of her identity, he believes that he will have access to the whiteness and cultural capital that she represents. As Dolores attempts to escape from Buckwell, solidify her union with Terry, and retain control of her land, the film takes the viewer on a visual tour through the streets of the city, the surrounding countryside, and the forbidden dens of Chinatown. This type of voyeurism transports the viewer to the city—and all its problems. The film reaches its climax with the 1906 earthquake, destroying Buckwell and, by implication, the impurity he represents. The spectacular filmic staging of San Francisco's destruction, and Chinatown in particular, creates a new city that is dependent on the mixed-race union of Terry and Dolores, firmly merging the past and the future of the city as it rebuilds itself. Their union and their production of a child—and heir to the city—creates a new Californian culture signaled by racial amalgamation.

As audiences would have observed, the characters of *Old San Francisco* relay a narrative of race, drag and costume dramas, and mystery in order to visualize the racial tensions in changing urban landscape of the city just prior to and after the 1906 earthquake and fires. In this context, “passing” becomes a significant determinant of mobility in the city, a way to transcend “bad” blood and obtain a sense of “good” or acceptable assimilation. In considering the cultural significance of *Old San Francisco*, I deploy the concept of “drag” as a double-productive term: Buckwell not only relies on a performance of racial drag in order to access a sense of social and economic mobility, but he also attempts to perform a sense of masculinity that comes with the claim to whiteness he attempts to access through his “passing.” In this way, racial drag becomes both a way

to perform a racialized identity and access the cultural capital of whiteness that the film portrays, but it also signals an assertion of American masculinity. In his attempts to assert physical and ideological dominance over his fellow Chinese and Dolores, Buckwell performs an exaggerated mode of masculinity expression that he believes will help him “pass” in this performative narrative. This performance of “drag” is particularly significant to the genre of the silent film. *Old San Francisco* is dependent on the centrality of *visibility* to the narrative. As a silent film, the only way for *Old San Francisco* to make a commentary on race is through the visualization of it. While the title cards of the film relay Terry’s “Irish” English and attempt to capture Dolores’s fractured speech, race becomes a marker that is primarily visualized through the body. Terry, Dolores, and Buckwell thus become visible spectacles of their respective races in the film. As an Irishman, Terry is represented as an ambitious immigrant staking his claim to whiteness through economic means. As a Californio woman, Dolores is depicted as a woman of aristocratic Spanish—and thus European—blood. As a Chinese man enacting a dangerous masquerade, Buckwell’s true identity can only be signaled through costume changes and descents into the underworld of Chinatown. In *Old San Francisco* and films like it, “the eloquence missing in the spoken word is given to the body in silent cinema” (Gaines 190). In the film, the body serves as both voice and testimony; it literally becomes the inscription that reveals the narrative of the text.

Central to this visualization is the art of “passing” in the film. Through these modes of visibility each of these characters attempts to “pass” out of the political reality that their blood suggest and into the cultural capital of whiteness that the film imagines. *Old San Francisco* seeks to whiten the characters through the vilification of a racial

other. The social power of the film comes from the fact that while Terry and Dolores are able to achieve this by the end of the narrative, Buckwell ultimately fails. His true identity as a Chinese man is quickly revealed to the viewer, suggesting that despite his best efforts, he will never be able to truly pass for the white male identity that he claims. Yet, what makes him so terrifying in the film, what designates him as the “villain” of the narrative, is that threat that he *could* succeed, he could be mistaken for the “proper white subject” that the film attempts to construct through the merger of Terry and Dolores. This threat causes the viewer to question not only what they see on the screen, but also their own notions of visual racialization. Visibility thus becomes something that is both revealing and masking, both a signifier of truth and a threat of deception. The importance of visibility in the film is fundamentally then about a social, political, and economic investment in whiteness. This project thus serves to merge the politics of visibility, the tangible realities of urban development, and the genre studies of “disaster romances” that *Old San Francisco* illustrates.

The problem of visibility and whiteness with which *Old San Francisco* engages with illustrates an uncanny relationship between race and representation in the film. *Old San Francisco* opens with a shot of the legendary Governor Portola<sup>46</sup> serving as a background for an inter-title that describes the Spanish past of the city. Images of Spanish Conquistadors fade into a sweeping image of the bay, the “golden gate,” lined with a few structures at the edge of the waterfront. These images culminate in a sequence that merges as sense of the California pastoral with the promise of urban growth. A series of shots visualize the land of California farms, sheep roaming across an

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<sup>46</sup> Gaspar de Portola (1716-1784), Spanish governor of Alta California.



unidentified valley, and cattle being driven across rolling hills. These images lead to a shot of the Vasquez ranch, the home of Dolores's proud Spanish ancestors. The narrative quickly shifts to the scene at the Vasquez ranch to an inter-title that states, "The Story." This brief transition moves the narrative from the Spanish past of the city to the "modern" conception of San Francisco with a shot of the Ferry Building clock tower that gives way to panning shots of the city, fully displaying the growth, prosperity, and grandeur of the emergent metropolis of San Francisco. As the camera pans, the viewer gets a sense of the vastness of the city and the marks of progress that it suggests. The screen inter-title confirms, "San Francisco grew and prospered. By 1906 it had become the Capital of the West—joyous, cosmopolitan—the Bohemia of America—the Paris of the Pacific." From the beginning of the film, San Francisco is imagined as part of the legacy of Europe, a site that mythically embodies both the spirit of the Old World and the progressive promise of the New World. The most important aspect of this new image is the global perspective that the film takes. San Francisco is imagined in relation to the Pacific, visualizing the ocean spread out before the viewer in the opening scenes. With this representation of the Golden Gate, the film situates San Francisco as a point of access to the worlds of the Pacific and the imagined threats of the "Orient." Moments like this facilitate a connection to a global narrative by placing the city at the center of U.S. empire. The film is thus not just occupied with the city, but also with the global and historical legacies that the city must reconcile in order to become a locus of U.S. imperial power. But while the film celebrates this powerful heritage, these images of beauty and progress do not last long. The film quickly reveals in its opening scenes that "the glory of the ancient Spanish California grew dim." As the opening sequence departs from

Spanish conquest to moments like the Gold Rush and the Bear Flag Revolt, the narrative of the film visually replaces the Spanish and Californio past with a new future. As a foundational part of this, the narrative complicates the idea of race as a fixed social category through dramatic and sensational forms of racial “passing” as it attempts to imagine a plausible future after the destruction from the 1906 earthquake and fires.

But the film suggests that the connection between the past and the present is rapidly weakening as a more cosmopolitan city emerges. At the heart of this demise are the vices of the city, the “mysteries” that corrupt the space of San Francisco. The urban squalor, the vice of humanity, is located in the film in the infamous Barbary Coast and the hidden dens of Chinatown. As one inter-title reveals, “The ‘cocktail route’ led to the Barbary Coast—that mile of hell which ran from Chinatown to the waterfront.” The shots that accompany this inter-title present the waterfront and the wharf areas through elevated shots that gaze down on the neighborhood of vice from afar, creating a safe distance between the “mile of hell” and the viewer. The camera then zooms in for a close-range shot of a street in Chinatown. This scene reveals a densely crowded street, lined with signs in Chinese characters. White citizens and Chinese people in traditional dress stroll by the camera as a watchful San Francisco police officer stands at the edge of the frame, carefully watching the spectacle placed before the viewer. By naming Chinatown as a center of urban vice, the film makes it clear that not only is “Hell” racially marked, but it has infiltrated San Francisco. From the beginning, then, *Old San Francisco* is set up as a narrative that suggests that the city is in desperate need of reconfiguration. In San Francisco notions of sin and salvation, good and evil, are directly linked to racial and ethnic identities.

At the center of these ideas is the notion of the disaster romance. In *Old San Francisco*, the form of the disaster romance functions not only as a sensational element of the narrative, but also reveals deep-rooted anxieties about tensions over racial mixing and merging identities in the West. The union between Terry and Dolores is designed to bridge the mythic past of the film and the narrative future that it imagines by redeeming the vice of the city and producing a clean slate in the form of an heir, a child in an acceptable form of racial amalgamation—namely, Spanish and Irish *European* lineage—that will furnish a future for the city. This family is one that is necessarily white, one that is able to assimilate the past in order to build a productive future. The end of the film happily reconciles the old Californio and new European immigrant pasts of the city through the creation of a new urban landscape and a new “American family” to occupy it. The disaster romance, then, legitimizes not only the union between Terry and Dolores, but also the new city that rises from the ashes. In the end, *Old San Francisco* vividly conveys the belief that “the city that *was* has become the San Francisco that *is*—serene, sunlit, and beautiful on its thrice seven hills.” What is perhaps most important about the generation that will inherit the city post-1906 is its interpretation of the modern California citizen. The union between Terry and Dolores is not simply about producing an heir for the city, but also about defining the boundaries of whiteness in the American West. As an Irish immigrant, Terry is a figure who stands on the cusp of whiteness but is still shadowed by anxiety over his claim to whiteness. As a Californio woman, Dolores is marked not as Mexican, Indian, or Mestizo, but as a woman of an upper-class *European* lineage. Both Dolores and Terry seem to sit on the fringe of whiteness as they strive to negotiate a definitive space for themselves and their heritage in pre-quake San

Francisco. Through the vilification of a common “enemy,” the definition of a firm “other,” they are able to make stronger claims to a cultural and social definition of whiteness as opposed to a purely racial one. Together, then, they succeed in creating a new definition of whiteness in the aftermath of the destruction of both the earthquake and the film’s villain. They illustrate an “acceptable” alternative for obtaining whiteness in California.

Standing in opposition to this marriage plot is Buckwell and the “othered” Chinese identity that he symbolizes. *Old San Francisco* locates the heart of racial conflict in representations of Chinatown and an acute anxiety over the presence of Chinese bodies in the city. These tense racial relations between Chinese and non-Chinese residents are reflected in complex interactions and tensions circulating around the need for cheap labor and the fear of racial miscegenation, rather than the culturally acceptable amalgamation that Terry and Dolores represent. In this context, the Chinese became a threat to both the purity of the space of the city and the notion of U.S. identity that was being constructed in the West at the turn of the century. As Alexander Saxton explains in *The Indispensable Enemy*, “Already in the mines and at railroad construction camps there had been collisions of Chinese and non-Chinese; and now, during the years following the war, intense conflict was developing in the new urban area” (260). In San Francisco, the conflict between Chinese and white citizens was based not simply on cultural notions of “foreignness,” but, as *Old San Francisco* suggests, were reflections of economic and public health concerns. Chinese presence—and in some cases absence—rapidly complicated the traditional black-white binary of the eastern United States and permanently altered notions of race and history in California. In *Old San Francisco*,

Chinatown becomes a site of spectacle, a “material manifestation of the alien within the modern American city, emphasizing Chinese difference from, deviance from, and danger to white society and the American nation” (Shah 1). Chinatown and the Chinese become not only the exotic other of the city, but also the primary source of anxiety that threatened the structures of whiteness—and all its privileges—in the city.

The spectacle of Chinatown and these conflicts are the crux of *Old San Francisco* and its arguments about the distinction between acceptable forms of ethnic mixing and unacceptable attempts at racial miscegenation. Chinatown is depicted with densely crowded streets of people in traditional dress and contained in this small community. In these scenes, Chinatown appears utterly foreign, jarring the viewer into an unsettling awareness of the presence of racial others in an “American” city. As Nayan Shah explains in his book *Contagious Divides*, “the creation of ‘knowledge’ of Chinatown relied upon three spatial elements: dens, density, and labyrinth” (18). All three of these spatial constructions promote an air of mystery around the construction of Chinatown as a space within a space: as a dark and forbidden place within the boundaries of the city. In the film, this notion is illustrated through the spatial division between Chinatown and the rest of the city and the voyeuristic journey into these forbidden spaces. *Old San Francisco* visualizes Chinatown as a *subterranean* space, one that can be accessed only through a descent into the underworld. As the shots of the film illustrate, it is the Barbary Coast that is *above* ground, while the dens of Chinatown are located *below* the surface of the initial locations of vice. The “dens, density, and labyrinth” produce both a sense of disorientation and a fear of being overcome and possessed by that space. Chinatown becomes imagined as a place of vice, capable of luring even the most moral citizens into

its dark dens. As part of this spatial construction, Shah emphasizes, “the Chinese were presumed to relish these ‘miserable’ circumstances of poverty, squalor, and filth” (27). The confluences of race and space in *Old San Francisco* substantiate a new vision of San Francisco after the earthquake through erasure. By altering the perception of Chinatown in the film, *Old San Francisco* suggests that if the spaces to which the Chinese are inclined and relegated are destroyed, then the Chinese themselves should disappear from the San Francisco landscape. Thus, in the film, the disorienting spaces of Chinatown—and the city as a whole—are mapped onto the Chinese population as markers of moral, social, and economic shortcomings.

By marking the Chinese as “other,” the film is able to exploit their difference to distinguish between *ethnic* and *racialized* mixing—between extending the boundaries of whiteness and the dangers of racial miscegenation. The screen narration informs the viewer, “The Chinese had long vexed San Francisco. To keep the Mongol within the limits of Chinatown—what graft and cruelty were invoked!” While this inter-title suggests a sense of sympathy, acknowledging the “graft and cruelty” that was committed against the Chinese, its sentimentalism is overshadowed by the deep sense of fear and anxiety that this moment also suggests. The tension alludes to larger historical and political concerns that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act. Passed in 1882, the act excluded Chinese people from immigration and citizenship. However, this rule possessed a large set of contradictions. While it labeled Chinese people as “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” the act still made immigration allowances for approved students, merchants, diplomats, and their families, creating clear divisions along class lines. The act also had larger social implications, including the rise of white vigilantism

against Chinese immigrants, the exclusion of Chinese workers from labor movements, and the 1902 amendment that extended immigration restrictions to other Asian groups. While these injustices were vividly present in California, *Old San Francisco* points to the prejudices that helped fuel the Chinese Exclusion Act and its consequences. In the film, the Chinese are imagined as vexing people, “Mongols” who need to be contained within the “limits of Chinatown.” *Old San Francisco* imagines the Chinese not as part of the city, but rather as a contaminant that must be dealt with, whose threat of spreading must be eliminated at all costs. Through representations such as these, Chinatown becomes an allegory for the overall moral, social, and economic “health of the city,” marking Chinese people themselves as agents of both disease and dis-ease in the city (Shah 34). Like the eugenic subtext of the rebuilding efforts, *Old San Francisco* is primarily concerned with imagining a post-1906 citizen for the city. Anything that does not fit this mold is quickly relegated to the underworld, to places like Chinatown.

In *Old San Francisco*, then, Buckwell can only be imagined as a villain. In his desire to rise to a high status in the city, he attempts to break the bondage of his heritage and thus becomes a threat to the image of whiteness that the film projects. He and his people must be contained. As a result of these constricting ideologies, Buckwell must pass as white in order to obtain a sense of agency. This notion of passing is not only important in considering the film’s characterization of Chinese identity, but also is significant in reading the film’s production as part of this narrative. Buckwell was played by actor Warner Oland, a Swedish immigrant who was often commissioned as a “yellow-face” villain. In 1931, Oland was cast as the infamous Charlie Chan and went on to star in the lucrative series of films for several years. He often insisted that he did not require

make-up for his portrayal of Asian others and cited a Russian grandmother with “Mongolian” descent as the source of his “exotic” features. Oland’s ability to “pass” as an actor reinforces the importance of passing for his representation of Buckwell in the film. For Oland’s Buckwell, visibility is a type of double bind. While he can be visually seen as white, he can also be visually unmasked and revealed as a racialized villain. In the cultural production of the silent film, the racial cross-dressing that Buckwell engages in becomes a way for the film to make a chilling commentary on race in San Francisco. In the absence of spoken dialect, the notion of passing becomes a way for the viewer to read the text. In *Old San Francisco*, Buckwell’s body is rendered as a silent signifier. But perhaps more important than this notion of body as text is the idea that ethnic drag “both expresses and disavows traumatic holes in the social fabric, and facilitates both historical denial and collective mourning. As a crossing of racial lines in performance, ethnic drag simultaneously erases and redraws boundaries” (Sieg 2). Buckwell’s attempt to pass for white in the film becomes a way to link the racialized body with mysteries of the city that cast doubt on identity and citizenry, fogging the distinction between who is part of the city and who must remain on the outskirts of it.

As this significance of the body suggests, Buckwell’s only hope for transcending his social position as a racialized body in the film is to abandon his heritage and community to forge a false identity—to “pass” for everything that he is not. In his landmark study *Blackface, White Noise*, Michael Rogin contemplates the importance of racial “cross-dressing” in *Old San Francisco* and *The Jazz Singer*. As a form of ethnic drag, Rogin’s conception of racial cross-dressing suggests a desire to pass that ultimately fails. Rogin explains, “[C]ross-dressing came to center stage not as gender play . . . but



as racial play in an epoch of racial inequality” (31). In the space of the city, this gender paradigm becomes applicable to racial passing as well. Race thus becomes a form of performance. But, as Rogin points out, this process is complicated: “These films make us wonder: Do cross-dressing immigrants buy freedom at the expense of their imprisonment of people of color? Or does that freedom itself look less like consent and more like the evasion of crimes, less like making a new self and more like endless disguise?” (128). Buckwell’s attempt to pass is a costumed drama, a performance, a play that ultimately fails. The consequences of this are far more serious than Rogin suggests, for they threaten to not only change racial dynamics but to completely mask them. His role-playing in the film and his ultimate demise suggest a history that implies that he *never could* play the role of a white citizen. His attempt to become—both figuratively and literally—a “white” citizen was doomed from the beginning. Buckwell’s passing, then, is constructed as a failed attempt to rewrite history.

This fundamental failure reveals a great deal about the racial politics of “old San Francisco.” In considering these dynamic racial conflicts in the period before the 1906 earthquake, *Old San Francisco* itself rewrites the history of the city by making a claim that race is a category that can be confined within segments of the city. In other words, with Buckwell’s failure, race—and all its social problems—is contained in the underworlds of Chinatown and the Barbary Coast. In the film, this is translated into a spatial mapping of race. The film limits the boundaries of Chinatown through Buckwell’s struggles for mobility in the city. While Buckwell appears white to the other characters in the film and the Chinese community that he exploits, this passing is contained in the public sphere of his existence as a businessman and the “Czar of the

Tenderloin.” However, in private (a space that the viewer is privileged to see) the inner racial and social conflicts that Buckwell embodies are fully revealed. Buckwell’s dual identity is contained in the secret chamber below his offices. The series of shots that compose the scene of Buckwell’s secret chamber begins with a close-up of Buckwell’s hand pressing a button on his fireplace mantel that opens a secret door in his study. This shot is not merely for sensationalized dramatic effect; rather, it suggests that the viewer is being taken into confidence. The camera then follows Buckwell as he descends a spiral staircase, twisting back and forth into the light of the frame. Buckwell’s secret chamber includes a temple-like shrine dedicated to traditional Chinese gods and his forbidden past. The first time Buckwell enters this chamber early on in the film, he immediately changes into “traditional” (in the constructed imagination of the film) Chinese dress, lights incense, and prays to the gods of his ancestors. After appearing white in the public sphere, Buckwell must “pass” back into his heritage through both clothing and religious rites. Buckwell’s chamber is the site wherein he changes in and out of various forms of racial drag. This in-between space is one that Buckwell must constantly negotiate in the film. This continual changing of drag produces a great sense of anxiety. As Buckwell prays before his shrine, he asks, “Oh, god of my ancestors—accept the sacrifices I offer for the sins I have committed against my own people.” Buckwell is fully aware of his “sins” of passing, yet he is also trapped in a world where there is no other alternative. He must be labeled as either a Chinese body that is marginalized or a “Czar” of erasure and exploitation. With this clear distinction, I want to suggest that Buckwell has limited choices both before *and* after the destruction of 1906. This visual limitation points to a dark fate for post-1906 Chinatown and racialized subjects of the city. While the rest of

the city gets a clean slate, a promise of a new beginning, Buckwell and the Chinese population he represents are always imagined as fundamentally incompatible with the urban landscape of San Francisco.

But Buckwell's passing is unsuccessful in the end. Because of Buckwell's incompatibility with the pre- and post-quake city, he is constantly viewed as a threat to whiteness in the film. This threat is visualized not through unmasking him, but through the whitening of Dolores. As part of the disaster romance narrative of the film, Dolores's sexual agency is charged with not only claims to her own whiteness, but is also able to dispel the myth of Buckwell's whiteness. In her own process of becoming white, Dolores is able to uncover the mysteries of Buckwell's identity through a dreamlike sequence in a prophetic moment in the film that reveals the truth of his Chinese identity. In these images of Dolores's agency, the viewer is quick to realize that Buckwell's passing is no match for the silent signifiers and visual power that the film constructs. In one of the more ominous scenes in the film, Dolores stares into the camera as her image fades into an inter-title that reveals the premonition, "blood will tell." It is Dolores who both uncovers Buckwell's evil scheme and transcends historical racial barriers. After Buckwell's attempted rape of Dolores causes her grandfather's death, she uncovers the truth about Buckwell's hidden racial identity. Dressed in white, with her long dark hair flowing around her, Dolores is visualized in this scene through a series of close-up shots that focus the light on her face, the director going so far as to place a candle near her face throughout the scene. In contrast, Buckwell's face is hidden in shadows, darkened by the lack of light. As Dolores stares at Buckwell, ghostly images of her ancestors float across the background of the scene, emphasizing both her racial heritage by marking her as

white *and* calling attention to Buckwell's racial heritage by marking him as "other." The camera focuses on her face, bathed in light, in a moment when the truth of Buckwell's identity is revealed. In contrast, Buckwell shrinks from the light of the camera, covering his face and masking his features by shrouding his cape over his body. In this scene Dolores herself gains true access to whiteness through her desire to see Buckwell destroyed and to preserve the properties of whiteness that he has tried to appropriate. She is able to not only assert her rich Spanish heritage, but also to assert a claim to American identity. It is in this moment "in the awful light of an outraged, wrathful, Christian God" that "the heathen soul of the Mongol stood revealed." As Dolores gazes at Buckwell, the viewer sees the truth of his "Mongolian" identity revealed through her white, Christian eyes. Any doubt about Dolores's heritage is in this moment erased. The threat of her blood being tainted with Mexican or Mestizo blood is gone. Instead, her power to see Buckwell's racialized body clearly highlights her Spanish, European heritage and emphasizes her California identity as an American. As a "whitened" body, Dolores has the power to see what cannot be seen and is able to uncover Buckwell's passing. Buckwell attempts to preserve his secret, but in the end "he knew the eyes of Dolores had penetrated his disguise and guessed his secret." In this moment it becomes blatantly clear that "good" will triumph over "evil"—that whiteness will be the future of the doomed city.

The racial and historical tensions that are imagined through the narrative of Terry, Dolores, and Buckwell are culturally and spatially resolved by the end of the film through images of the infamous 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires. It is unclear whether Crosland used stock footage, models, or a combination of both to represent the

destruction of San Francisco. Regardless, by visualizing the physical destruction of the city, *Old San Francisco* can claim that the problems of the city are effectively destroyed and, more importantly, buried. This argument suggests that, like a mythical phoenix, San Francisco could be born again, could start over after the erasure of the “mile of hell,” Buckwell, and the other undesirables who plagued the city. This quickly translates into a narrative of progress for the city. As the earthquake occurs, the film moves between shots of the collapsing city and images of the characters attempting to escape the destruction around them. At the center of this destruction is Chinatown. The “disaster shots” of the film illustrate debris falling *inward*, falling onto the subterranean dens of Chinatown. The underworld of Chinatown is thus imagined as caving in on itself. As the camera moves from shots of the city skyline falling into rubble and the fires raging across the city, the dens of Chinatown, and the streets of the Barbary Coast, the film visually separates the two areas of the city. This separation is confirmed with the death of Buckwell. At the end of the destruction sequence, the image of Buckwell’s lifeless body fades into an image of the new urban landscape post-1906.

### **Looking Forward and Backward: Conclusions**

As *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* illustrate, the 1906 moment created a sense of chaos that was not only linked to the falling structures of the city, but to the falling ideologies of race and space, as well. As Sara Dean claimed in *Travers*, the 1906 earthquakes and fires turned the world of San Francisco “topsy-turvy,” shaking the class, ethnic, and racial categories of the city to their very core. In considering the impact of these texts, I want to take a closer look at the resolution of *Old San Francisco*. While

the visual representation of the city crumbling to the ground at the end of the film is stunning, the implications of this scene are even more significant. What is perhaps most interesting about this scene is its contrast with the actual history of disaster in San Francisco. While the film concentrates on the destruction of the city in Chinatown and the Barbary Coast, it was these locations that showed some of the strongest resilience. In reality, “The fact was that Chinatown in San Francisco demonstrated extraordinary durability . . . [D]espite predictions of plague and fire, it yielded to neither one nor the other until finally razed by the earthquake of 1906—which ‘abated’ most of the rest of the city as well” (Saxton 150). What the film fails to recognize is that, while Chinatown crumbled to the ground, it quickly worked to rebuild itself just as the rest of the city did. This was no easy task. Many of the city’s officials and influential citizens called for Chinatown to be removed to an area outside the central business district of the city. Proposals to relocate the Chinese community to areas of the city like Hunter’s Point and Potrero Hill met resistance from Chinatown leaders and business leagues and human rights interests groups in the city, and they were ultimately defeated. In the end, Chinatown was rebuilt on almost identical lines as its pre-1906 predecessor. However, with *Old San Francisco*’s visualization of the 1906 earthquake, the history of survival that Chinatown had experienced was effectively erased, leaving nothing but a pile of ruins to mark the space that had for so long been a source of conflict in the city. As the film visualizes the earthquake and fires, viewers see Chinatown crumble before their eyes, as the “hill of hell” sinks into nothingness. The significance of this scene is that it visualizes the notions that the “earthquake and fire destroy Chinatown, the modern Sodom and Gomorrah . . . Although this Christian meaning is not intended by the film,

the redemptive sacrifice of Chinatown gives birth to the American family” (Rogin 136). The quake and fires, then, pave the way for a new San Francisco—and a new type of San Franciscan—to be literally born out of the destruction. But like so many fleeting images in *Old San Francisco*, this one too is a mere illusion. Today Chinatown has bled into Union Square and North Beach and has become a major center for San Francisco’s thriving tourist industry. With this sense of continuing visibility, Chinatown is more present than ever.

This ending can be read as a synecdoche for the argumentative purpose of these texts and their continuing legacy. While the works in this chapter appeared between 1907 and 1927, the tradition of using the mystery genre to deconstruct the immense cultural impact of the 1906 earthquake remains a San Francisco literary tradition. A contemporary example of these themes is Fe Myenne Ng’s 1993 novel, *Bone*. A portrait of a Chinese-American family coping with loss in San Francisco’s Chinatown, the novel attempts to reconcile ethnic urban fragmentations of history and memory. As the family attempts to mourn and grapple with the suicide of the middle daughter, Ona, each member must confront the realities of Chinese identity in an American landscape. Through stories of failed business ventures, illicit affairs, fractured familial relationships, and personal feelings of guilt and loss, the characters in *Bone* illustrate the complexities of racial and ethnic identity formation in Chinatown, San Francisco, and the American West. Like the 1906 narratives that are discussed in this chapter, *Bone* vividly engages with questions of racial identity in a continually shifting urban landscape. As “a failed family” (3) the characters in *Bone* slowly realize that “[f]amily exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history” (36). The story

and history that Ng deconstructs in her novel point to larger concerns about identity in San Francisco. At the heart of all these narratives is the question of who does and does not belong in the city—who survives the destruction and who will dictate a new future.



*Chapter 3: Finding the “Falcon”: Hammett and Hard-Boiled San Francisco*



*John's Grill. Andrea Dominguez, 2009.*

**Introduction: Meet Me at John's**

*He went to John's Grill, asked the waiter to hurry his order of chops, baked potato, and sliced tomatoes, ate hurriedly . . . – Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon**

Inside John's Grill small wooden tables reflect dim light behind the windows facing Ellis Street in what is now the fringe of Union Square. The wooden walls are covered with a flood of images: famous patrons, old maps tracing the growth of the city, a photographic timeline of the restaurant's history, and images of the destruction of the

1906 earthquake and fires. In the years since the restaurant opened following the 1906 Great Quake and fires, the site has become a space that expresses a sense of collective memory about the city. The images contained within its walls keep time for the city, illustrating moments that have helped shape and define the cultural abstraction that we identify as “San Francisco.” In memorializing select events, key players, and dramatic triumphs, John’s Grill *produces* memories for the city that privilege moments and that construct time. As a result, John’s Grill is not just in the business of food, but also in the business of history. Through its images and its overt sense of nostalgia, John’s markets history by considering popular myths of San Francisco space, including the 1906 earthquake and the narrative of *The Maltese Falcon*, and quietly capitalizes on it by transforming it into a fetishized object, a beautiful and illusive myth. It’s ironic that John’s accomplishes this with such fluidity considering that Dashiell Hammett was able to achieve such a similar effect with his mention of the San Francisco eatery in *The Maltese Falcon*. With one sentence, Hammett solidified John’s Grill in San Francisco as a cultural landmark.

This landmark is primarily concerned with identifying and preserving the properties of Hammett’s “American man.” In *The Maltese Falcon*, the hard-boiled hero, detective Sam Spade, is a regular guy who enjoys “chops” and potatoes in the small and stately restaurant in the heart of the city’s business district. At John’s Grill, Spade displays some of his most endearing features as a solitary man. Through his wanderings, his solitary meals, and his brooding walks down foggy streets, Spade is the iconic representation of the urban American man that is predicated on an alienated bachelorhood that allows him to survive on the “mean streets” of an urban landscape. In this way,

Spade captures and projects visions of masculinity that are central to the hard-boiled tradition. In *Hard-Boiled Masculinity*, Christopher Breu suggests, “The figure of the hard-boiled male represented a different imaginary solution to the contradiction between the cultural fantasy of masculine autonomy and the emergence of mass and corporate culture. Rather than invoking mythic fantasies of a bygone era, he represented an adaptation of this cultural fantasy, through the figure of the lone detective or urbanite, to the rationalized . . . landscape of the modern city” (60). As Breu explains, Spade and other hard-boiled characters like him created a modern version of American masculinity.<sup>47</sup> In Hammett’s work, this projection of masculinity is one that is primarily concerned with the tensions between domestic and foreign. By constructing Spade as a white, American, and local male, Hammett offers a stark contrast to the threats of dark, foreign, and feminized otherness that stand in opposition to his protagonist in the novel. It is through a process of negation, of glossing over the complex history that landmarks like John’s Grill engage with, that Hammett crafts his version of the American Man. In *The Maltese Falcon*, then, Spade as the symbolic American male can only be measured by what he is not.

Just as the genealogy of Hammett’s Spade is a complex web of negation, the legacy and lore surrounding John’s Grill is no simple tale. Rather, it is a legacy of a

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<sup>47</sup> Hammett himself was forced to confront these tensions during his time as a Pinkerton detective and later as a writer. Despite Sam Spade’s popularity, it is impossible to forget that he is a creation, a construction of Hammett. Hammett himself spent many days and nights at John’s Grill, enjoying the simple American cuisine as he pondered the plots of his narratives and the complexities of his characters. One San Francisco *Chronicle* writer explains, “Almost since the time Dashiell Hammett ate his first pork chop at John’s Grill, the legacy of the fearless gumshoe has become as entrenched in San Francisco as July fog” (Whiting CM4).

place that is riddled with drama, misconception, speculation, and some semblance of truth. One of the more powerful Hammett myths claims that the author wrote the famed novel while sitting at a table at John's. Don Herron, president of the Dashiell Hammett Society and contributor to the Bancroft Library's San Francisco Mystery collection, claims that, while Hammett was a regular patron of the establishment, he actually wrote *The Maltese Falcon* at his residence at 891 Post Street, several blocks away from the famed eatery.<sup>48</sup> In fact, for all its inferred significance, the eatery only makes one cameo appearance on the pages of *The Maltese Falcon*. Hammett writes: "He [Sam Spade] went to John's Grill, asked the waiter to hurry his order of chops, baked potato, and sliced tomatoes, ate hurriedly, and was smoking a cigarette with his coffee when a thick-set youngish man with a plaid cap set askew above pale eyes and a tough cherry face came into the Grill and to his table" (Hammett 165). Over the course of the novel, Spade also dines at Herbert's Grill on Powell Street, States Hof Brau, and twice at the Palace Hotel.<sup>49</sup> With this variation, why has John's Grill become the iconic location that is signaled out? The restaurant isn't even featured in the 1941 film version that put San Francisco on the map as a city of noir. Still, the legacy remains.

The answer to this question of John's iconic legacy lies not in the novel *The Maltese Falcon*, but rather in the rich history of John's Grill as a cultural icon in the city. Besides providing an urban landmark for Hammett's novel, John's Grill has been a backdrop for some of the most important moments in the city's history. Established in 1908, it is one of the oldest restaurants in the city, bearing witness to over a century of

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<sup>48</sup> See Sam Whiting, "Touring Hammett's Old Haunts." *The San Francisco Chronicle* 6 Feb. 2005: CM4.

<sup>49</sup> The Palace Hotel is also discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

San Francisco's history.<sup>50</sup> Now owned by local restaurateur John Konstin, John's Grill continues to pride itself on its unique and lengthy past and classic American cuisine. The interior of the restaurant seems to record and visualize the city's past, vividly displaying images of the city's early days juxtaposed by the opposite wall, which features smiling faces of politicians, actors, and world leaders who have graced the restaurant with their presence over the years. At the center of this historical remembrance are the 1906 earthquake and fires. Established only two years after the devastation of the earthquake, John's Grill was at the center of a city rebuilding itself. Like the Ferry Building described in Chapter 2, John's Grill has served as a sign of the city's enduring ability to rebuild and reinvent itself. The walls of John's prominently feature dramatic photographs of the devastation that the quake and fires created and images of the city rebuilding as it returned to a status of prominence in the American West. Through this display of images, it becomes starkly clear that John's is a place that is primarily concerned with memory. As an example of this, John's Grill has served as the luncheon place for the city's annual anniversary observance of the devastating 1906 earthquake and fires for many years. Thus, the establishment of John's Grill was not just about creating a future in the post-1906 landscape of the city, but also about preserving a collective sense of the past.

As the relationship between John's Grill and Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* suggests, this imagined past is one that is primarily concerned with the role of masculinity in the American city. But this transcends the idea of "the solitary man" in

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<sup>50</sup> The title of oldest restaurant in the city actually goes to The Tadich Grill. While currently located at 240 California Street, Tadich was established in 1849 and has operated at 7 different locations in the city during its reign.

complex ways. In the novel, and in the memory of it that John's projects, American masculinity is reflective of the tension between the domestic and the foreign, the ideal and the marked. Just as John's Grill is still a popular place to spend a Saturday night and Hammett's novel is still a popular text, the ideologies that lie at the heart of *The Maltese Falcon* continue to shape the cultural landscape of San Francisco. The most significant of these powerful cultural ghosts is the relationship between American masculinity and citizenship. By fostering tension between what types of histories are remembered and what kind of man is crafted as a hero in the American imaginary, Hammett's novel and the cultural memories that it inspires in places like John's Grill help preserve racially charged tensions between American identity and otherness that are ingrained in the pages of *The Maltese Falcon*.

### ***Curse in California: Continental Ops and the Lineage of Space***

Like the walls of John's Grill, Dashiell Hammett's work is also concerned with lineage and legacy, with history and its complex relationship to narrative. While *The Maltese Falcon* is by far Hammett's best-known work and the major focus of this chapter, his earlier work establishes an important link between post-World War I literary production and the problems of blood, lineage, and history that are the hallmarks of racial constructions in San Francisco. His Continental Op stories that are set in California introduce us to unsettling anxieties about the boundaries of race and gender, of American and "other" that *The Maltese Falcon* so vividly explores. As San Francisco (and other cities like it that Hammett wrote about) attempted to cope with the global trauma of World War I, the real and imagined multi-layered histories of the city became more and

more complex. The social mixing and anxiety that 1906 narratives, like those discussed in Chapter 2, attempted to reconcile are complicated by the man-made destruction of the war that would create a vastly different landscape in the city, California, and the nation. For example, in *The Dain Curse* Dashiell Hammett considers this complexity of San Francisco urban space by looking not at the *local* destruction of 1906, but rather attempting to grapple with the global fragmentations resulting from the long relationship between San Francisco and the “Old World” hauntings of Europe. Published in 1929,<sup>51</sup> *The Dain Curse* was Hammett’s second published novel and began to establish him as a major hard-boiled and urban American novelist. In the novel, the problems of blood and memory are not a second chance but a damning curse that characters and settings must “recover” from in order to survive in a post-war urban landscape. The novel traces Old World crimes that are genetically “passed on” to American families. Crime, like blood, becomes a genetic phenomenon. In *The Dain Curse*, then, blood is a trait that cannot be erased, denied, or negated. Blood is thus a “curse,” a permanent mark that stains not only the individual but the city and the nation.

*The Dain Curse* is not a simple hard-boiled mystery novel, but rather a narrative that is about the importance and purity of blood, the problem of tainted lineage and fragmented history. The novel uncovers the dark familial past of Gabrielle Leggett, a young San Francisco woman who spends her time experimenting with illicit drugs and visiting religious cults in the city. A diamond theft quickly becomes a tale of family

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<sup>51</sup> *The Dain Curse* originally appeared in *Black Mask* in four parts: “Black Lives” (November 1928), “The Hollow Temple” (December 1928), “Black Honeymoon” (January 1929), and “Black Riddle” (February 1929). Hammett sent the finished manuscript for *The Dain Curse* to Knopf on June 25, 1928. Knopf published the novel on July 19, 1929.

secrets, incestuous murder, and dark pasts. After the suicide of her father, Gabrielle retreats to the Temple of the Holy Grail, a cult in San Francisco. Once there, the founder of the cult also mysteriously dies. As Gabrielle watches the men in her life die around her, she loses all hope for any security and love as she drives deeper into the underworld of the urban landscape that she inhabits. As Gabrielle attempts to cope with the trauma around her, Hammett's *Continental Op* learns that the Dain Curse can be traced to Gabrielle's birth mother and sister, Alice and Lily Dain. In a family of jealousy and lies, Gabrielle was tricked into killing her mother when she was just a young child. Living a lie for the majority of her life, Gabrielle is "cursed" and haunted by her family heritage and hidden past. At its core, then, *The Dain Curse* is about "a primitive strain of blood" (61).

With the mystery of the "Dain Curse," Hammett is making an important argument about the haunting of blood, suggesting that the "nature" of "otherness" can never be fully erased or abandoned.<sup>52</sup> The cultural memory of crime is one that can never be escaped because it is rooted deep in the blood. The "primitive blood" that lies at the heart of the novel is also a commentary on the social and physical landscape that Gabrielle and the other characters reflect—1920s San Francisco. The increase of European immigration, the trauma of the war, and the continual (re)generation of multi-layered histories all create a space that is ripe for familial mysteries to come in and out of the

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<sup>52</sup> It is worth noting that Hammett is certainly not the only American male writer to engage with anxieties over blood and racial and social constructions of otherness. Earlier authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville have all struggled with attempts to befriend American manhood and emergent American identity constructions through a mobilization of blood and physicality in their work. Hammett's work continues to express concerns over these types of anxiety.



city's shadows. As Elliott Barkan explains in *From All Points*, "between 1900 and 1920, the white foreign stock (immigrant and second generation) came close to doubling in the west . . . [T]he foreign stock remained at roughly 32 to 33 percent of the west's entire population during these decades. In other words, nearly one-third of the builders of the west at that time were the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves" (111). As a center of the American West, San Francisco sat at the crux of this influx in immigration and the coming of age of first- and second-generation residents. This influx of immigrants further complicated conceptions of whiteness in California and San Francisco. In achieving whiteness, immigrants could possess a viable cultural commodity that would open opportunities for them. Yet the anxieties about this "opening" up of the city cannot be ignored. Texts like *The Dain Curse* thus give voice to these troubling sentiments, and suggest that blood and blood purity are always in question, that racial categories are classification are always in flux. By designing Gabrielle as the product of European parents, Hammett marks her as a figure who is haunted by these concerns.

Like the city that she inhabits, Gabrielle is a point of collision for these social issues that the novel investigates; it is in her that these problems of blood and history are revealed. As a descendent of a family plagued by European crimes and social problems, Gabrielle is both culturally and racially marked, placed outside the boundaries of American whiteness. This classification is based on the "cursed blood" that runs through her veins and serves as the source of conflict for the violent events of the novel. In a moment of rage, Mrs. Leggett (the sister of Gabrielle's slain mother) tells Gabrielle, "[Y]ou're cursed with the same black soul and rotten blood that she and I and all the

Dains have had; and you're cursed with your mother's blood on your hands in babyhood; and with the twisted mind and the need for drugs that are my gifts to you; and your life will be black as your mother's and mine were black" (58). Gabrielle's "twisted mind" and "need for drugs" are not the problem; rather, the problem is the very "rotten blood" that runs through her veins and has been passed down from her dysfunctional family. Mrs. Leggett makes it clear that the problem of blood has plagued all the Dains because it is a "curse" that can be passed down from generation to generation like any physical trait. Blood thus marks the body and the soul just as it marks the city and the landscape. Like the anxieties that "blood problems" cause for urban inhabitants during this period, so do they plague familial histories, bodies, and tortured souls. Problems of blood are thus imagined as a private *and* public issue, seeping into all aspects of urban life. Like the multi-layered histories of San Francisco, the Dain Curse, then, is also about hauntings, ghosts, and apparitions that, while never fully present, never fully disappear. In *The Dain Curse* ghosts are the apparitions of blood that surround the city and the boundaries of urban citizenship.

These ghosts and hauntings that characterize the plot of *The Dain Curse* are enscrbed in the bodies of the characters. The Dain Curse is not a simple matter of dark familial history; rather, it is a physical stigma that is mapped onto Gabrielle's very body, serving as the cornerstone of her physical identity. Like the uncertainties surrounding Gwendolyn Thorton in *Travers* and Helene Ruyler in *The Avalanche*, Gabrielle's physical appearance is a central source of anxiety in the text. In this case, rather than her "bad blood" marking her as potentially non-white, it marks her as a dangerous combination of childlike innocence and a threatening man-eater. Gabrielle is initially

described as “a girl of twenty or less . . . Of medium height, she looked more slender than she actually was. She had hair as curly as her father’s, and no longer, but of a much lighter brown. She had a pointed chin and extremely white, smooth skin, and of her features only the green-brown eyes were large: forehead, mouth, and teeth were remarkably small” (8). Gabrielle’s delicate and elf-like features create an image of childlike innocence, a far cry from the morphine-addicted, cursed killer that she is imagined as in the novel. But first appearances are deceiving. Like the city of San Francisco itself, Gabrielle bears the mark of her complicated past. As Leonard Cassuto suggests in *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality*, Gabrielle is “the hard-boiled version of the homeless orphaned child in distress” (12). Yet, despite the chilling realization in the novel that her parents are never coming back because they can never be resurrected from the dead, the blood that she inherited from them can simply not be denied or changed. Like Helene in *The Avalanche* and Buckwell in *Old San Francisco*, Gabrielle’s very being is tied to the history of which she is a part and from which she cannot escape.

According to Hammett, Gabrielle is “simple as an animal, with an animal’s simple ignorance of right and wrong, dislike for being thwarted, and spitefulness when trapped” (61). Her blood threatens to shed her very claim to humanity because it has reduced her to an animal-like, sub-human creature. The “simple ignorance of right and wrong” is part of the curse that runs through Gabrielle’s veins. Like an animal, she cannot fight her nature, the attributes that come with her lineage and bloodline. With this animalization of Gabrielle, Hammett calls on tropes of naturalism, featuring a Darwinian-like struggle. She can only survive if she can be “cured” of her tainted blood. The main problem of the novel then becomes Gabrielle’s process of fighting her nature and denying

her blood. This process is mirrored by Gabrielle's drug addiction and struggle to kick her nasty habit in the novel. Yet she cannot overcome her addiction on her own; rather, she requires the assistance of the Op for any chance at becoming "clean." The Op becomes the hero of the narrative when he is able to cure her not only of her addiction, but of the plagues of her past, as well.

The tale, then, is not about murder or family secrets, but rather about "recovery"—about the possibility of rehabilitating the bad blood that lies at the center of *The Dain Curse*. In San Francisco, then, history *is* identity. The history—the pattern of blood—that runs through the veins of the characters determines their character, their design, and their essence. History haunts their very being, transforming them into ghost-like images of the pasts that they represent. The only way that Gabrielle can recover her identity and survive in the modern city is to "recover" from her condition of bad blood. Gabrielle's drug addiction recovery serves as a twisted allegory for the recovery process that she must engage in to combat the problems of her heritage. Doctor Riese, who treats her recovery, explains to the Continental Op, "her recovery is, as I see it, the thing which we should be most concerned, and nothing else should be allowed to interfere with that" (68). The novel is about Gabrielle's process of recovery, of battling the inner demons of her blood that are manifested in her drug addiction. It is only through a cycle of "recovery" that she will be able to function in the post-war landscape of the city; it is only through remembering and coming to terms with her past that she will be able to have a future. But her recovery is complicated by the novel's obsession with memory. How does one recover from hauntings? How does one not forget ghosts? *The Dain Curse* suggests that memories of ghosts and their hauntings never truly fade. As Mrs. Leggett

recalls the murder that Gabrielle committed as a child, she explains, “Gabrielle was always, even before she became addicted to drugs, a child of, one might say, limited mentality . . . [W]e had succeeded in quite emptying her mind of the last trace of memory, that is, of this particular memory” (56). The real crime of the Dain Curse was not the murder but the attempt to erase the properties of memory for the family. However, what *The Dain Curse* illustrates perhaps more than anything is that the blood and history cannot be erased. Rather, *The Dain Curse* suggests that the shadows of the past that run through the body of the characters—and thus the city itself—are always present, always lurking in the dark, always haunting.

The problem of memory that *The Dain Curse* reveals through the tale of Gabrielle and her cursed family serves as an intriguing precursor for Hammett’s 1930 publication of *The Maltese Falcon*. While *The Dain Curse* investigates the “cursed” heritage of a single family as the attempt to forge a new life in San Francisco, *The Maltese Falcon* grapples with the “cursed” and disorienting global landscape that has been produced by the physical and sociological destruction of World War I. *The Dain Curse* is about the possibilities of starting over in a new place while *The Maltese Falcon* must confront the reality of a new and dysfunctional global community. In *The Maltese Falcon* there is no simple method of “recovery,” no escape from the ghosts of the past.

### **Urban Noir: Hammett and Hard-Boiled San Francisco**

*The Dain Curse* exemplifies the American hard-boiled narrative tradition at its best. In the novel, Hammett artfully merges the sentiments of the tough private eye and the mystery of a family curse while recalling foundational tropes of the American gothic

tradition. These stylistic and narrative attributes combined to create a “hard-boiled” text that reflects a deep-rooted preoccupation with memory and the past. This idea is further manifested through the stylistic movement of film noir.<sup>53</sup> My discussion of *The Maltese Falcon* depends on this detailed relationship between the hard-boiled literary tradition and the stylistics of American film noir. While the goal of this chapter is not to perform an exhaustive investigation of the stylistics and histories of the hard-boiled tradition or film noir, providing a context for these works is essential to uncovering arguments about the relationship between American masculinity and racial othering in these narrative traditions and the racially driven national anxieties that they conjure. Thus, while noir is a retroactive term, one that has been the subject of much debate, my aim is to establish a relationship between the hard-boiled tradition and noir stylistics and themes in order to highlight and complicate the similarities and differences between the novel and filmic version of *The Maltese Falcon*. *The Maltese Falcon* offers a critical case study for considering these narrative forms because it transcends the boundaries of these individual categories—hard-boiled and noir—to create a fluid transition between styles and forms.

Published in 1929, Hammett’s novel introduces Americans (and working-class men in particular) to themselves: in Sam Spade they find the idealization of American masculine identity. He in many ways is the definitive American detective—radically reimagining the stuffy heroes of British detective novels and the upper-class heroes of

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<sup>53</sup> Film noir is a classification retroactively given by French film critics to American hard-boiled-inspired films released approximately from 1941 to 1958. Since the formal recognition of film noir, many critics have debated whether noir is a genre or a style. For the purposes of this chapter, I work from the critical assumption that film noir and hard-boiled narrative structure are styles that are part of—and transform—the genre of mystery in American cultural production.

more traditional American literature. Like their dime novel predecessors, hard-boiled narratives offered working-class stories for an emerging working-class readership. Sold and marketed through “pulp”—cheap magazines created for mass consumption—hard-boiled narratives became highly accessible, and commercially successful, forms of American cultural production during the inter-war and post-war periods. But, perhaps more importantly, Hammett’s narrative relies on the gritty realism of the American city, on the dramatic lights and shadows that plagued the urban streets of the country.

Likewise, film noir (despite its French name and the legacy of French criticism that stands behind it) is dependent on American experience, landscapes, and urban structures. Many critics cite the 1941 release of John Huston’s version of *The Maltese Falcon* as the beginning of the American film noir movement.<sup>54</sup> Like its novel predecessor, the film considers the problems and conflicts of American masculinity against the backdrop of the American city. Huston artfully translates the definitive traits of American space that Hammett hints at by visualizing them on the silver screen. Together, these works facilitate a link between the hard-boiled tradition and film noir that, despite encompassing multiple forms and using at times drastically different narrative techniques, achieve a common goal: creating an American space for the ideal American citizen.

In order to unpack this complex system of representations, it is imperative to situate Hammett’s narrative of *The Maltese Falcon* as an anticipation of what would eventually be called *noir*. *The Maltese Falcon* film offers a rich visualization of some of

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<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that, in considering the period of American film noir, the majority of critics close the movement with the 1958 release of Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil*.

the key—and most common—tropes that this style of film has to offer. More importantly, noir attempts to reconcile the dark contextual moments that its conception reflects. Some of the major contexts of the film noir tradition include World War I, World War II, the Red Scare of the 1920s and 1930s, fanaticism, racism (signaled in films like *The Birth of a Nation* from 1915), contemporary Ku Klux Klan activity, anti-Semitism, the rise of Hitler in Europe, and, of course, the hard-boiled tradition. These contexts anticipate the stylistic features of noir. These contexts and the narratives that they dictate are cornerstones not only of American film noir, but also of narratives that link the space of the American city—in this case San Francisco—to the space of American masculinity through a process of negation. By revealing the dark anxieties about national identity within the suffocating confines of the American city,<sup>55</sup> film noir is able to construct the vision of an American hero (who it seems is necessarily male) by visualizing everything that he is *not*. The purpose of film noir is thus not to construct a hero as much as it is to identify the villain. A sense of American space and American identity is thus visualized by the systematic othering of all that is foreign, female, and deadly.

Because of this complex process of visualization and negation, film noir offers a rich background for critical assessment. Through the deconstruction of film noir, we can reveal the anxieties at the root of what I characterize as representations of negation. By adapting our critical focus, noir provides a cultural critique of historical crises that

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<sup>55</sup> In the case of *The Maltese Falcon*, the setting of San Francisco becomes particularly important because, geographically, San Francisco is a small, confined space. There is thus an inherent restriction of movement and mobility built into the landscape of the setting and its narrative.



necessarily question and problematize the very boundaries of American identity as related through mass-produced and consumed cultural productions. As Alain Silver explains in his introduction to the *Film Noir Reader*, noir is well suited as a subject for multiple forms of critical discourse. In outlining the various ways that noir films can be read by film and literary scholars, he suggests that alienated characters can be deconstructed through existentialism, obsessed characters beg a Freudian reading, proletarian characters can be read through the lens of Marxism, femme fatales offer a case study for the scrutiny of feminism, and so on. While these methods of investigation are all important, the complexities of film noir demand a reading that not only borrows from multiple critical traditions, but also challenges us to consider new avenues of analysis, to further complicate the stark, black-and-white images with which we are confronted. It is with this problem of analysis in mind that I approach my own reading of Hammett's and Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. I read noir not only through a lens of gender and/or race, but also through a lens of urbanism. Reading noir through the lens of urbanism is critical to uncovering the complexities of the larger discourses concerning national anxieties, citizenship, blood politics, and race that noir suggests.

This intervention is critical to a (re)reading of *The Maltese Falcon*. Hammett's world is male, urban, and, above all, "American." But in order to give his characters credibility, Hammett must rely on creating a setting that is not only convincing, but that also makes a claim that invests itself in the "authenticity" of the space of the city. In this way, we can read noir narratives as attempted projections of "real" city life. While this may seem chilling when one is confronted with the common noir tropes of murder, theft, and femme fatales, the vices of the city provide a dramatic outlet for the revelation of

anxieties about American identity that lie at the heart of film noir stylistics. The American city lies at the center of this. In *Street with No Name*, Andrew Dickos explains, “the city landscape envisioned as a requisite setting for the film noir symbolizes the conflict of all cities in their collection of different groups of people with competing influences and interests” (62). By setting narratives in a space wherein cultural collisions are inevitable, noir challenges the viewer not only to bear witness to these collisions, but to try to reconcile them, as well. The “competing influences and interests” that Dickos alludes to are the characteristics that create the conditions for systematic “othering” in film noir. This representation of the city is carefully crafted through a number of production means. Some of the features of film noir that highlight the setting of the cityscape include: low-key lighting, imbalanced light, night shots, deep focus, wide-angle focal length, dissymmetrical mise-en-scène, extreme low and high angles, and foregrounded obstructions. These stylistic methods create a projection of the city that highlights the realism of narratives like *The Maltese Falcon* and countless others. As Nicholas Christopher suggests in *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, “For a human being, the city is a cinematographic experience even before it is put on film” (45).

As part of this “cinematographic experience,” the city in *The Maltese Falcon* both isolates and brings together the characters in the narrative. This tension reflects the unstable and constantly fluctuating context of a port city that is part of a larger western, mercantile world. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade is the archetypal solitary man, alone in his search for justice, immune to the humanistic needs of companionship. He is an alienated bachelor, comfortable only on the “mean streets” that he wanders. In reality,

there is nothing solitary about the ideological constructs behind these types of narratives. The hard-boiled and film noir movements detailed the *collective* struggle of national recovery. These narratives, then, do not imagine a solitary man alone, but rather consider the collisions of culture and history that occur within the landscape of the city. The film noir productions of this period unmask the vulnerability behind a population that was supposedly “made wise from collective suffering” (Dickos 63). These *collective* commentaries that hard-boiled and film noir narratives construct present a chilling counter-narrative to the conception of the “American Dream.” By challenging the self-determination of the solitary man and privileging contexts of the collective, hard-boiled and film noir narratives transform the ideologies of the American Dream. In *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, J. P. Telotte suggest that “The film noir seems fundamentally about violations: vice, corruption, unrestrained desire, and, most fundamental of all, abrogation of the American dream’s most basic promises—of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution” (2). Telotte suggests that noir is a style of violation and that vice is central to unpacking narratives like *The Maltese Falcon*. He posits that the American Dream is a conception that rests on more than a positive optimism that obscures the critical and gritty realism that lies at the heart of the hard-boiled and noir movements. What makes the American Dream such a powerful ideological construction is its ability to provoke anxiety, to create a fear of vice and of violation. As a result, the “hope, prosperity, and safety” that the American Dream is supposed to encompass are all imagined, much like the American male, through a process of negation, through a fear of everything that they should not be. Thus, noir does not destroy the American Dream, but rather gives us a chillingly haunted version of that

foundational myth. Rather than negating national mythology, noir transforms it, visualizing the dark side of the American Dream. As Jon Tuska suggests in *Dark Cinema*, “What film noir was, what was so revolutionary about it, was its inherent reaction to decades of forced optimism” (152). Noir becomes not only a reaction, but also a *reinterpretation* of everything that we think is “American” and everything that we think it is not.

### **Global Mysteries and Local Designs<sup>56</sup>: Finding the *Falcon* in Post-War San Francisco**

*Where Bush Street roofed Stockton before slipping downhill to Chinatown, Spade paid his fare and left the taxicab. San Francisco’s night-fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant, blurred the street.* –Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

This image from Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* displays the complex tension between the city and its stories—between image and illusion—that lies at the heart of the novel and John Huston’s stunning film adaptation. The image of Bush and Stockton “slipping” into the depths of Chinatown vividly illustrates the fluidity and movement of space in San Francisco. This moment in the novel prompts us to question the very neighborhood barriers that it establishes, to challenge the very patterns of the landscape. Hammett’s characterization of the San Francisco streets constructs an entire world for the reader, one that is full of mystery. The “night-fog” that is as iconic as the city itself acts as a thick veil that “blur[s]” everything lingering under its misty surface. This is Sam Spade’s world. As he works to unravel the mystery of his partner’s death

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<sup>56</sup> I borrow this title from Walter Mignolo’s *Local Histories, Global Designs*, which discusses the the role of Immanuel Wallerstein’s “Global World System” in relation to the circulation of culture as part of capitalist hierarchies of power.

and the truth that lurks beneath Brigid O'Shaughnessy's dangerous sexuality, Spade moves across the streets of the city, through a variety of social and cultural spaces, searching for answers to foggy mysteries that have no clear questions. But Spade's quest is not just about the plot lines of *The Maltese Falcon*; rather, it is what *propels* those plot lines that is more significant to his search for clarity in a city of veils. As Spade moves across the city and through the history of the black bird, it becomes apparent that *The Maltese Falcon* is not merely a simple story about local theft and murder. Rather, it is a global narrative that questions the very nature of how history is recorded and remembered, how crimes are committed and solved. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the city collides with legacies of Europe, threats of the "Orient," dangerous femme fatales, and complex battles in which good and evil can no longer be classically defined. As a result, the crime in the novel transcends murder and stolen artifacts by engaging with the larger implications of globalizing crime and mixing histories and identities in a single space. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the mystery is not the common hard-boiled trope of "who dunnit" but a questioning of the boundaries of race and gender in a modern American city.

Just as with *The Dain Curse*, *Old San Francisco*, *The Avalanche*, and *Travers*, *The Maltese Falcon* is primarily a novel that is occupied with anxieties about race in the American city. While it seems that Hammett's tale points to every concern but race, the plotlines of murder and history, of femme fatales and hard-boiled private dicks, are themselves codes for the problems of race. Set in a San Francisco that has finally recovered from the physical scars of the 1906 earthquake and fire, *The Maltese Falcon* must contend with the new "disasters" that shake the core of the narrative. *The Maltese Falcon* must decipher destruction on a global scale. This global narrative reads disaster

not in a local context but translates the devastation of the 1906 earthquake and fires to a global scale. The 1929 novel grapples with the global devastation of World War I, with destruction that changes the very boundaries of American relationships, roles, and identities. The 1941 film deals with another type of destruction—economic destruction that emerged with the nationwide devastation of the Great Depression. Both of these moments prompt new anxieties about the parameters of American identity, questioning the very definitions of that construction. Both of these texts attempt to imagine and construct a strong American character in the radically new global landscape—an American character who is capable of surviving such destruction. For the port city of San Francisco, these concerns are particularly important. As a center of commerce, trade, and circulation, San Francisco becomes a landscape that is both powerful and vulnerable during the periods that Hammett writes and Huston produces his film. Imaging the city as part of the global narrative of destruction threatens claims to commerce and power that have been spared (or perhaps reinforced) by the war. Despite these different contexts, the commonalities between *The Maltese Falcon* and the 1906 narratives discussed in Chapter 2 are their anxious reflections on racial miscegenation and how they decipher “foreign” and “domestic” presences within the city. While *Travers*, *The Avalanche*, and *Old San Francisco* all accessed anxieties about racial mixing through marriage plots, *The Maltese Falcon* considers the problems of race through problems of gender that make the marriage plots of previous decades an impossibility. Continuing to investigate the Darwinian problem of survival that we see in earlier novels like Atherton’s *The Avalanche* and Hammett’s own *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon* attempts to assert an American presence in the fragmented global landscape through the systematic

“othering” of minorities and women. Thus, both Hammett’s novel and Huston’s filmic representation are central to understanding the construction of not just the American male, but also the very properties of American blood.

The tale of *The Maltese Falcon* at first seems strikingly simple. Sam Spade and his partner Miles Archer are on a new case for “Miss Wonderly,” a dangerously beautiful woman who begs Spade to help her locate her missing sister. Yet, like most things in the story, Wonderly and her fabricated story are not what they seem. Bewitched by Wonderly’s innocent and seductive beauty, Archer eagerly agrees to work on the case only to meet his death through a point-blank gunshot wound. After Archer’s death, things spin wildly out of control and Spade quickly learns that Wonderly is actually Brigid O’Shaughnessy, an international con artist who has been on a global search for a prized artifact—the Maltese Falcon. As Spade attempts to unravel Brigid’s story and separate truth from her tantalizing lies, he encounters characters who challenge the boundaries of both his masculinity and his “Americanness,” including: Gutman, a wealthy man with questionable motives who reveals the history and worth of the Maltese Falcon that he has sent Brigid to look for; Gutman’s young and nervous protégé, Wilmer; and Joel Cairo, the international treasure hunter of questionable racial origins and even more questionable sexual preference. The illusive black bird stands at the center of the action. Covered in black enamel to mask its true value, the Maltese Falcon is a mythic gold and jewel-incrusted statue that can trace its lineage back to the dawn of both European antiquity and the birth of the modern world. A figure of unparalleled worth that dates back to the time of the Crusades, the Maltese Falcon haunts the novel like a sinister ghost. Its illusive properties render it an apparition—one that never fully

succeeds in seducing Spade to believe the web of tales that the characters around him spin. In the end Spade locates the figure only to learn that it, like so much else that he has encountered, is a fake. He and the rest of the characters are left only with myths, with the linegrings of the ghosts that they chase. As the only character not possessed by the mythic powers of the statue, Spade remains a figure who is still capable of justice, of influencing the course of history. Yet this situation is not nearly as glamorous as it may seem, and, in the end, Spade's only reward is to turn Brigid in for the murder of his partner, rising above lust to preserve his own type of ancient code.

While this story is both intriguing and wildly entertaining, the central symbol of the narrative, the illusive black bird itself, reveals a much more complex tale. Through the imagined history of the statue, *The Maltese Falcon* positions San Francisco as a *global city*, accessing the local *through* the global. By bringing the Falcon—and its history—to the city, San Francisco becomes part of the global legacy that the statue embodies. But this collision of the global and the local creates a sense of anxiety about borders—if the Falcon and its twisted history can travel to U.S. soil, what else can come with it? Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid all exemplify other dangers that can come through San Francisco's vulnerable ports. The Maltese Falcon, then, not only symbolizes the legacies of Europe, but also serves as an allegorical trope of the vices of the Old World that threaten to poison the new. The central mystery that *The Maltese Falcon* must contend with, then, is the question of how to define—and protect—an American city within from global vices. It is not murderers or sinister plots that Spade must uncover; rather, these are mere clues to the larger issue of the story—uncovering the seductive



history of the Maltese Falcon itself that serves as an allegory for global fragmentation and America's plausible ability to sift through the ashes of war and devastation.

Through the narrative, Spade must learn this unique history lesson in order to understand his role in creating a new American order that can lead the world out of the destruction that it has witnessed. It is only once Spade understands the meaning of the Falcon itself that he is able to rise above the other characters. In a heated conversation, Spade admits to Gutman, "'Oh, hell,' he said lightly, 'I know what it's supposed to look like. I know the value of life you people put on it. I don't know what it is'" (Hammett 109). Spade's seeming ignorance protects him from the lust for wealth and power that possess the other characters. His clarity of vision allows him to read the symbolism of the Falcon for what it really is—an allegory for vice that has only led to destruction on a global scale. As Ross MacDonald has suggested, in some sense Spade encounters a new type of frontier in the novel, one that has expanded the borders of inter-war United States culture to encompass the destruction of Europe. Of Hammett's novels MacDonald writes, "[T]he subject of his novels, you might say, was the frontier male thrust suddenly, as the frontier disappeared, into the modern megalopolis" (203). The "modern megalopolis" that MacDonald details *is* the new frontier, the novel global landscape that men like Spade must negotiate. In order for Spade to decode the mystery of Archer's death, Brigid's secrets, Cairo's origins, and Wilmer's dark stare, Spade must uncover the significance of the Falcon itself.

If Spade is crafted as a local figure, he illuminates the importance of the San Francisco landscape in the larger context of a global narrative. By establishing a local connection to a global narrative, Hammett is able to bridge the gap between the space of

an American port city, with all its vulnerabilities, and the space of European destruction. It is thus through this global narrative of the statuesque icon that Hammett crafts the problems of an American city; in other words, it is through the past of the Maltese Falcon that Spade is able to decipher and navigate the problems of contemporary San Francisco. While Hammett's attention to the global history of the bird is central to understanding this, Huston's film vividly reveals this relationship between the global and the local in its opening scenes. Huston opens the film by telling the viewer the story of the Maltese Falcon through a screen narration of the global history of the illusive bird. The opening frame tells the tale: "In 1593, the Knight Templars of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with the rarest jewels—but pirates seized the galley carrying the priceless token and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day." From the beginning of the film, Huston draws attention to the global centrality of the narrative.

It is not until after this global context has been crafted that Huston turns his attention—and his camera lens—to San Francisco, to the stage of the drama that is about to unfold. As the story of the Maltese Falcon fades into the background of the frame, the image morphs into a vision of the San Francisco skyline. The words "San Francisco" announce the viewers' arrival to the city by the bay as the screen fills with a panoramic view of the city that highlights key landmarks including the Bay Bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Ferry Building. But these landmarks do more than establish the viewers' presence in the city. As one critic notes, "the extreme long shots of the city that usually open such films normally signal a detached, objective perspective, and thus a level of facticity that the narrative supposedly has; but these images represent a kind of self-

display, the city intimately opening itself to our gaze in the narrative about to unfold” (Telotte 16). While these spanning cityscape shots are a common convention of the film noir style, in *The Maltese Falcon* this scene not only illustrates the setting of the film, but also places the city at the center of the viewer’s gaze. The city becomes vulnerable. The landmarks of San Francisco that this shot illustrates collectively signify the centrality of ports, motion, and mobility to the narrative. By highlighting San Francisco’s status as a port city,<sup>57</sup> Huston draws attention to the international status of San Francisco that is built on the movement of people and goods in and out of the city. The narrative is thus about the fluidity of movement, about the ability of stories to travel across space and time.

While the novel does not open with the story of the Falcon as Huston’s film does, “Chapter 13: The Emperor’s Gift” elaborates on the story of the black statue much more than the opening scenes of Huston’s adaptation. While some of this is clearly due to the narrative limitations and time constraints of film as an artistic medium, there also seem to be deeper implications particular to the 1929 moment of the novel. While the novel does not specifically engage with the war like some hard-boiled narratives, its preoccupation with fractured histories of Europe suggests deep-rooted anxiety about the destruction of the past and the uncertainty of the future. Watching the war from the outside looking in, the United States could only imagine the realities of the destruction from afar. Despite this distance, the novel still emerges out of an inter-war context and is preoccupied with the global consequences of war and destruction. Part of this preoccupation includes a return to and a reinvestigation of the myths of Europe. As the old world literally crumbles and falls, the world searches for histories to help explain and alleviate the pain

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<sup>57</sup> See my discussion of the Ferry Building in Chapter 2.

of such massive destruction. In other words, there is a turning to the past in order to make sense of the present and plan for a viable future. As Irving Malin suggest in “Focus on *The Maltese Falcon*: The Metaphysical Falcon,” the statue “is a changing symbol of change itself. It can never really be grasped; it vanished triumphantly” (76). The history that the novel relies on is thus one that is inherently illusive and unclear. The frustration, then, is perhaps that Spade cannot *solve* such a complex mystery, for the narrative that the falcon presents only prompts more questions and further anxieties about the relationship between history and identity. The “changing symbol” status of the Maltese Falcon creates a world in the novel and the film that is unstable, always changing, and always anxiety provoking.

Hammett weaves a tale of a band of Crusaders, the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem who later called themselves the Knights of Rhodes and settled in Crete in 1523. As Gutman traces his seventeen-year quest for the statue, he explains that the Crusaders “persuaded the Emperor Charles V to give them Malta, Gozo, and Tripoli . . . with these conditions: they were to pay the Emperor each year a tribute of one falcon in the acknowledgement that Malta was still under Spain, and if they ever left the island it was to revert to Spain” (Hammett 123). The historic legend of the Maltese Falcon can be traced to the roots of the modern world, linking the statue to both antiquity and modernity and positioning it as a symbol of the transition between European grandeur and global expansion. As part of this trajectory, San Francisco is positioned as a colony, an extension of the European history that the legend of the Maltese Falcon details. This is an unsettling notion, for it suggests that San Francisco, and hence the United States as a whole, is still under the influence of Europe. San Francisco is caught within the gaze of

Europe. This brings the problem of identity confusion to the forefront of the narrative. As Gutman's narrative continues, he explains that, as their first tribute to the King of Spain, the Knights decide to send Charles the Maltese Falcon—a golden statue covered in precious jewels “made by Turkish slaves in the castle of St. Angelo” (Hammett 125). From the time of its creation, the Maltese Falcon is an icon crafted by a collection of sources, rooted in multiple places, and laced with layers of history. It is, as Sam Spade says at the end of Huston's film, “the stuff that dreams are made of.”

After its early years as a prized tribute, the Falcon takes a whirlwind tour across the globe. The novel traces the tale of the Falcon from Algiers, where it was taken after it was captured by the infamous pirates Barbarossa, Redbeard, and Khair-ed Din to “the possession there of Victor Amadeus II soon after he became king in 1713, and it was one of his gifts to his wife when he married in Chambery after abdicating” (Hammett 125). The bird then went to Sicily where “it turned up next in the possession of a Spainard who had been with the army that took Naples in 1734—the father of Don Jose Monino y Redondo, Count of Floridablanca, who was Charles III's chief minister.” The coveted statue then travels to Paris when “Paris was full of Carlists who had had to get out of Spain. One of them must have brought it with him, but, whoever he was, it's likely he knew nothing about its real value” (125). The voyage of the Maltese Falcon vividly traces the fractured history of a world that is defined by a tradition of trade and circulation that traces its roots to mercantile Europe. By eventually leading the narrative to San Francisco and U.S. soil, Hammett establishes a link between the Old World and the New through the notion of circulation that is central to the development and maintenance of a port city. By bringing the bird to San Francisco, Hammett illustrates

the role of ports and emphasizes the significance of circulation as a way to describe the *opening up* of San Francisco and the American West. During the Falcon's long journey, two key issues are revealed through the Falcon's complex history: first, the Maltese Falcon illustrates a fluidity of movement that transcends borders, spaces, and war; and second, it is only through a veiled identity that such fluidity is possible. Gutman explains to Spade, "[I]n disguise, sire, it [the Maltese Falcon] was, you might say, kicked around Paris for seventy years by private owners and dealers too stupid to see what it was under the skin" (126). Through hiding its history, the Maltese Falcon is rendered as a ghost, as an apparition of the novel's imagined and selective past. As the protagonist, Spade is charged with unveiling both the bird and its complex past. Spade must expose the statue for the fake that it is in order to bring any sense of redemption or hope to the end of the narrative. In the narrative, the Maltese Falcon is really an empty shell, a void. It is nothing but a shadow of the real thing that, in the end, continues to elude Spade and the other characters. It is a counterfeit. Thus, the "fake" status of the statue is not the disappointment of the narrative that it might seem, but rather serves to uncover the complex histories that lie behind it and the anxieties of the plot.

The myth of the Falcon is crafted out of such indestructible lore that Spade must go to great lengths to disrupt the narrative that Gutman has spun around the statue. What is perhaps most interesting about Gutman's elaborate tale is that Hammett crafts this narrative as a *fact*, shaking off any semblance of myth. By creating a detailed history linked to European antiquity and the modern space of San Francisco (the imagined "heir

to Rome”<sup>58</sup>), *The Maltese Falcon* becomes a tangible possibility that transcends the boundaries of the printed page. After Gutman reveals the story of the Falcon to Spade, he states, “These are facts, historical facts, not schoolbook history, not Mr. Well’s history, but history nevertheless” (Hammett 124). Here Gutman draws several key distinctions between this mythical history and conventional history. Yet a sense of legitimacy is still foundational to Gutman’s tale. To help support his fascinating narrative, Gutman “references” a series of arcane texts and authors (J. Delaville Le Roulx’s *Les Archives de l’Ordre de Saint-Jean*, the French historian Pierre Dan, Lady Francis Verney’s *Memoirs of the Verney Family During the Seventeenth Century*, and Domenico Carutti’s *Storia del Regno di Vittorio Amadeo II*), which is meant to legitimize not only the tale behind the Maltese Falcon, but also to justify the lengths that Gutman, Cairo, and O’Shaughnessy will go to in order to possess the prize. By situating the history of the Maltese Falcon as a “fact,” Hammett lends a sense of credibility to the complex histories of Europe and the racial and gender-oriented anxieties of inter-war San Francisco. As a result, these global constructions and narratives that the story of the Falcon relays translate to the urban problems of Spade’s San Francisco. Global history thus becomes local mystery.

This translation from the global to the local crafts a new lens for reading *The Maltese Falcon*. Just as *The Maltese Falcon* uses the global to unpack the local, it also uses gender and sexuality to craft a complex argument about race. While Sam Spade is the pillar of local concerns and attitudes in the global narrative of *The Maltese Falcon*, he also becomes an emblematic example of American masculinity. A large body of

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<sup>58</sup> See my Introduction and Chapter 2.

criticism exists on Spade's example of American masculinity. Critics such as Christopher Breu, Jopi Nyman, and Erin A. Smith have argued that Spade is meant to embody a type of American male who responds to the global crisis of World War I (and in the context of the film, the national crisis of the American Great Depression). In *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, Erin A. Smith argues that hard-boiled narratives created male-centered worlds and crafted "mean streets" that stood in strong opposition to the consumer-centered sphere of female domesticity (23,101). Smith asserts, "The hard-boiled hero kept the faith. Clinging fiercely to his autonomy and his disdain for authority figures of all sorts, he continued to practice his manly craft in a world increasingly filled with corrupt authorities, powerful rings of gangsters (read corporations), and errand boys of all types" (100). In other words, the hard-boiled man was an instruction in American masculinity. But as Christopher Breu suggest, this desire for the quintessential American man is nothing more than a (powerful) national "collective fantasy" (2).

Sam Spade lies at the center of this "collective fantasy" in *The Maltese Falcon*. While Spade encapsulates all of the features of the hard-boiled male that critics like Breu and Smith describe and challenge, he also serves as an allegorical narrative about race and citizenship in the global city of San Francisco. In the novel Spade embodies the values (and vices) of the American urban space that he inhabits. It is Spade, not Cairo or Gutman or Brigid, who is the model for the proper citizen in the urban world of American cities. As Spade struggles to find a break in his case, he becomes a man who also struggles to find his space in the global history that the Maltese Falcon represents. This space is a projection of a quintessential "American" identity that attempts to stand in



opposition to all that is classified as “foreign.” In “Homage to Dashiell Hammett,” Ross Macdonald places Sam Spade and other Hammett heroes, like the Continental Op of *The Dain Curse*, alongside characters from *McTeague* and *The Sea Wolf* as “reminiscent of unreconstructed Darwinian man” (203). They are primal, instinct-driven creatures that seek, first and foremost, their own survival. In doing so, Spade and characters like him illustrate a very important lesson: they furnish a model for how to be an American man. As Smith suggests, “Hard-boiled detective stories were Americanizing narratives. They invoked familiar racial and ethnic distinctions, but suggested that such distinction could be emphasized or deemphasized as one’s interests dictated” (123). Spade is an exercise in education, a template for asserting a highly unstable and vulnerable national identity.

Spade, then, has the same vulnerabilities, and the same anxieties, that San Francisco itself harbors. This conjunction posits key concerns about the space of the American city in the emerging global landscape that is the contextual backdrop of the novel. In his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library Edition, Hammett describes his infamous protagonist: “Spade is no original. He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been . . . [H]e wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with” (70). In imagining Spade as a type of “dream man,” Hammett must contend with both his power and his vulnerability, with both his fearlessness and his deep-rooted anxieties about his own masculinity. More importantly, perhaps, Hammett’s consideration indicates that Spade must be “hard and shifty” precisely because the city is a hard and shifty place. The tension, then, between fighting corruption and becoming corrupted in the space of the city is a central concern in the

story. In one of the key passages from the novel, Spade's trusted secretary, Effie Perine, says, "'You worry me,' she said, seriousness returning to her face as she talked. 'You always think you know what you're doing, but you're too slick for your own good, and some day you're going to find out why'" (Hammett 29). In this example, Spade personifies the cosmopolitan city of San Francisco *and* its flaws. Like Spade, San Francisco seems to be "too slick" for its "own good." Lost and disoriented in the global mess that he is soon to be trapped in, Effie suggests that he does not always know what he is doing. Like Spade, San Francisco itself is trapped in a world of rapid globalization, wherein goods, histories, and threats easily flow within and over national boundaries.

This crafting of Sam Spade as an American figure—one who is gendered and racialized—depends on Hammett's construction and Huston's visualization of Joel Cairo. As Philippa Gates asserts, "In Hollywood film, Americanness is thus associated with heroism; 'otherness' with villainy" (257). This is clearly the case with Cairo. Cairo is the "anti-Spade," challenging everything that our protagonist stands for, including his masculinity and his racial/ethnic/national identities. Unlike Spade's overt and dominating masculinity as a hard-boiled man, Cairo's sexuality is constantly called into question as he is referred to as "queer" and labeled as "the fairy." More than pointing a gun at Spade in the small San Francisco office of the privet eye, Cairo's true danger seems to be his queer potential to undermine Spade's version of American masculinity. In *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-boiled Fiction*, Jopi Nyman argues that "hard-boiled fiction attempts to defend the ideal of the autonomous male: this character is shown to be a truly masculine character who opposes all forms of Otherness and relegates everyone who does not fulfill *his* criteria to the category of the dominated"

(4). Cairo is the opposite of the “autonomous male” that Nyman describes in this passage. He negates everything that the hard-boiled man stands for. As a result, he is the “otherness” that must be controlled, the foreign body, the global infiltrator who must be “dominated.”

But Cairo’s “otherness” is not limited to his questionable sexuality. With Cairo the problem of sexuality is translated into a problem of race in Huston’s film version. When Hammett submitted the novel for publication in 1929, he met with staunch criticism over the homosexual undertones of Cairo’s character. In a letter dated July 14, 1929, to editor Harry Black, Hammett wrote, “I’m glad you like *The Maltese Falcon*. I’m sorry you think the to-bed and the homosexual parts of it should be changed. I should like to leave them as they are, especially since you say they ‘would be all right perhaps in an ordinary novel’” (Layman and Rivett 51). It was because the detective novel was such an accessible genre, an “Americanizing” form, that Hammett felt the need to leave in the anxieties about sex and sexuality. This problem of representation did not fade. Forced to deal with concerns over “obscenity” and the censorship of the time, Huston imagines Cairo not as overtly homosexual but brands him “effeminate.” However, the real anxiety over Cairo’s “otherness” is lodged in Huston’s focus on the problem of Cairo’s national and racial origins. Through creating a stronger sense of anxiety over his racial heritage and national origin, Huston is able to emphasize the threat that Cairo poses to American masculinity not only in terms of sexuality and gender, but also through crafting a racial opposition to the cultural capital of whiteness. Problems of sex become problems of race. In the novel Cairo is described as:

a small-boned dark man of medium height. His hair was black

and smooth and very glossy. His features were Levantine. A square-cut ruby, its sides paralleled by four baguette diamonds, gleamed against the deep green of his cravat. His black coat, cut tight to narrow shoulders, flared a little over slightly plump hips. His trousers fitted his round legs more snugly than was the current fashion. The uppers of his patent-leather shoes were hidden by fawn spats. He held a black derby hat in a chamois-gloved hand and came towards Spade with short, mincing, bobbing steps. The fragrance of *chypre* came with him. (Hammett 42)

Cairo's "small-boned" body with "slightly plump hips" is marked as feminine in Hammett's description. His "snugly" cut pants are more reminiscent of Brigid's form-fitting dresses than the masculine garb of Sam Spade. The floral fragrance of "chypre" signals the sensory perception of a woman. The "short, mincing, bobbing steps" that he approaches Spade with are a far cry from Spade's broad shoulders and muscular arms. While Cairo's feminine features mark him as subordinate to Spade in the gender hierarchy of the late 1920s, they also render him as a danger to masculinity itself. In the narrative, Cairo's effeminate qualities may contribute to marking him as "other," yet they are also the source of his power. As one critic notes, Cairo "survived a temporary alliance with Brigid only because he was sexually immune to her attractions" (Layman and Rivett 110). He is able to subvert the danger that Brigid poses only to create a further threat to Spade and his American version of masculinity. Cairo's gender-bending looks and mannerisms challenge Spade's construction of masculinity, undermining the vision of the American male that his description so carefully crafts.

In Huston's film Cairo's threat to American masculinity transforms into a threat to American racial identity—and its overt investment in whiteness—itsself. The 1941 film becomes much more preoccupied with Cairo's racial identity and national origin as a way to signal his otherness and thus his opposition to the model of American masculinity

that Spade represents. In the film actor Peter Lorre brings Cairo vividly to life for the viewer. Born Lazlo Lowenstein from Jewish parents of Hungarian and Austrian decent, Lorre captured the overtly foreign qualities that Huston chose to highlight in Cairo's character. Long typecast as the sinister foreigner in films, Lorre portrays the "Levantine" not through a representation of clear racial origins, but through creating a sense of racial and national confusion. The description of Cairo as "Levantine" itself signals a sense of confusion. With "Levant" encompassing the countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Egypt, Cairo's identity remains shrouded with multiple possibilities—and none that give him claim to anything but extreme "otherness." The name "Cairo" itself suggests both the exotic otherness, conjuring the power and grandeur of ancient Egypt, and the foreign threat that the unknown of the Middle East represents. As these descriptions of him illustrate, Cairo's racial and national origins are always in question.

Testifying to this problem of identity is Huston's representation of Spade searching Cairo's pockets. After being surprised by Cairo in the darkness of his office, Spade quickly physically overcomes him, illustrating his own masculine strength while emphasizing Cairo's effeminate weaknesses. While Cairo lies unconscious and helpless, Spade calmly and methodically searches Cairo's pockets for clues to the intruder's identity. But what he finds reveals more questions than answers. In the novel Spade finds in Cairo's pockets:

a much-visaed Greek passport bearing Cairo's name and portrait; five folded sheets of pinkish onion skin paper covered with what seemed to be Arabic writing; a raggedly clipped newspaper-account of the finding of Archer's and Thursby's bodies[;] . . . a handful of United States, British, French, and Chinese coins; a ring holding

half a dozen keys; a silver and onyx fountain-pen; a metal comb in a leatherette case; a nail-file in a leatherette case; a small street-guide to San Francisco; a Southern Pacific baggage-check; a half filled package of violet pastilles; a Shanghai insurance-broker's businesscard; and four sheets of Hotel Belvedere writing paper, on one of which was written in small precise letters Samuel Spade's name and the addresses of his office and his apartment.  
(Hammett 47)

In this account Cairo is labeled Greek but is imagined as a citizen of the world. The Arabic writing on the onionskin paper seems to cast doubt on the validity of his Greek passport, leaving his racial identity and national origin a mystery. The “handful of United States, British, French, and Chinese” coins links him to economies all over the globe. But what is even more unsettling than the sense of movement that his pocket contents illustrate is the possibility that he brings the properties of these far-off “othered” places to San Francisco with him. As the passage progresses, the contents of Cairo's pockets shadow his journey from Greece (presumably), to the United States, to San Francisco, to Spade's apartment. The threat of infiltration—of penetration—then is what marks Cairo as a dangerous threat to Spade's character. The threat of his sexual orientation is fully manifested through the threat of his questionable national origins and even more question racial identity. Huston takes this argument a step further when he visualizes Spade's search through Cairo's pockets in the film. While this scene also pictures Spade pulling a plethora of international items from Cairo's expensive pockets, Huston takes one very important liberty with Hammett's novel. The solitary Greek passport becomes multiple international passports, including ones from Greece, France, and England. In the 1941 moment, Huston's representation of this scene emphasizes the need for national insulation and protection during a time of domestic economic doubt and

international tensions. The multiple passports create a sense of anxiety over who is coming in and out of the city. While many of the narratives of San Francisco that I have discussed in this project focus on and praise San Francisco's encouragement of mobility, *The Maltese Falcon* cautiously warns against such practices. Cairo, then, becomes an allegory for all that is unknown. In the hard-boiled tradition, "the conflict between American heroes and 'othered' villains can offer insight into the broader situation of international conflict at a specific moment in time" (Gates 254). As an "othered villain," Cairo not only poses a threat, but also exposes the vulnerabilities of an American culture as it attempts to reconcile the global conflicts of the period. As Spade quickly shuffles through the documents in Cairo's pockets, the countries of their origins are on clear display to the viewer, as if we are gazing cautiously over Spade's shoulder. Spade's anxiety thus becomes the viewer's anxiety, passing questions of racial identities and historical narratives on to the watchful audience.

The image that Cairo represents is what Spade must stand in opposition to in the narrative. As a result, Cairo's effeminate otherness signifies everything that the American man is not. As the antithesis to Cairo, Spade's character becomes a vivid demonstration of both sexual and racial designations for the American male. The threat that Cairo poses is very real, and Spade's job is not only to solve the mystery of Archer's death and the Maltese Falcon, but also to combat the threat that Cairo's body posits in the narrative. As the private eye, Spade is designated as a man in control from the beginning of the narrative. But when Cairo easily invades Spade's space and is able to fluidly move between his international world of crime and Spade's local world of order, a clear threat emerges. Spade, the watcher, is now being watched. He, the American male, has

become vulnerable to the gaze of another, or a sinister and intangible enemy. This unsettling notion calls into question the tensions of American masculinity during the period of both the film and the novel. As the country reeled from the global destruction of World War I and then was forced to reconcile and overcome the economic devastation of the Great Depression, American masculinity became both a strength and a weakness in the American cultural fabric. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade is now at the center of the gaze rather than gazing upon others. This inversion of roles creates a sense of mass confusion that questions the limits of American power and the threat of erasing racial and sexual boundaries.

The description of Spade in the novel and Humphrey Bogart's version of him in the film serve as a vivid testimony to this tension. While Spade is clearly meant to epitomize the American male in both texts, the representations of his character are shockingly different. In the novel Spade is strong, muscular, and dangerous. He is everything that Cairo is not, creating a version of the American male that is both comforting and threatening. Hammett writes:

Sam Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v *motif* was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down—from high flat temples—in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan. (3)

The “blond Satan” that Spade is imagined as in the novel encapsulates the nature of the private eye—Spade is a man who is both careful and dangerous, a simultaneous sinner and saint, and his looks suggest that he is a saint operating in a world of devils. In this passage, Spade is “a character who is a long way from being a hero” (Ruehlmann 73).



The tension between Spade's own particular brand of justice and the conventional law that he must work around has made him both a danger to American society and its only hope for salvation. His "yellow-grey" eyes and the "v motif" across his face render him both observant and menacing, signaling his ability to work through multiple levels of the "law" in order to get the job done. With this physical description, Spade is "a new breed of anti-hero, a man whose rigid personal code is placed above that of the society he inhabits. And Spade *is* a dangerous man, capable of using the corruption around him, admitting that most things in San Francisco can be bought or taken" (Nolan 62). Because Spade is a vulnerable figure in the film, he must embrace the danger he faces. The construction of Spade's character thus relies on a sense of negation, on rejecting the stereotypical conventions of a "hero" to develop an "anti-hero" persona that is well equipped to deal with the racial and gender anxieties of the modern city.

While this sentiment remains, the physical image of Spade that Hammett crafts in the novel greatly differs from Huston's representation. In the film version, Spade is played by Humphrey Bogart—through Bogart's slight and dark features, he *becomes* Spade, altering the visualization of Hammett's hard-boiled man forever. Film critic James Naremore suggests, "Bogart is the visual opposite of Hammett's Sam Spade . . . Bogart's slight, swarthy appearance, his menacing smile, to say nothing of his famed low-life New York accent (he calls the falcon a 'black boid') evoke an altogether different personality" (120). With his "low-life" New York accent and his "menacing smile," Bogart's representation of Spade is one that bridges the American west and east to craft a character who is relatable through both his status as one of cinema's earliest sex symbols and a true "man's man"; he makes Spade a figure whom women want and men

want to be. Huston's version of Spade thus makes him more *accessible* to a larger audience.

But this accessibility of Spade's character does not alter the tension between justice and temptation any more than the original novel does. At the center of the temptation of the novel is Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Every bit as tempting and seductive as the Maltese Falcon itself, Brigid is the femme fatale that challenges the integrity of Hammett's all-American hard-boiled man. Unlike Spade, who is able to travel under the veil of the city fog, and Cairo, who uses the mobility of global cities to his advantage, O'Shaughnessy is an openly exposed figure. Her feminine attributes, her seductive body, and her desire for wealth and power keep her on display, at the center of the novel. Yet this power of presence within the city—the power and danger that Brigid carries through the visual display of her body and the enticement that it invites—is contrasted with her claimed desire and need for secrecy in the narrative. As she pleads with Spade she explains, “I want you to save me from—from it all,’ she replied in a thin tremulous voice. She put a timid hand on his sleeve. ‘Mr. Spade, do they know about me?’” (34). She continues, “‘Must they know about me at all?’ she asked. ‘I think I’d rather die than that, Mr. Spade. I can’t explain now, but can’t you somehow manage so that you can shield me from them, so I won’t have to answer their questions? I don’t think I could stand being questioned now. I think I would rather die. Can’t you, Mr. Spade?’” (Hammett 35). O'Shaughnessy wants to move with the same fluidity that Spade and Cairo are able to capture, yet her power lies in the fact that she can be *seen*, she can be touched, and she can be desired. Her begging to Spade carries with it overtly sexual undertones that beg not just for his protection, but also for his submission to her feminine

power. This makes her more deadly than Gutman, Cairo, Wilmer, or any international treasure seeker.

But Spade cannot—and, furthermore, will not—save her from the prying eyes of the city and its laws. Surrendering himself to O’Shaughnessy’s seduction would be a crime greater than the theft of the Maltese Falcon or her murder of Archer because it would make the American man *weak*, rendering him helpless against the simplest of temptations. As Christopher Breu suggests, hard-boiled texts like *The Maltese Falcon* revise the conventions of romance in the context of modern social systems (70). At the end of Huston’s film, Spade dreamily states that the Maltese Falcon is “the stuff that dreams are made of.” But, in *The Maltese Falcon*, dreams don’t have happy endings. Thus, the relationship between Spade and Brigid can never come to fruition. Brigid is just “foreign” enough, as her Irish name signifies, to render her an inappropriate partner for Spade. Their failed union is thus a sign of the failed plot to render American masculinity obsolete in the new global landscape. In the novel the fiery redhead is every match to Spade’s blond Satan: “She put her hands up to Spade’s cheeks, put her open mouth hard against his mouth, her body flat against his body. Spade’s arms went around her, holding her to him, muscles bulging his blue sleeves, a hand cradling her head, its fingers half lost among red hair, a hand moving groping fingers over her slim back. His eyes burned yellowy” (89). If Spade is a blond Satan, then Brigid is clearly yearning to be his demon lover. Yet the film’s representation of Brigid through Mary Astor is softer—and that makes her all the more dangerous. While she adds a sense of sophistication of the character of Brigid that the novel lacks, she also exposes new vulnerabilities in Spade’s tough anti-hero façade. Astor’s angelic and maternal looks

unsettle the redheaded stereotype of the femme fatale from Hammett's novel. Together, these representations seem to suggest that all women are suspect—that regardless of the type of feminine lures that Brigid's character may possess, the union with Spade will never work, will never have a happy ending. In the end, then, the relationship between Spade and Brigid fails because Spade's allegiance is to his code of ethics, not to the body of a woman. A union with O'Shaughnessy would mean the sacrifice of the hard-boiled male and all that he stands for in the narrative. Spade sums this up nicely when he tells Brigid's pleading eyes, "I won't play the sap for you" (Hammett 213).

In *The Maltese Falcon*, the message is clear: the American man won't "play the sap" for anyone. But while Hammett's and Huston's constructions of Sam Spade seem to suggest that Spade will not play a role, sap or otherwise, these constructions also seem to reinforce the notion that the American man is a vulnerable abstraction. At the heart of this lies the sense that Spade—and the version of American masculinity that he offers—is a product of negation, a result of deciphering what he is *not* rather than what he *is*. Spade is thus crafted not through a strong assertion of the type of man that he should be, but rather by the type of man that he should not be. In the end, he is little more than a rejection of the character traits of Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid. He is a rejection of the "other."

### **Spade Revisited: An American Legacy**

Sam Spade's character does not end with the final credits of Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. Through Hammett's novel and Huston's film, Spade has become a masculine icon, a definitive image of American manhood. The ideal of Spade not only

continues to endure, but has continued to evolve, transcending the pages of his initial creation. While hard-boiled narratives and noir are arguably styles of the past of cultural production, their sentiments continue to shape American cinema—and American masculinity. Two insightful examples of this complex form of cinematic reincarnation can be found in *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968) and *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). Both films feature modern detectives—vigilante-like cops who will achieve justice through any means necessary. Frank Bullitt and Dirty Harry Callahan take the image of Sam Spade a step farther; their means are dirtier, their methods are less conventional, and their workings inside and outside the justice system are infinitely more complicated. This is in part due to social changes of the 1960s and 1970s that could be traced through the commercial world of Hollywood cinema. *The Maltese Falcon* and its protagonist literally had to work in a black-and-white world—one that could only go as far as social conventions of Hollywood. Spade was, in a sense, a censored man. The detective protagonists of the cop films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were not harnessed by the same constraints. This is perhaps most vividly noticeable in the effects of the abolition of the Hollywood Production Code in 1968. With a movement away from the Production Code and to the establishment of the now familiar-film rating system, the censorship of the Hayes Office was blown open. Where once no crime could go unpunished, now protagonists would engage in their own crimes to help save the day. *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* thus offer radical revisions of the vision of the law—and the vision of the American man.

*Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* are early examples of what we now consider neo-noir.

Like the noir tradition, neo-noir visualizes men alone, tests the social boundaries of the

American city, and struggles with racial and “American” identity constructions. But, at its core, neo-noir signals a return to “western” themes, or to visualizations of classic struggles between good and evil. *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* offer a return to the vigilante-method of crime solving that has been so prevalent in Western genre films. With these films, the American West is once again placed at the center of the struggle for American “justice.” What makes *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* significant in relation to *The Maltese Falcon* and the construction of Sam Spade is not only their revision of the American detective figure, but also the notions that these films transport the methods of the “wild West” to the urban streets of San Francisco. The chilling narratives that *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* construct expose the urban setting of San Francisco as nothing more than a new version of the frontier—a wild space that must be tamed at all costs. While the original noir tradition primarily mobilized its unconventional quest for justice around the figure of the private detective, neo-noir works from *within*, locating its hero in the rogue police officer who values justice above the conventions of the law. These shifts signal a crisis in American masculinity and imagine a world that is occupied with civil liberties, Miranda rights, and proper “procedure”—a world in which there is a privileging of the *other*. While these reimaginings are no doubt problematic, they provide a key source of insight into the problems of racial discourse in San Francisco and California that never faded completely out of the background. While my goal here is not to interrogate the many problematic representations and anti-feminist and anti-ethnic discourse in these films, I do want to suggest that these dominating representations of American masculinity and othered identities in *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* stem from hard-boiled and noir anxieties that were never reconciled. Neo-noir attempts, then, not only to reimagine the

conventions of noir, but also to re-narrate the cultural doctrines that works like *The Maltese Falcon* articulated to the masses. Cultural shifts like newly complicated racial tensions of the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War, and the social chaos that the San Francisco Zodiac murders created in the city all created a new set of tensions that Bullitt and Dirty Harry had to confront.

These sentiments are further complicated by the neo-noir treatment of urban space. Just as neo-noir signals a threatening shift from dominant to other (and back again), so does it signal a shift from the classical vision of the American city of modernity and to a world of urban sprawl that is threatening to fall apart. The edges of the city are no longer as defined as they once were, the boundaries of urban space—and all its vices—are left blurred. In *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry*, for example, the action is not merely limited to the streets of the city, but tends to fall outside the boundaries of San Francisco proper and leak into neighboring communities. Bullitt's infamous car chase takes him down the Great Highway and into the outer edges of San Francisco County, far from the urban problems that resonate most with the center of the city. Dirty Harry follows the Scorpio killer across the Golden Gate Bridge to Marin, an area known for its incredible wealth and impenetrable calm. As the crimes in these films stretch beyond the traditional boundaries of the city, the very definition of urban space is altered as city and suburb bleed together to form a unified space that is tormented by the same criminal acts. This is particularly startling in a space like San Francisco, wherein the physical geography of the landscape itself limits the bleeding of the city. As a contained peninsula, San Francisco is also a contained city, limited by the boundaries of water and rocks. As crimes like those represented in *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* leak out of the

confines of the city, they challenge the very formations of the landscape, altering the perception of San Francisco as a definitive space.

Despite these key changes, one thing remains the same—the crossing of boundaries, the transcendence of social rules. In *Detours and Lost Highways*, Foster Hirsch suggests, “Characters in noir stories cross boundaries—as victims of bad timing, chance encounters, of their own forbidden wishes; in a fateful split second, typical noir protagonists plunge into the other side of the law” (14). This is the case with *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry*. Peter Yates’s 1968 film *Bullitt* follows the search of Frank Bullitt (Steve McQueen) for a deadly killer who has come to San Francisco to stop justice in its tracks. Bullitt is sent to protect witness Johnny Ross as he waits to testify in a Senate subcommittee hearing on organized crime. When Ross is killed in a seedy hotel on the Embarcadero, Bullitt becomes suspicious of those outside *and* within the law whom he has vowed to protect. Through an iconic car chase through the city, conflict with local politicians, and his own sense of self-doubt, Bullitt realizes that he alone can bring justice to the city and navigate through the corrupt web of lies around him. As he delves deeper into the mystery of Ross’s murder, Bullitt learns that the dead body he thought was Ross was Albert Reneck, a used-car salesman from Chicago whom Ross killed in order to keep his secret and escape the country unnoticed. Bullitt then engages in a race against time that ends at the San Francisco International Airport where he kills Ross at the dramatic finish of the film. Like *Bullitt*, *Dirty Harry* is a film about the necessary vigilantism of American justice. In *Dirty Harry*, Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) is on the trail of a Zodiac-like killer, the illusive Scorpio. As Harry attempts to solve the crimes and find the killer who has the city on its knees, he must maneuver around his own police



department, “proper procedure,” and political power plays. In the end, Harry must defy the police chief, the mayor, and the district attorney to locate Scorpio as the killer highjacks a school bus full of children. Harry chases the bus across the Golden Gate Bridge and out of the city. In his standoff with Scorpio, Harry doesn’t hesitate to kill the man who has eluded him through a series of technicalities. In the end, Harry’s vigilante justice is made clear as he throws his police badge into a body of water where Scorpio’s body floats across the screen.

At the crux of both of these films is a revision of the narrative of masculinity that is presented in *The Maltese Falcon*. *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* reimagine the sentiments of Sam Spade by constructing a more definitive, and far less forgiving, version of American “justice” that claims to transcend the simple self-interest narratives of the hard-boiled and noir traditions. These films are thus not just about the “man alone”; they are about men creating, defining, and preserving political and cultural systems of dominance. As Philippa Gates suggests, “In a period when President Nixon’s hard-line politics on crime and the widespread loss of confidence in law-enforcement were dominating the American psyche, the vigilante cop film presented masculinity that was tough, independent, violent, and successful in the war against crime” (126). *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* are products of this political context. More importantly, they attempt to solve the dilemma of the American male by *looking back to* an earlier period, by borrowing from and reinventing the Sam Spade archetype of *The Maltese Falcon*. Together these films not only reinterpret the figure of Sam Spade through the lens of neo-noir and its conventions, but they also work to redefine American masculinity. The Bogart-esque representation of

Sam Spade thus becomes a point of departure, an origin for these films and the new American male that they help define.

*Bullitt* begins this redefinition with its characterization of its title protagonist, Frank Bullitt. In the film Bullitt is imagined as a type of renegade character who is necessarily both inside and outside the parameters of the law and the society that he has vowed to protect—he is a figure at the margins of society. Yet this marginalization allows him to radically revise American masculinity. As explained in *Cinema by the Bay*, “*Bullitt* updated San Francisco’s traditional progressive image in its portrait of an idealistic cop: The film was like Bogart for bohemians, and his sport-jacket-and-turtleneck style established police-detective chic” (Avni 16). Steve McQueen’s character helps prove this point by never appearing on screen in an official police uniform. He is always in street clothes, sporting his signature turtleneck and sports coat, stylistically offering a symbol of San Francisco casual chic. But his cool style does more than just look good on the silver screen. With his refusal to wear a uniform and the images of him in basic, dark clothing, Bullitt attempts to render himself an “unmarked” man, a man who has not been tainted or “othered” in any sense. At the core of this lies the threat of feminization. In the film, Bullitt must resist all attempts to feminize him, to take away or mask his masculine power. When initially assigned to guard witness Johnny Ross, Bullitt sighs and explains to the other officers assigned to the case “we’re babysitting,” suggesting that he has been reduced to doing a form of “woman’s work.” In addition, after his infamous car chase, he is reduced to having his girlfriend drive him to and from work and around the city. These scenes produce an underlying tone of anxiety about the boundaries of gender and sexuality in the film. The struggle to solve the crimes of the

narrative becomes a secondary concern to the struggle to define and assert the identity of the American male.

In asserting his masculinity, Bullitt attempts to be in every sense a solitary man. In the film he needs to prove not only that he can catch the killer, but that he can do it alone. This sentiment is made clear not only through the action that Bullitt takes while on the job, but through the filmic representations of his domestic life, as well. In a short but important scene, the film shows him shopping at his neighborhood market, piling frozen dinners into his basket. Rather than mark him as a good consumer (another identity associated with female presence), this act instead points to his seemingly doomed domestic life. In this scene he is marked as a man alone, one who lacks a typical—and, furthermore, acceptable—domestic life, complete with a wife and a home-cooked meal. These tropes of America familial identity are thus erased because they stand in conflict with the trope of the solitary man whom Bullitt and characters like him embody. The film thus seems to suggest that it is only because he is alone in the world that he can solve the crime, that he can assert a strong sense of masculine identity. Curiously, Bullitt still manages to have a love interest in the film. In another glimpse into Bullitt's life, the viewer is privileged to moments between him and his girlfriend as they attempt to deal with their troubled relationship. Bullitt's girlfriend is a sensitive woman in every sense, one who recognizes "the ugliness around us." These sentiments automatically construct her as Bullitt's antithesis in the film. But despite this polarization, she lacks the presence and power of Bullitt. First, she is never given a name. In fact, we know her only through the context of Bullitt, so it is only through him that we are able to view her character. The frames that visualize her for the viewer serve as vivid testimony to this. We see her

through Bullitt's perspective, through his gaze. In almost every instance when she is on camera, the lens looks down at her, placing her literally beneath Bullitt and his gaze. A key moment of the narrative comes in their heated discussion on the side of the road. As Bullitt gazes down at her, she passionately cries, "With you living with violence is a way of life. With violence and death. How can you be part of it without becoming more and more callous? Your world is so far from the one I know. What will happen to us in time?" This scene is central to the narrative of the film because it creates an immense distance between Bullitt and the feminized world that his love interest represents. It is no coincidence that the setting of this scene mirrors these sentiments. The scene of their argument is framed by the freeway that connects the East Bay to San Francisco. Jammed with cars with the docks of the Oakland Port looming in the background, the scene creates a visual no-man's land. The positioning of this scene suggests that, while Bullitt is not part of the feminized sphere that his lover represents, he is also not entirely bound to the masculine-driven world of crime and justice that he seems to embody. In *Bullitt* the mystery has less to do with the crimes committed and more to do with the act of redefining American manhood.

While Bullitt struggles to negotiate these anxieties, the boundaries of American manhood and its relationship to constructions of "justice" and "othering" are made even more transparent in George Siegel's *Dirty Harry*. Clint Eastwood's portrayal of Harry Callahan is truly that of a man alone. Within the scope of the film the viewer learns that Harry is solitary and ostracized, and he likes it that way. Harry is a man who has overcome the need for attachment. For example, despite this singularity of his character, we learn that the callous Harry was once married. But having lost his wife after she was

hit by a drunk driver, there remains no traces of the domestic life that he was once part of. Rather, the death of his wife signals a rejection and symbolic “death” of partnership as a whole. This domestic disturbance of sorts is echoed by Harry’s experiences of the San Francisco police force. During the course of the film he is assigned and loses a partner. In fact, Gonzales, the college-educated detective who is assigned to a reluctant Harry, is everything his partner is not and, after a near fatal injury, leaves the force out of concern for his family and his future. When first partnered with Gonzales, Harry explains, “Now you know why they call me Dirty Harry, any dirty job that comes along.” These sentiments create a renegade type of anti-hero. This point is further proven in the way that Harry deals with the Scorpio case. When Harry gets called into the District Attorney’s office after his initial handling of the Scorpio case, the DA exclaims, “You’re lucky I’m not indicting you for assault with intent to commit murder . . . Where the hell does it say you have the right to kick down doors, torture a suspect, deny medical attention and legal counsel? Where have you been? . . . What I’m saying is that man had rights!” Harry bluntly responds, “Well, I’m all broken up about that man’s rights.” In this scene, Harry becomes the accused assailant; he has become the danger to the city that must be tamed. Here, the viewer vividly learns that Harry walks a fine line between protector and murderer. Yet, in this scene the viewer is not preoccupied with “that man’s rights,” but rather is prompted to feel sympathy for Harry and outrage that the justice he seeks has not been properly served. The viewer is thus constructed as a vigilante along with Harry, made complicit in his unyielding drive to deliver his own brand of “justice.” It’s no surprise, then, that even despite the critical backlash that *Dirty Harry* received, it was an instant hit at the box office.

As viewers we are asked to be complicit in Dirty Harry's and Bullitt's quests for vigilante justice. This sense of complacency complicates not only our conceptions of broad categories like "justice" and "American," but it also asks us to reconstruct the boundaries of the spaces we inhabit. At the center of these revisions lies the city itself. It is through the consideration and use of the city itself that these two narratives are able to construct an ideal sense of American masculinity. Without the background of a large urban center, the cases that Bullitt and Dirty Harry work on—and, consequently, the type of men that they are classified as—would not be possible. The city fosters not only a sense of inherent vice, but also a desire for moral cleansing. Like the narratives of 1906 from Chapter 2, these texts attempt to revise the city itself, to redesign the urban landscape that is haunted by crime. *Bullitt's* and *Dirty Harry's* connections to urban space are visualized through extensions of their expressions of masculinity, specifically through Bullitt's dramatic car chase through the streets of San Francisco and through Harry's voyeuristic tendencies and dominating vantage point as he works to solve the Scorpio case.

In *Bullitt*, Steve McQueen will do anything to get his man. The iconic car chase that occurs midway through the film serves as testimony to this. As the chase progresses, not only are viewers confronted with inspiring images of the streets of San Francisco, but they also bear witness to wrecks, fires, explosions, and property damage. Bullitt will go to any means to protect his city—even if it means he has to literally destroy parts of it. The city thus becomes both the driving force behind and the victim of Bullitt's relentless chase for justice. In addition, the city becomes a central agent in Bullitt's success. In the car chase scene, geography plays a central role. As Bullitt turns and twists across the city

streets, he transforms from being followed to following his suspect. When Bullitt manages to get behind the killer, it is only because he knows the city streets and the killer does not. He has the advantage of being a local. From this point on the scene is dictated by Bullitt's gaze, by the movements of his car along the streets of the city. Once the pace of the cars picks up, the music of the film's soundtrack stops, and the only thing the viewers hear is the sound of tires on pavement and roaring motors—and the only thing they see is the city passing by. The screen becomes consumed with the rushing motions of the car chase, and the crime and plot of the film quickly fade into the background, overshadowed by the towering buildings and winding streets of San Francisco.

In *Dirty Harry* the gaze of Bullitt's car chase is transformed into a chilling sense of voyeurism. Harry's voyeurism is conveyed through his vantage points and elevation in the film, as well as the use of San Francisco's geography to help illustrate this point. As one critic notes, "Don Siegel lovingly photographs Mount Davidson Park and other San Francisco landmarks with a gritty realism; in these scenes, Harry triumphs over the geographical spectacle. Siegel uses masterful helicopter shots and wide-angle lensing to advantage, letting Harry dominate the frame in his battle for survival over San Francisco's lowlifes" (Schwartz 22). As Harry searches the city for Scorpio in the film, the viewer is treated to expansive views of the entire Bay Area. In one scene, the viewer follows Harry's gaze from a building rooftop, as he looks *through* the city, from the Bay Bridge and Treasure Island, the Embarcadero, and, finally, the building where Scorpio's first victim was shot and killed. This scene places the entire city at the center of danger, but it also places the entire city under the scope of Harry's gaze. In a similar scene, as Harry searches for the killer, he looks down on the city from a police helicopter. From

these vantage points, Harry is able to not only see the scope of his case, but is also able to view the city's corruption and to literally float above it. In a sense, *Dirty Harry* is a film "about high places and mastery" (Wanat 90). This sentiment is revealed in one particular scene in the film. As Dirty Harry attempts to set up and trap Scorpio, he uses a Catholic Priest in North Beach as bait to try and lure the killer out. As Harry scans the rooftops at night in search of the killer, his gaze stops at the window of a naked woman. As we watch him watching her, it becomes apparent that Harry's ability to rid the city of violence is foundationally linked to his overt masculine sexuality. While Harry is distracted by his view of the woman's bare body, the killer emerges on her rooftop. This moment links Harry's gaze, his dominating sense of masculinity, and his need for vigilante justice in a single cinematic frame. The double-voyeurism of this scene suggests a deep link among masculinity, the power of the gaze, and the city itself. The city thus becomes a medium through which Harry—and the ideal of the American male—can exercise and exert his power.

Just as *The Maltese Falcon* suggests a deeper and much more chilling context, *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry* assert their own doctrines of American masculinity through strategic othering. In these films Bullitt is not Albert Reneck, and Dirty Harry is a far cry from the Scorpio killer whom he hunts down. But other than these crimes that they investigate, the viewer learns relatively little about the characters. Bullitt and Dirty Harry are thus created through negation. Much like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, these characters signify the properties of American masculinity by visualizing everything that it is not.



### **Solitary Men in Global Spaces: Conclusions**

As readings of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Bullitt*, and *Dirty Harry* illustrate, the central mystery of that hard-boiled, noir, and neo-noir traditions is the anxiety over definitions of American masculinity. It is through assertions of masculinity in these texts that problems of “bad blood” are (re)defined and resolved in the global landscape that San Francisco signifies. Yet these mysteries of identity are never solved or reconciled because, despite all of the theorizing on American masculinity that we can draw out of these texts, the simple fact remains—the American male is in many senses a void. By imagining the American male as everything he is not, these texts leave us with a sense of anxiety over what he actually *is*. Masculinity thus becomes marked by what the blood does not suggest. But what is perhaps most jarring is the suggestion that these characters get lost in the shuffle of dynamic “othered” figures to whom they are supposed to stand in opposition. Characters like Gutman, Cairo, and Scorpio are more developed, more seductive, and, frankly, more interesting than the protagonists that they agonize. Spade, and later Frank Bullitt and Dirty Harry, are shells of the men that they claim to be, weakly composed characters with single-sided constructions that lack the depth of the antagonists that they must face. In the end we, the reader, the viewer, are still left wondering what an American “hero” looks like. This void leaves us with a sense of lingering anxiety, with the realization that identities, like perceptions, are not stable and are rather constantly in flux. These narratives, then, not only reflect the unstable historical and social contexts that they emerge from; they also remind us that American identity is a ghostly abstraction, a highly unstable, carefully crafted cultural construct.

These men become shadows, ghosts who walk the city streets and haunt the spaces of American masculinity.

*Chapter 4: Uncanny San Francisco: The Vertigo of Historical Markings*



*Mission Dolores.* Andrea Dominguez, 2009.

**Constructing Memories: Imagining San Francisco Icons**

*“Well, San Francisco’s changed. The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast.” – Gavin Elster, *Vertigo**

Alfred Hitchcock’s iconic film *Vertigo* is about ghosts. As Avery Gordon explains in *Ghostly Matters*, spaces of the physical and cultural landscape remain haunted

by the tangled legacies they have buried over the years. These types of spaces often lie at the heart of historical imaginings of San Francisco. In *Vertigo* San Francisco is the center of multi-layered pasts that lurk under the architectural splendors of the city that the film highlights. As the plot progresses, private detective Scottie (James Stewart) follows troubled and beautiful Madeleine (Kim Novak) through the eerily empty streets of San Francisco down blind alleys that seemingly lead nowhere, past old hotels, and through forgotten stories. However, the chilling part of Scottie's chase is the film's movement through, back, into, and against time. This collapse of time comes to fruition during *Vertigo*'s iconic scene at San Francisco's Mission Dolores, in which Madeleine attempts to reach into the past of her ancestor, the racially constructed Carlotta Valdez. Scottie's shadowing of Madeleine to Mission Dolores suggests that Madeleine's husband, Gavin Elster, is wrong, that "the things that spell San Francisco" are far from disappearing. It is this compounding of time that lies at the crux of Hitchcock's classic film *Vertigo*. In the film, Scottie watches Madeleine—and the dark narrative of racial tension and amalgamation that she represents—move from the streets of present-day San Francisco to nineteenth-century constructions of race, class, and gender, and back again. This movement suggests a sense of fluidity between the modern moment and the old San Francisco that Elster expresses a sense of deep nostalgia about in the epigraph that begins this chapter. The "Old San Francisco" that Scottie uncovers through shadowing Madeleine is one that is haunted, stalked by the lingerings of racialized ghosts and sexualized tension that never fully fade with the passing of time or the reconstruction of narrative.

Through considering *Vertigo* in relation to how history is racialized—or how racial politics are behind how history is remembered and forgotten, constructed and reinvented—I argue that the film offers a cultural critique about how history is “marked” and that it *gazes back* across time. At the center of this analysis is an interrogation of the multiple forms of “gazing” that occur with the film. My analysis is thus shaped by three types of gazing that shape the narrative: the touristic gaze, the gendered gaze, and what I call the racialized gaze. The touristic gaze of the film give the viewer a voyeuristic glance at the city that sells not only a particular narrative, but also a specific history about the spaces that are represented in the film. The gendered gaze complicates the politics of viewing through male and female mediated gazing. The visions of history, reality, and the city are distinct experiences for Scottie and Madeline/Carlotta/Judy. Through this comparison, I reevaluate critiques of *Vertigo* as a male-centered film to suggest that female agency is mediated through the historical act of *gazing back*. These two types of gazing ultimately lead to my formulation of the racialized gaze. This way of looking places the racialized history that is evoked in the narrative at the center of both the film and the perceptions of space that it illustrates. In order to deconstruct these concepts, I begin with establishing a foundation for these types of formations in the noir tradition by examining the racialized histories in *The House of Telegraph Hill*. I use this film to consider the relationship between the American gothic tradition and the noir filmic tradition, both of which play a major role in the imaginings of *Vertigo*. My reading of *Vertigo* then uses these ideas to complicate the relationship between the multiple gazes that shape the way we view the film, as well as the racialized history that it imagines.

These sentiments that lie at the center of my arguments are vividly brought to life in *Vertigo* when Madeleine visits the graveyard at Mission Dolores. In the film, Mission Dolores serves as a location that creates a collision course between “old” and “new” San Francisco, bending time to illustrate that the past is always present. At the beginning of this scene, the viewer watches as Madeleine’s car pulls across the screen and parks just beyond a “California Historical Site” marker. It is significant that this sign is included in the shot. From the beginning of Madeleine’s journey through and across time, there is a keen awareness that the film is preoccupied with constructions and markings of history, with the way that spaces and moments are remembered in Californian. The marker lends a sense of legitimacy to the site, creating a socially acceptable narrative of “history.” The camera then pans away from the sign and to the front of the old mission, the original structure that predates the modern basilica at its side. This is Madeleine’s point of entry, the doorway that she enters through as if she were walking through the doorway of time itself. The camera follows her as she walks through the dim shadows of the old church and into the bright sunlit garden of the Mission’s cemetery. The juxtaposition of light and dark in this scene illustrates a passage through time as she moves through the present and into the past. As she emerges in the sunlit garden, Madeleine pauses and stands before a single grave—that of Carlotta Valdez, whose tombstone indicates that she lived from 1831-1857, during the rise of San Francisco as a western post of empire and the struggle for California’s statehood. As Scottie stands in the graveyard and watches Madeleine, the viewer sees the outline of both the old Mission and the new basilica in the background and, in that instant, is met with a stark collision between the present and the past.

This moment can be read as an allegory for the central concerns of the film. In this scene Madeleine is constructed as a character who is a result of both the present and the past, a figure who is crafted through generations of injustice and pain. Scottie, the “wandering” observer, gazes not only at Madeleine as she travels back and forth through time, but also at the progression of time itself. Through these backward glances and the emphasis placed on history through the historical marker, the scene explores *Vertigo*’s concern with history through the landscape and architectural landmarks of San Francisco. But this is not just any history. Rather, the history that *Vertigo* engages with is a haunted one—it is a history that is continually haunted by the remnants of the racialized ghosts that Carlotta’s grave represents in the film. By marking her life and death with the historical markers of 1831 and 1857, Hitchcock draws the viewer’s attention to a very specific historical period that marks the end of Spanish rule in California, the length of Mexican independence, the influx of white settlers, the Gold Rush, and the eventual annexation of California as an American state. This period of California history is not only one that is occupied with wars, unrest, and conflict, but also one in which race becomes a central concern, a key abstraction in a very real struggle over land and power. These are the racialized ghosts that haunt *Vertigo*—the memories of a past in which race, class, and gender are cultural markers of status: of “American” and “other.” In the film, then, Carlotta (and thus Madeleine) is “marked” just as the mission itself is marked; she is a remnant of the past, a historical, yet conquered, site.

At the core of this investigation is the importance of location. As the use of Mission Dolores illustrates, *Vertigo* is a film that, perhaps more than anything, is preoccupied with elements of setting. The plot centers on the twisted love affair of

Scottie Ferguson and Madeleine Elster. Scottie is a retired police officer who has to leave the force because of a severe case of vertigo that inhibits him from participating in the demands of detective work. As he begins his new life he gets a call from an old college friend, Gavin Elster. Elster asks Scottie to follow his wife Madeleine, who seems to disappear for hours, never tells him where she goes, and has been acting strangely. Elster fears that Madeleine is being possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdez. Despite his doubts, Scottie agrees to take the case. As he begins to follow Madeleine through the streets of San Francisco, from the monuments of Mission Dolores and The Palace of the Legion of Honor, to the Golden Gate Bridge and the redwood forest, Scottie becomes more and more entangled in the mythology of Madeleine's possession—and the seduction of her beauty. As Scottie falls in love with Madeleine, he desperately tries to find a way to save her from herself and the latent memories that, at least to him, seem to run in her veins. Despite his hopes, she is doomed, and, after struggling with his vertigo, he is unable to save her as she jumps from the bell tower of Mission San Juan Bautista. After Scottie recovers from a mental break that the events of the first half of the film cause, he attempts to regain a sense of normalcy in his life. As he walks down Post Street in downtown San Francisco, he spots a young woman who could be Madeleine in disguise. The woman assures him that she is not Madeleine but Judy Barton, a young shop girl from the Midwest. However, in a flashback the viewer learns that she is in fact Madeleine. Judy was Elster's now-estranged lover who helped him kill Madeleine and capitalize on both Scottie's skills as a detective and his fears from his vertigo. Despite herself, Judy has fallen in love with Scottie and agrees to see him. Scottie attempts to refashion Judy into his idealized



version of Madeleine, doing everything from buying her the type of clothes that Madeleine wore to convincing her to dye her now brown hair blond. In the end, Scottie's obsession destroys Judy, making a chilling history repeat itself.

The centrality of location to this plot cannot be overstated. The decision to set *Vertigo* in San Francisco was one of the first actions taken during the preproduction process, and it is no secret that Hitchcock was both professionally and personally drawn to the natural beauty and complex history of the Bay Area. During a 1956 trip to the city, Hitchcock scouted many of the locations, including: Mission Dolores, The Palace of the Legion of Honor, Fort Point, and Big Basin Redwood State Park near Santa Cruz<sup>59</sup> (Auiler 64). While based on the French novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *Vertigo* only uses the shell of the story. A narrative that deals with the fragmentation brought on by the destruction of World War II in Europe, Hitchcock translated these unsettled feeling to America by focusing on the intangibility of racial mixing in California. In the Cold War climate of the period in which the film is set, Hitchcock transforms the context of World War II to mirror the insider/outsider fears of the Cold War. Hitchcock thus used the location of San Francisco to not only depart from the original text, but also to re-imagine the narrative through the lens of California's complex racial history and complex definitions of "American" identity. As one critic notes, "The location, as usual, was so basic to Hitchcock's vision that two round trip plane tickets for [Maxwell] Anderson [the first writer enlisted to work on the script] and his wife were attached to the writer's June 1956 contract. The playwright was even instructed to visit specific sites, including San Juan Bautista and Mission Dolores" (McGilligan 540).

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<sup>59</sup> In the film this site is often precieved as Muir Woods State Park.

These initial scouting missions began a preproduction process that would last nearly two years while Hitchcock went through a series of talented writers in order to make the script fit his vision. Filming finally began on location in San Francisco on September 30, 1956. The first scene filmed was the scene where Scottie follows Madeleine as she visits the grave of Carlotta Valdez at Mission Dolores (McGilligan 553).

The use of historic San Francisco sites like Mission Dolores and the method of filming on location create a double-touristic gaze, one that is part of both the production and the viewing process. In reading *Vertigo* San Francisco becomes identified as a “tourist site” for the viewer, rendering the film a lesson in geography and history. A tourist site can be defined as “a spatial location which is distinguished from everyday life by virtue of its natural, historical, or cultural extraordinariness” (Rojek 52). Tourism becomes a type of “hyperreality,” a method of storytelling that transforms the space that it constructs (Coleman 3-8). To gaze at the city, then, is not a simple practice of viewing, but engages much more active participation in the reading and representation of space. More importantly, as Chris Rojek suggest in *Indexing, Dragging, and the Social Construction of Tourist Sights*, “Mention of the mythical is unavoidable in discussions of travel and tourism. Without a doubt the social construction of sites always, to some degree, involves the mobilization of myth. As a social category ‘the extraordinary place’ spontaneously invites speculation, reverie, mind-voyaging and a variety of other acts of imagination” (52). In *Vertigo*, San Francisco becomes “the extraordinary place” that prompts “speculation, reverie, mind-voyaging,” and “acts of imagination.” It is through imaging the space of the city, and all its hidden histories, that Scottie is able to unravel

the mystery of Madeleine's tragic story and recognize the racialized ghosts that continue to haunt the California landscape that she inhabits.

Thus, *Vertigo* is not just about identifying and visualizing San Francisco as a place of touristic adventure. Rather, Hitchcock employs the historical narrative to situate *Vertigo* as a text that invokes what I call the "racialized gaze." The racialized gaze is a historical gaze, one that can look forward and backward, asking the viewer to look beyond the superficial constructions of the film, past the images of a platinum-blonde Kim Novak and stereotypes of "Old San Francisco" that Elster can't seem to relinquish, to unearth the violent histories of Spanish colonialism and eventual American dominance in California. In the film, Mission Dolores is a site that signals this deployment of the racialized gaze, linking the story of Madeleine and Carlotta to an imagined and romanticized Spanish past in California. Perhaps more importantly, this past is one that is necessarily European in origin. Despite the fact that the date markers on her headstone place her outside the period of "Spanish" California, Carlotta is not identified as Mexican, Indian, or even mestiza. She is a woman from "Old California," a woman of Californio and Spanish lineage who can trace her roots back to Europe, and, in effect, back to whiteness. This is reproduced in Madeleine. While the blood that supposedly runs through her veins is tainted by Carlotta's tragic life, she too is both racialized and "whitened" for the audience. But her presence in California from 1831-1857 is more telling, suggesting that she can in fact trace her heritage to "Mexican" constructions. I want to suggest that because of this sense of uncertainty, the racialized gaze of the film sees the tainted blood through the veil of her Euro-American features. While Carlotta's—and Madeleine's—hair, eye color, and facial features all suggest a claim to

whiteness that is both unstable and questionable, the racialized gaze works to disorient the viewer, to cast doubt on the visualization of race, and to deconstruct and reconstruct forgotten and marginalized histories.

This sense of gazing through history is compounded by the history of Mission Dolores itself. As Madeleine sits before the grave of Carlotta Valdez at the Mission scene in the film, the viewer's gaze is directed to the cemetery of the old church. While this moment links Carlotta to a Spanish past that continues to have an enduring influence on the present, it also obscures the detailed history of the Mission. The Mission Dolores settlement was founded in June 1776 by members of the de Anza Expedition, which had been charged with expanding Spanish settlement to Alta (upper) California and spreading Catholicism to local indigenous populations. Formally dedicated on October 9, 1776, it was the sixth religious structure established as part of the California mission system.<sup>60</sup> Today all that exists of this early settlement is a historical marker near the intersection of Camp and Albion Streets.<sup>61</sup> The structure that is today known as Mission Dolores was dedicated fifteen years later in 1791 and over two hundred years has retained the same architectural properties, remaining relatively unaltered since its original construction period from 1782-1791. Named for Saint Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan Order, the mission became locally known as Mission Dolores due to the presence of a nearby creek called Arroyo de los Dolores, or "Creek of Sorrows." This illustrates an intricate blending of global and local design, a careful mixture of Spanish imperialism

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<sup>60</sup> The Mission is located at what is now 3321 Sixteenth Street in San Francisco. Located in one of the more diverse corners of the modern city, Mission Dolores is situated at the crossroads of the city's Mission District, Castro District, Lower Haight, Noe Valley, and Upper Market Street neighborhoods.

<sup>61</sup> This original location is about a block and a half away from the current structure.

and local referents. Today, this mission is both the oldest original intact Mission structure in California and the oldest building in San Francisco.

Further emphasizing this merger between the global expansionism of Spanish imperialism and the local, the Mission served as far more than a mere religious structure. Mission Dolores included an entire settlement of activity from its founding until the mid-nineteenth century. “Pueblo Dolores” included a farming community, manufacturing, hotels, ranches, medical facilities, and schools. At the time of the Mission’s peak from 1810-1820, the circumference of the mission’s land holdings totaled close to 125 miles, making it one of the largest land settlements in the West. The Mexican War of Independence brought a steady decline in land holdings and social and cultural structures for the Mission settlement and Pueblo Dolores. In 1834, church property was rapidly sold or granted to private owners as a result of new Mexican secularization laws. These laws meant that the missions only held title to the actual church structures, the residences of the priests and other religious staff, and small parcels of land that were used as gardens and cemeteries. Despite a steady period of cultural and economic decline, the Gold Rush brought renewed interests in the Mission. In the early 1850s, two plank roads were constructed from downtown to the Mission to enable easier access to the church for the more settled parts of the city. This revitalization of the Mission area also brought a renewed sense of cultural tension. As access to the Mission area became more readily available, the surrounding neighborhood quickly developed into an entertainment district that swayed far from the ideals of the Catholic Church. Yet in order to survive in the surrounding rising metropolis, the Mission was forced to adapt both its land and its practices, even leasing some of its surrounding properties for use as saloons, gambling

halls, and prostitution houses. Once again, the Mission occupied a precarious and liminal cultural space between its Spanish past and its colonial present.

Restoring and protecting the history and future of the Mission became a major concern for San Francisco after the earthquake and fires of 1906. Though sustaining some damage from the quake, the original adobe structure remained standing. In addition, the church was spared from the flames after the San Francisco Fire Department made the decision to dynamite the Convent and School of Notre Dame that had been located directly across the street from Mission Dolores. As a result, while nearly all city blocks east of Dolores Street and north of 20<sup>th</sup> Street were consumed by flames, the Mission stayed out of the quickly advancing fire path. In addition, repairs to the Mission were among the first priorities for the city as it began to rebuild itself. As the oldest cultural moment in the young city, the Mission was transformed from a place of worship to a center of historical and civic pride. After repairs were made to the original Mission Church, the Mission made plans to expand its buildings and further solidify its importance to the city. In 1913, construction began on what would become the Mission Dolores Basilica. Adjacent to the old Mission, the Basilica was completed in 1918. The image at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the old Mission Church against the backdrop of the Spanish-inspired Basilica. The juxtaposition of the structures suggests not only historical movement, but also highlights the act of re-visualizing the past. The Mission has served as a constant witness to the growth and development of the city.

In the film, the scene at Mission Dolores illustrates cultural shifts that have had extreme repercussions for the way that the past is remembered in San Francisco. In borrowing a key concept from Chris Rojek, I want to suggest that Mission Dolores and

other sites like it in the film are “sensation sights.”<sup>62</sup> These sites are invested with and function as a source of “symbolic capital” that creates historical and cultural narratives for the city (Crilley 234). As “sensation sites,” these places are often centers of spectacle (Rojek 64). Rojek argues that there are three main features of sensation sites:

First, sensation sights refer to the interruption of ordinary collective life-routines by reason of natural disaster, social outrage, crash or act of aggression. . . . Second, unlike spectacle, sensation sights do not occur—nor are they presented—as ‘breaks’ from everyday life-routines. Rather, they belong to the ordinary information flow in advanced sign societies . . . . Third, sensation sights are corollaries of societies which reproduce low trust relations and high levels of affective neutrality towards others. (64)

The sensation sites of the film serve to disorient the way that the city is experienced. By highlighting the lingering ghosts of the past, these sites continually impress and alter the flow of the present. Their “sensation” thus stems from their power to disrupt the power structures that help shape the way that the city is viewed. *Vertigo* destabilizes these sites, to uncover the histories that lie behind the sensation. In *Vertigo*, Scottie’s normal routine is constantly interrupted through the way that he experiences the city. From his disabling vertigo to his historical interpretive rides through the city landscape, to his uncovering of racialized tales like Carlotta’s, the movements of the film serve to disorient Scottie and alter the way that he—and the viewer—experience the history of the city. What is truly chilling about these disruptions is that, as Rojeck points out, moments like this tend to follow the “ordinary” lines of the city. The secrets that Madeline and Carlotta hide are not hidden at all; rather, they are present in the threads of the narrative that Scottie is trying so desperately to decipher. The timelessness that these sites seem to embody is in

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<sup>62</sup> See Chris Rojek, “Indexing, Dragging, and the Social Construction of Tourist Sights.”

fact a long continuum of injustices that continue to plague the characters and their attempts to reconcile the past. As a result, *Vertigo* constructs a world in which none of the characters can trust each other, where no one is fully innocent in a world wherein history is doomed to repeat itself. In these ways *Vertigo* fashions San Francisco as a sensation site that is dependent on the very real lens of the racialized gaze. The “sensation” of the film is thus dependent on the construction of racial others, fragmented histories, and deep-rooted hierarchies.

### **Haunted Houses and Lost Identities: Reading the Art of the City in *The House on Telegraph Hill***

The trope of “sensation sites” is not unique to *Vertigo*. Noir films often use notions of sensational sites as a method of returning to the chilling stylistic attributes of the American Gothic tradition. Before reading *Vertigo* as an exercise in historical racialized gazing, I’d like to consider the 1951 black-and-white noir film, *The House on Telegraph Hill*.<sup>63</sup> While *Vertigo* is often thought of as being produced at the end of the noir period, *The House on Telegraph Hill* offers an example that is at the center of the filmmaking movement. Despite the production differences between these two (black-and-white vs. color, plot, etc.) they offer similar narratives about the role of race in the city. In addition, both films are about the fantasy of San Francisco—about how the city, its history, and the people in it are imagined. As both films demonstrate, race is a central part of this trajectory, crafting a vision of the city that is in many senses a utopic nightmare. *The House on Telegraph Hill* considers key problems of history, memory,

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<sup>63</sup> *The House on Telegraph Hill* was directed by Robert Wise and based on a novel by Dana Lyon.



and ethnic identity through the use of architecture and cultural artifacts. The film tells the tale of “a starved, scared, homeless girl who saw a shot at a better life and ran with it.” The film traces a series of unfortunate events in the life of Victoria Kowalski (Valentina Cortese), a Polish woman who has lived through the horrors of World War I and World War II and immigrated to America to begin a new life under an assumed name and identity. The film is thus concerned with her claims to establishing a “white” identity in the city. As a woman who escaped the horrors of war, Victoria is given a second chance at life when she assumes the identity of her dead friend, Karin. Gaining passage to America through her stolen credentials, Victoria/Karin goes to New York to claim Karin’s young son who was sent to live with relatives shortly after the war in Europe began. While in a displaced persons camp after the war, Victoria attempts to contact Karin’s Aunt Sophie and seek guardianship of Karin’s young son. While waiting for a reply, she learns that Sophie has died and quickly makes arrangements to travel to the United States to meet with the estate lawyers. The narrative then jumps to 1950—nearly four years after the war has ended—to a scene of Victoria/Karin in the New York offices of the law firm that has been in charge of Sophie’s estate. What she finds is “a considerable fortune” that involves Karin’s son, Christopher (Gordon Gerbert), and a large sum of money and property. In an attempt to seal a sense of security, Victoria seduces Christopher’s current guardian, a wealthy and strikingly handsome man named Alan (Richard Basehart), and the two quickly marry and head west to San Francisco. Victoria’s voiceover reveals, “Was I in love with him, I don’t know. But I did know that the best way for me to be safe was to be married to an American.” While doubt lingers in her mind, she can only think to secure her freedom through access to both wealth and

citizenship. By marrying an American, she hopes to not only begin a new future, but also to fully erase the horrors of her racialized past. Marrying Alan is thus a way to secure a claim to whiteness and fashion an American identity, to secure a place in the new city that she inhabits.

But instead of securing a future, Victoria learns that the past never really disappears. The plot becomes rapidly more complicated once Victoria/Karin makes her way to San Francisco. In San Francisco, Victoria must deal with many plots twists and turns, including a “haunted” house, Christopher’s sinister nanny, Margaret (Faye Baker), and the affections of the handsome Marc Bennett (William Lundigan), who is torn between falling in love with Victoria and a sense of unease that she is not who she claims to be. As Victoria/Karin becomes more and more suspicious of her surroundings and the people in her new home, she uncovers Alan’s sinister plot to drive her insane and murder her in order to regain control of the fortune that Christopher represents. In a moment of desperation, Victoria confesses the secret of her stolen identity to Marc in order to help save her own life and that of the child whom she was grown to love as her own. The film reaches a climactic finish when Alan attempts to kill her by poisoning her nighttime glass of orange juice. However, instead of being a passive victim of his deadly plot, Victoria secretly switches the glasses, poisoning him as she attempts to escape the nightmare that seems worse than the death camp that she was imprisoned in at the beginning of the film.

Despite the complex history that Victoria brings with her to San Francisco, the film is consumed with—and invested in consuming—the city. From the opening scenes it is clear that this is a narrative that is about the American West, about a geographical and ideological departure from the war-torn Europe from which Victoria escapes. The

film begins with expansive views of the bay and city of San Francisco. As the camera pans across the scenery before the viewer, Victoria's velvety voice explains, "This is San Francisco as it looks from Telegraph Hill . . . where I once thought I would find peace and contentment." From the beginning of the film, then, there is a stark contrast between the images of the open vistas of San Francisco and the "hidden" sound stages where the majority of the film was shot in Hollywood. Despite this contrast, this opening marks the film as a San Francisco narrative, as a representation of that space that calls upon the cultural tropes that construct it. Through these opening images and the voiceover, San Francisco is established both as a place of opportunity and as a threatening vista. This tension is left in limbo as the scene quickly fades to black and the viewer is confronted with a setting far removed from the promise of an American city. The narrative abruptly flashes backward to Europe where the viewer becomes privileged to Victoria's story. From a broken home to a prison and concentration camp, Victoria's story is one that has haunting repercussions for her life in America. While the scenes set in Europe identify Victoria as Polish, the scenes in the concentration camp suggest more complex identity politics that call into question the status of her claim to whiteness. The film seems to suggest that Victoria is a Polish Jew but the narrative never overtly makes an assertion about her ethnic heritage. As a post-war film, *The House on Telegraph Hill* cautiously explores the horrors that Jews faced in Europe and the global trauma of World War II that haunt a seemingly prosperous America. In the film, these wounds are imagined through uneasy definitions of whiteness that the war and its aftermath called into question. Victoria's ethnic heritage is continually shadowed by a sense of unease that both creates problems of authenticity for her assumed identity in the states and prevents her from

gaining full access to American urban citizenship. The “racialized gaze” through which we see Victoria/Karin creates the questions of identity that signal a deep anxiety over her identity that goes beyond falsified credentials. In order to combat these anxieties, Victoria claims in a voiceover, “Poland does not exist for me anymore.” The setting is thus shifted to San Francisco in attempts to erase both the horrific landscape of the Polish concentration camp and the history that Victoria leaves behind.

Despite this change in setting, Victoria finds that horrific landscapes can be found even in a land of promise and new beginnings. As the setting is translated to the Victorian mansion wherein much of the San Francisco portion of the film takes place, the film creates a noir-esque “haunted house,” reimagining the tropes of American Gothicism through anxieties over racial identity. This tradition is especially strong in San Francisco. There is a long history of the trope of haunted San Francisco that influences the way that we conceptualize the city. From the early days of settlement and the Gold Rush, writers like Ambrose Bierce were invested in uncovering lost histories and inventing ghosts. The house is a product of this trajectory. Nestled below Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, the house is the architectural focal point of the film that signifies both the threats of the new landscape that Victoria has wandered into and the multi-layered histories that haunt both this space and the secrets that Victoria harbors. Described by Victoria as “so old and beautiful” when she first sees it, the house features expansive views of the bay that mirror the ones featured in the opening scenes of the film. This doubling illustrates that in the film the house *is* the city. In a central scene the viewer sees the expansive views of the bay and the city through Victoria/Karin’s bedroom window. As she looks over her private balcony, the city and the bay lay beneath her gaze. This scene is complicated by

the placement of Christopher in the path of this gaze. As Victoria/Karin stares out across the city below her, Christopher standing in the backyard and playing with a baseball comes into the focus of the frame. This scene marks him as an American and her as a foreign body positioned on the outside (inside) looking in (out).

The spatial and cultural distance that the film draws between Europe and America, between Victoria and the other characters, creates a sense of displacement in the narrative. When Victoria is liberated from the concentration camp in Poland, she is identified as a “displaced person.” As a result, she is sent to a “displaced persons” camp as she struggles to get to America and start over. This feeling of displacement, however, is something that she can never fully escape. As she struggles to adjust to her new life she explains to Alan, “Sometimes things come back. Things I want to forget. I can’t help it. You must be patient with me. I’ll be alright.” Alan responds, “We’ll just have to try harder to make you forget.” The notion of “forgetting” thus becomes a central theme in the film. In the end it is Victoria’s inability to forget that ultimately destroys the future she has attempted to secure for herself. A key scene between Victoria and Margaret illustrates this point further. One afternoon, Margaret catches Victoria going through the belongings in her room. Among her things, Victoria finds a small locked album. When she asks Margaret about its contents, Margaret is quick to coolly explain that the album was given to her by the late Sophie and that its contents are private. The album represents this inability to forget, to eradicate the past and all its violence. In addition, while Victoria represents a chilling return from the grave, this moment also marks Margaret as a displaced subject in the film. Margaret is described by Alan as a woman of “many unusual qualities” who must cope with a difficult social and class situation. While

classified as a domestic in the estate home, she is also an accessory to Alan's plot to gain Sophie's wealth for himself. When she discovers that Alan has been poisoned, she turns to Victoria and adamantly accuses her of trying to take Chris and Alan away from her. However, she quickly realizes that she is just as much a victim of Alan's sinister plots as Victoria is. As Alan reveals that he has consistently attempted to murder both Victoria and Christopher, he begs Margaret to save his life. As he withers in pain on the floor, the camera pulls into a close shot of Margaret's vacant face as she calmly and quietly explains to him that no doctor is coming. As he begs for help under her gaze, the camera turns up towards her as she continues to look down on him and refuse him help to ensure that "at least Chris will be safe." This moment marks Margaret as a mother figure who cannot fulfill that role. She is as "displaced" from the illusive status of a free woman as Victoria is.

This conception of "displacement" is one that we see echoed in *Vertigo*. Scottie is displaced in his own way, a "wanderer" who searches for meaning in the layers of history that he uncovers as he moves through the city. Madeleine is displaced in space and time, trapped in a mythic narrative about very real fractures of the past. Judy is displaced by functioning as a pawn in other people's constructions of her. Ultimately, these signs of displacement circle back to racial tensions in both films. The theme of "displaced persons" that Victoria and Margaret represent leads to a complex system of racialization in *The House on Telegraph Hill*. We encounter several overtly racialized characters who furnish minor roles in the plot. The first is Kei (Kei Thin Chung), an Asian servant in the house. While Kei's presence remains constant throughout the narrative, he is relegated to the background of the events of the film, treated as simply

another fixture in the house. The second is a female Asian performer who is on stage when Victoria, Alan, and Marc have dinner during their night on the town. By placing her on a stage, the film exhibits an overt form of Orientalism, capitalizing on her otherness. While the “minorities” in the film seem to be “othered” through an appropriation of Asian identity,<sup>64</sup> Victoria seems to walk a fine line. For Victoria, her presence in San Francisco represents an attempt to secure a cultural investment in whiteness. In this way, race, freedom, and wealth are all linked within the narrative. This triangulation is central to Victoria’s status in the film and her ability to escape the dominating plan of Alan. Victoria’s clouded past becomes a signifier for this struggle between racialization and national origin. While Victoria is identified as Polish, she is able to access American cultural capital through her ability to speak English—even with a foreign accent. More importantly, the film’s denial of her possible Jewish heritage signals a denial of transforming her into a racialized body. Her resistance to racialization, however, creates a sense of anxiety that cannot be as easily displaced as her body in the film.

These anxieties over race are manifested in the house itself. The original advertising posters for the film focused on the house itself as the focal point of the narrative. With taglines including, “This is the house forbidden to every woman with a conscience, forbidden to every man with honor,” “Shame is the mystery of this house and betrayal its master,” and “Where deceit . . . hate . . . murder lurk in every shadow,” the film was marketed as a haunted house type of narrative, calling on gothic tropes to help sell tickets at the box office. Victoria’s first night in the house reinforces these notions.

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<sup>64</sup> See my discussion of Chinatown and American Orientalism in Chapter 2.

During this scene the camera captures Victoria's eyes staring out above the bed covers, unable to sleep as she feels the house come alive in the dark around her. As the camera follows her eyes darting around the dark bedroom, the background is filled with noise of creaking wood and howling wind. As Victoria watches the tree branches outside her bedroom window manifest into terrifying yet unidentifiable shapes, her fear reaches its peak and she quickly jumps out of bed in anxious desperation. This haunting scene reaches a climax when the camera cuts to a scene of Victoria walking into the living room only to come face to face with the portrait of Karin's deceased Aunt Sophie. Victoria stops to gaze at the portrait of Aunt Sophie that hangs above the fireplace mantel. As the camera captures Victoria staring up at the portrait, Sophie's dark gaze looking down at her, her voiceover states, "I had a strange feeling that Aunt Sophie saw through me." As she continues to stare at the portrait she acknowledges, "I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that something was wrong in this house."

The problems of the house are further complicated through the bizarre abandoned playhouse that lies on the edge of the property. The playhouse is a rundown wooden structure that has a hole in its foundation that leads to a dramatic drop down a steep hill—one of the iconic hallmarks of San Francisco geography. Victoria becomes obsessed with the playhouse, with the unknown story of what has taken place there. In a key scene she goes to investigate the playhouse when she knows that no one will be home. As she gazes through the hole in the foundation out onto the city spread below her, she is startled by Alan's arrival as he asks, "What are you doing in there?" As she searches for a quick explanation and claims that she was "just looking around," Alan slowly advances toward her. The camera shows Victoria moving backward, away from the lens as she attempts to



put more distance between Alan and herself. As she stares into his face—and into the lens of the camera at the viewer—she suddenly falls through the hole. While Alan swiftly reacts to pull her back to safety, the scene is imagined as a threatening predatory standoff between these two characters. The tension that builds between Victoria and Alan during this moment is a tension not merely about falsified inheritances and haunted houses, but about the unstable identity categories that they both represent.

The problem of the house and the playhouse, the “haunting” that occurs in these spaces, is linked to the unstable identity categories that they suggest. At stake in the film is the right to claim a type of California identity, to belong in the house and the city it represents. As part of this, the film makes a particular argument about “nativism” in California. In *The House on Telegraph Hill*, “native” becomes a fantasy, a construction of presence in the California landscape. Alan, for example, continually describes himself as a “native Californian,” a man entitled to everything that he imagines Victoria is trying to take away from him. Alan’s conception of “native” is traced by his presence, and, perhaps more importantly, alludes to a presence of whiteness. By marking history through his presence and absence, Alan marks “native” American identity by the presence of whiteness. In doing so he effectively erases the historical legacies of race that the film is uncomfortable with: Indian, Spanish, and Mexican claims to a Californian identity. This redefinition of “native” allows the film to protect the power structures of whiteness that it is engaged with. These sentiments and definitions are far more complex in *Vertigo*. Like *The House on Telegraph Hill*, *Vertigo* is concerned with a return to a questionable and racialized past, with a deep investigation of “Native California,” and with the haunting memories that refuse to fade away.

### **The End of Film Noir and the Return of the American Gothic**

*The House on Telegraph Hill* represents a noir return to the American Gothic, a reinvestment in the strategies of horror that dared to question social and cultural order. While *The House on Telegraph Hill* was produced at the height of the noir movement and at the center of Cold War activity, it shares this return to the gothic with Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Many noir critics have placed *Vertigo*, and its 1958 release date, at the end of the noir movement, signaling both a debt to and a departure from the stylistic forms that noir films shared and making iconic symbols of Hollywood production during this period. In his essay "Hitchcock at the Margins of Noir," James Naremore observes that *Vertigo* "seldom looks noir-like," citing Hitchcock's experimentation with color, lighting, and the large Hollywood budget backing the picture (276). Like the noir films before it, *Vertigo* includes fragmented pasts, obscured identities, and mysterious anxieties. As with many films in the noir tradition, like *The House on Telegraph Hill*, the narrative produced uncanny disturbances of the future that are linked to anxieties over the past. In this case, the "vertigo" of the film is the temporal disorientation that Scottie must contend with as he attempts to uncover Madeleine's story and the narratives of Carlotta and Judy. As Scottie traces these at times tangled threads of history, he looks for not only the forgotten memories of the city itself, but also attempts to reconcile the disorientation, the vertigo, that they produce.

Through this temporal mobilization, *Vertigo* can be read as a type of "city guide," as an echoing of forms from the mid-nineteenth century that included urban sketch narratives and urban handbooks that detailed city life. However, in *Vertigo* the viewer is

not only acquainted with the city, but also becomes consumed by it, lost in its streets. This is similar to the urban sketch texts of the mid-nineteenth century. Designed to provide a type of cultural catalogue to the city—and all its vices—urban sketches were types of embellished guidebooks that attempted to capture or project a character for cities. In *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915*, Catherine Cocks suggests that “the literary approach typical of the urban sketch did not furnish the reader with a clear sense of urban geography. The authors offered little or no information on the layout of a city’s streets or the precise location of its prominent buildings” (15). As a type of urban sketch, *Vertigo* does not furnish a “clear sense of urban geography” but instead thrusts the viewer into a world of complex twists and turns. The content of *Vertigo* also carries shadows of the urban sketches of the nineteenth century. As Cocks explains, “The urban sketches could easily serve as guides to the very haunts of vice and crime they virtuously warned against. Yet, whatever their actual uses, their authors all urged the reader-visitor to be morally vigilant, at least to protect himself or herself from temptation, if not to do battle against it” (15). If we read *Vertigo* along these lines, the message seems clear: Hitchcock cautions the viewer to remain vigilant, to uncover obscured histories.

This merger between the nostalgia that was evoked at the end of the noir period and the patterns of the urban sketches of the nineteenth century create a resurgence of tropes of the American gothic. At its most basic level the gothic can be described as “the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present” (Lloyd-Smith 1). In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Gothic Literature*, Catherine Spooner and Emma McEnvoy argue, “Gothic

has been defined according to its emphasis on the returning past, its dual interest in transgression and decay, its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear, and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy” (1). In returning to tropes of the American Gothic, *Vertigo* also offers a return to the past, to the buried and lost histories that have been carefully and methodically erased from the present. The “aesthetics of fear” that the American Gothic inspires is the overwhelming sense of anxiety over the past that continues to lurk and bleed into the present and that signals a sense of what Freud calls, “the uncanny.”<sup>65</sup> In producing a sense of the uncanny, the American gothic tropes that help shape *Vertigo* highlight ghostlike sentiments that were thought to be dead and buried.

In returning to the gothic, *Vertigo* also revisits the social and cultural anxieties with which the nineteenth-century gothic tradition was occupied. While at first glance *Vertigo* is a film that is preoccupied with Scottie’s latent memories and traumatic past, these moments serve as an allegorical link to the larger concern of historical ghosts. In particular, *Vertigo* is concerned with the construction and ghostly presence of an American “other.” The psychological threats that plague Scottie illuminate the historical lingerings with which the plot is occupied. As a result, it is the shadow of otherness that haunts not only the American landscape, but also the sense of American nationalism that establishes national myths. Eric Savoy explains, “The gothic cannot function without a proximity to Otherness imagined as its imminent return; consequently, allegory’s rhetoric of temporality—its gesturing toward what cannot be explicitly recovered—aspires to a narrative of the return of the Other’s plentitude on a frontier in which ‘geography’

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<sup>65</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Freud’s notion of the uncanny, see my Introduction.

supplements the impossibilities of language, of both national and personal historiography” (6). While the gothic traditionally construes “otherness” as monstrosity, In the case of the late noir films, like *Vertigo*, which return to a sense of American gothicism, visualize otherness in terms of racial and historical disorientation. In their introduction to *Noir Anxiety*, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo argue that “film noir displays unconscious anxieties over the borders of identity . . . [C]ondensations and displacements of various anxieties over race, sex, and origin work to camouflage the centrality of race and racism, sex and sexism, and nationality and nationalism to film noir; sometimes behind the screen of an amorphous and free-floating existential anxiety over fate or the human condition in general” (xv). In *Vertigo* these “borders of identity” are constantly threatened, crossed, ignored, fashioned, and refashioned to create a sense of confusion and displacement. The idea of “origins” thus becomes one that is not only concerned with blood, but with invention and narrative, as well. These individualized tensions regarding identity become allegorical narratives for national anxieties about metanarrative social constructions. In *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, Teresa A. Goddu argues that American gothic literature both criticizes and undermines national myths of innocence and equality (10). She explains, “While the gothic reveals what haunts the nation’s narratives, it can also work to coalesce those narratives. Like the abject, the gothic serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it” (10). Films like *Vertigo* not only challenge the constructions of “white” and “race” within the historical context and social culture of San Francisco, but also challenge the larger cultural narratives that construct these ideological categories. Reading race in *Vertigo* is a way to read—and deconstruct—larger myths of the “nation.”

At the center of this sense of disruption lies a narrative setting. The location and landscape in the American West are haunted abstractions that must negotiate the cultural lingerings of fragmented and forgotten pasts. *Vertigo* is no exception to this hypothesis. Like gothic texts that highlight the centrality of architectural settings and landscape, *Vertigo* is a narrative that relies on the space of San Francisco—its historical remnants and the architectural legacies that they have left behind—to help visualize the anxieties of race and ethnicity with which the film is concerned. In “Gothic Cities” Robert Mighall argues that the gothic genre of has adapted to the circumstances of modern urban life (54). In suggesting that a fundamental feature of Gothicism is the “persistence of historical memory,” he states, “[F]or the urban Gothic this meant the criminal past haunting the civic present” (55). In *Vertigo* the “criminal past” is tied to the story of Carlotta that repeats itself in the “civic present” of Madeleine, Judy, and their twisted romances with Elster and Scottie. The film traces the “persistence of historical memory” that is concerned with mythic renders, racial imaginings, and ghostly remnants of a past that never fully faded away.

### **Selling the City**

Part if this historical haunting of San Francisco is in the touristic appeal that Hitchcock captures in in the film. Not only did the premier of the film take place in San Francisco, rather than the typical locations of Hollywood or New York, but the film also itself advertised San Francisco as a destination of spectacle. *Vertigo* transported the viewer to the city through the screen. Yet while the sites of San Francisco that Hitchcock uses are scenic, they are far from the glamour that Hollywood was capable of

envisioning. Paramount's VistaVision techniques that created a wide-screen filming process served to not only expand the image before the viewer, but added an element of desolation to the film. As Scottie follows Madeleine through the streets of San Francisco, the viewer is confronted with famous landmarks including the Mission Dolores and the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the Mark Hopkins Hotel (which becomes Madeleine's apartment building), Gump's Department Store, and Podesta Baldacchi, the flower shop where Madeleine buys the flowers for Carlotta. Though so many scenes are located in the heart of the downtown district of the city, what is perhaps most noticeable about Hitchcock's representation of these places is that they are starkly empty. The "travelogue" that *Vertigo* creates follows Madeleine and Scottie "wandering" through the streets that are curiously absent of "wandering" tourists. The city is thus rendered as a landscape that is left open, waiting, and available to the viewer.

This idea was reinforced through the original promotional posters for the film. The posters and ads for *Vertigo* were a way to sell the narrative—and all its hidden histories—to the public. For the studio, a key component of this project was to sell the actual *place* of *Vertigo*. While Hitchcock had originally approved posters that used the "vertigo" visual motifs of the film in order to focus on the psychological thriller that drove the narrative, Paramount Studios was quick to change these images and emphasize scenes that highlighted recognizable San Francisco landmarks. By drawing attention to the setting of San Francisco, the posters and ads for *Vertigo* promised to transport the viewer to that location and its cultural monuments. As Chris Philo and Gerry Kearns argue in their introduction to *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*, "The act of selling places clearly conflates history and memory in the course of

meeting economic needs, but this conflation is also engineered by the bourgeois ‘managers’ of place to reaffirm the ideological commitments that society’s most powerful groups would like to be hegemonic” (26). By selling a sense of place, the advertisements for *Vertigo* were also able to sell the “ideological commitments” of hegemonic power that have shaped racial and cultural discourse in the city long before Hitchcock’s tale of Madeleine and Scottie. The new ads for the film features images of the Golden Gate Bridge, Novak in bed with Stewart by her side, and a female body falling from a tower with a small outline of a male figure looking down (Kapsis 52). These images turned the viewer’s gaze *toward* the city and the complex racial history that it represents in the film.

Through the images on the film posters and the attention that Hitchcock draws to the physical landscape of San Francisco, *Vertigo* offers more than an intricate mystery narrative of mistaken and forged identities. Rather, one of the most significant aspects of the film is that it shifts the location of the American gothic tradition to the West. By placing California landmarks at the center of the narrative, Hitchcock both recalls the past and reinvents the cultural significance of the American West: he both explores and redefines the symbolic frontier of San Francisco. The effect of this dual narrative strategy is the feeling of disorientation—of vertigo—that the film relies on for its dramatic edge. In their introduction to *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, David Morgan, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski argue, “[A]s a result of the Turner thesis, Americans both romanticize their heritage and distance themselves from it. Their illusions about their past leave them disoriented in the present, travelers in a real world following a map of Neverland” (18).



The film's visions of the past leave the characters in the film "disoriented in the present," unable to fully access the past they are connected to through the space that they inhabit.

This sense of disorientation, this visual and cultural "vertigo," transforms the San Francisco landscape into a neo-gothic space. In *Vertigo* these spaces collapse space and time, creating a continuous narrative that reaches into and relies on history. In the spaces to which Scottie follows Madeleine, time collapses so that the narrative of Madeleine and Carlotta becomes a single story. In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock relies on the historical fragmentations of San Francisco to capture the space *while* he simultaneously creates a new space for the viewer—a space where the past and the present collide in a violent and racialized fashion. In this sense *Vertigo* visualizes an American heterotopic space that transforms the classic haunting ghosts of the gothic tradition to the haunting racialized histories of the San Francisco landscape on which the narrative is dependent. This collapse of space and time is demonstrated not only in the narrative threads of the film, but also in its technical composition. While Scottie and his disorienting vulnerability, are part of the of San Francisco that Hitchcock imagines, the landscape that surrounds him only seems to further his fears, to capitalize on his flawed nature. It is in the use of the technique of the Reverse Zoom that the film is able to suggest this sense of vulnerable vertigo. Reverse zoom "is in fact a zoom out, as is evident in its rapidity and in the maintenance of pictorial perspective from the close to the wide aspects of the shot" (Pomerance 217). With reverse zoom "movement from the proximate to the distant position in a reverse zoom shot can be made with stunning speed, to such an extent that we are left unable to detect the movement as being outside of, or distinct from, our very own impulse to produce" (Pomerance 217). This is the technique that creates the *visual*

vertigo of the film. Yet these shots also mean so much more to the narrative. The disorientation created by reverse zoom shots is a mere symptom of the historical disorientation with which the film engages. The real “vertigo” of the film is not the illness that Scottie suffers, but rather the historical and cultural disorientation that the film creates.

The vertigo that Scottie experiences in the film is complicated by the relationship between surveillance and historical/tourist sites with which the film engages. In the film we watch Scottie watching others. Through his pursuits, we are taken to locations that not only reveal something about the plot, but also about the cultural conditions that create the possibility of the plot. Through the “chase” scenes when Scottie follows Madeleine through the city, the viewer is exposed to sites that not only add an element of visual interest to the film by forming points of cultural reference, but ones that are also significant markers of San Francisco racial history. Scottie first begins to follow Madeleine when she leaves her apartment near the Mark Hopkins Hotel. As he begins to follow her down the streets, he watches as she stops at the Podesta Baldocchi florist on Grant Street, Mission Dolores, and The Palace of the Legion of Honor. In this sequence, the idea of the chase is simply employed as a point of departure, as a common noir device to set the motion of the underlying plot. But, these sites are not coincidental “wanderings.” Rather, they are culturally loaded historical constructions that reveal complex and haunting racial histories. What they point to is even more significant. As Scottie wanders through the streets of the city and watches others, it is *he* who is being continually watched. Scottie is the focus of the gaze in the film –and often it is women who look *at him*. Madeleine gazes at him with the power of emotion that he cannot begin

to understand; Carlotta watches him through her framed window of history; Judy's gaze knows secrets that he cannot begin to understand; and Midge's mother-like gaze sees all his shortcomings as a man. These female gazes make Scottie vulnerable not just as a character, but as a man. In his failed attempt to possess and control all of the women he encounters in the film, Scottie ultimately fails to fully gaze back. It is not his gaze that haunts the space of the film, but that of the women that is central to the narrative. This is complicated by the fact that each of these women are sexualized in some way: Madeleine as the object/obsession of Scottie's affection, Carlotta as a tragic romance tale of a storied past, Judy as an play-thing, and Midge as a liberated woman imaged as an overbearing mother-figure. The sexual identities and anxieties that each of these women produce, serve as an allegory for the racial histories that lie under the narrative.

### **Uncanny San Francisco: The *Vertigo* of Cultural Icons**

The constructions of gender and race that the film creates are tied to the space of the city. *Vertigo* is a film that is concerned with icons. The sites that Scottie and Madeleine visit not only determine the scope of the plot, but also serve as cultural referents that designate the film as part of a larger historical and cultural trajectory that is concerned with the space of race in San Francisco. The historical sites that Scottie and Madeleine (and later, Judy) visit are thus *visualizations* of this history. It is through these sites, like Mission Dolores and the Palace of the Legion of Honor, that the film is able to tell a story that transcends the twisted love affair of Scottie and Madeleine and the ultimate betrayal that destroys Judy and Scottie. By using these sites, Hitchcock taps into a complex history that is driven by discomfiting, ever-changing definitions of whiteness

and the historically blurred boundaries between race and space in San Francisco. Scottie's quest to discover the truth about Madeleine, Carlotta, and, later, Judy, is in a sense a journey to uncover the marginalization of racialized women in the city. But what perhaps is most chilling about *Vertigo* is that, like the icons and landmarks that continue to mark and signal San Francisco as San Francisco, Scottie is doomed to continue the motion of a long pattern of marginalization.

However, Scottie is not a passive witness to the unfolding of history that is rendered in the film. Rather, he is an active agent, an active viewer who is just as responsible as the other characters for the perpetuation of racial marginalization in the city. In the film, then, Scottie is a voyeur, a flaneur character who uses the active power of the gaze in order to "watch" Madeleine as she travels through the city and the constructed memories of Carlotta Valdez. Just as Laura Mulvey suggests, the gaze is a symbolic form of power, one that places the gazer in a position of privilege. This power is often gendered and racialized, placing women and minorities at the mercy of a gaze that sees all. In the case of *Vertigo*, the gaze sees not just artificially constructed women and racial categories, but an artificially constructed city, as well. As a self-proclaimed "wanderer," Scottie is left to roam the city seemingly unchecked. As the flaneur, he possesses the power of the gaze that allows him free access to the city—and all its history. With this comes the ability to shape the narrative, to decide what histories he will believe, what histories are important to the story. This power, however, is what marks Scottie as a fundamentally flawed character. His willingness to believe in, or to construct, a history about and for the city also designates him as an easy mark for the

sinister plot that Elster designs and in which Judy participates. In the end, Scottie is just as much at the mercy of the gaze as the characters he watches.

Scottie's deconstruction of Madeleine's story and San Francisco's history begins during his visit to Pop Liebl's bookstore, the Argosy Book Shop. As Scottie begins his investigation of Madeleine and her ancestor, Carlotta Valdez, he asks his friend and ex-fiancé, Midge, if she knows anyone who is "an authority on San Francisco history." Midge offers Professor Saunders at Berkeley but is quickly rejected by Scottie who explains, "No, I don't mean that kind of history. I mean the small stuff. People you've never heard of." Midge quickly catches on and replies, "Oh, you mean the gay old bohemian days. Old San Francisco. Stuff like who shot who on the Embarcadero, August 1879." This scene reveals a great deal about the way the film considers history in relationship to the landscape of San Francisco. In this scene, Scottie sets up an opposition between the "little stuff" and the canonical meaning of history, the things that get recorded, taught, and systematically remembered. By opening up the definition of "history," Scottie is able to access narratives that have long since been buried by "real" history.

At the Argosy, Scottie uncovers key facts not only about Madeleine's familial past, but also about the historical racial dynamics of old San Francisco. The narrative behind Madeleine's madness is one that can only be found at an obscure location because it itself is an obscure part of the city's complex—and often contrived—past. The film suggest that Pop Liebl and his bookstore are the authorities most qualified to act as "authorit[ies] on San Francisco history" because, like the narrative of Carlotta, they occupy a similar marginal position in the city's official cultural landscape. Pop Liebl is

portrayed as a small, foreign man who speaks with a heavy accent. He is not a writer of history, but a seller of it—a man who deals with the narratives that are remembered in and about the city. As a result, his knowledge of San Francisco’s past is portrayed as unassimilated by official history and culture, as pure and raw representations of the “real” city (Corber 155-156). This distinction is key to understanding the position of Carlotta, and thus Madeleine and Judy, in the film. As one critic notes, “Because official histories of San Francisco exclude such ‘small stuff,’ Carlotta’s story can only exist as part of the city’s lore . . . The relegation of Carlotta’s story to the status of lore because it supposedly does not constitute ‘real’ history allows the film’s characters to romanticize it. They treat it as a historical relic; for them, it belongs to the Bohemian days of San Francisco’s past. As a result, they seriously misunderstand contemporary social relations” (Corber 158).

When Scottie asks Pop Liebl about Carlotta, Liebl states, “I remember Carlotta. Beautiful Carlotta. Sad Carlotta.” He then proceeds to tell Scottie and Midge that Carlotta was a beautiful Spanish Californio woman who was innocently seduced by “a rich man, a powerful man.” As Scottie and Midge listen intently, Pop Liebl continues:

It is not a usual story. She came from somewhere south of the city, some say a mission settlement. Young, very young. She was found singing and dancing in the cabaret by that man. And he took her and built for her a great house. And there was a child, yes, a child. I cannot tell you exactly how much time there was of how much happiness, but then he threw her away. Men could do that in those days, they had the power and the freedom. And she became the Sad Carlotta, alone in the great house, walking the streets alone. Her clothes became old and dirty. And the Mad Carlotta, stopping people in the streets to ask, ‘Where’s my child? Have you seen my child?’ . . . She died . . . by her own hand.

From this narrative the viewer learns that Carlotta is a victim of many things—of powerful men, of uncertain upbringing, of low class standing, of racialized

marginalization, of gender discrimination, and of a city that does not and will not protect her. Liebl quickly establishes a polarized dichotomy between the man that takes her as his implied mistress and the “power and freedom” that she so clearly lacks. In this quick scene, Carlotta is imagined as an exotic other, a woman of less than moral perfection, a mother, and a mad woman. She is “thrown away” only to die at her own hand. Not only does this tale foreshadow the fate of other women in the film who will be “thrown away” (Madeleine is “thrown away” because she is an abstraction, Judy is “thrown away” by both Elster and Scottie), but it also furnishes a link to the racialized past of the city. Her madness and, ultimately, her death are symptoms having no space or agency in the city. But, perhaps most importantly, Pop Liebl begins this tale with a warning: “It is not an unusual story.” From the beginning of Carlotta’s story, then, the viewer is conditioned to understand that such history repeats itself. The theme of “throwing” women away is one thing that ties the legacy of Carlotta, the invention of Madeleine, and the destruction of Judy together in the film. However, “[a]lthough Scottie knows there are many such stories as Carlotta’s, he fails to see the connection between her experience and those of the other women in the film. For these reasons he remains blind not only to the persistence of the city’s racist and misogynistic practices and institutions, but also to his participation in their reproduction” (Corber 158).

This unwillingness to merge the past and the present is established from the beginning of the film when Scottie visits Gavin Elster’s office in the Mission District of the city. Elster’s office—like his persona—stands in stark opposition to the narrative that is uncovered about Carlotta. While both are concerned with the “old” San Francisco, these two descriptive narratives reveal very different parts of the city’s past. Elster

married into the shipbuilding business when he wed Madeleine. His office visually juxtaposes the future of shipbuilding and global industry and enterprise with the nostalgia for a constructed and imagined past for the city, illustrating a constant struggle between history and modernity in the film. Images of San Francisco decorate the walls. The black-and-white images seem to trace the early days of the city and the land development on which Elster himself has capitalized. As Scottie gazes at the frames on the wall, Elster laments, “San Francisco has changed. The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast . . . Yes, I would have liked to have lived here then. Color. Excitement. Freedom.” The affinity that Elster has for the city echoes the description of the “gay old bohemian days” of “Old San Francisco” that are alluded to in the film again and again. Yet for all its appreciation of the history of the city, *Vertigo* conflates the shipping yards with the Mission District—a geographic impossibility. The window that frames Elster as he sits behind his desk shows the port of the city directly behind him. Yet the Mission is located inland, rather than close to the lucrative coastal waters of the bay. A more geographically accurate representation would have placed Elster’s office at Hunter’s Point, China Beach, or, at the very least, the Embarcadero. For a man who was so concerned with location, why would Hitchcock make this blatant revision of the San Francisco landscape? Like the pictures that hang on Elster’s wall, *Vertigo* constructs San Francisco as an *imagined* space. Hitchcock’s geographical liberties only further highlight the power of narrative in the construction of place.

But geographies aren’t the only attributes of the story that are forgotten and augmented. The *Argosy*, Elster’s office, and the geographical liberties that Hitchcock takes all shape the narrative of Carlotta Valdez that the film depends on. In *Vertigo*



Carlotta is a symbol of marginalized history that is forgotten, remembered, invented, and reinvented in the film. It is her story that shapes the viewer's perception of San Francisco in the film. This is central because Carlotta's narrative is not simply a matter of reinventing a past for the city; it is also about reinventing the past of race in the city. Carlotta's story traces the marginalization of Spanish, Californio, and Mexican bloodlines in the city and the redefinition of whiteness over time. Because of this investment in the history of race and the social evolution of the cultural capital of whiteness in the city, Carlotta's plight signifies a complex cycle of marginalization through race and gender. Carlotta story, then, is not merely that of a fallen woman scorned by a wealthy lover, but it also carries the history of the Spanish and Californio blood that runs through her (and ultimately Madeleine's) veins.

The lineage that Carlotta represents causes a great sense of anxiety in the film. In Scottie's second meeting with Elster, Elster reveals that Madeleine is Carlotta's great-granddaughter, the product of a child who was taken from the "sad Carlotta" of whom Pop Liebl had spoken. Elster swears to Scottie that Madeleine has "never heard of Carlotta Valdez. Nothing," admitting that her mother revealed these dark family secrets to Elster after their marriage. Elster's concern is one that revolves around blood: "Her grandmother went insane and took her own life. Her blood is in Madeleine." Emphasizing the situation, Elster later reveals, "Madeleine is twenty-six. Carlotta Valdez was twenty-six when she committed suicide." It is the blood that traces the secrets of the past that is of concern in the film. The fact that Madeleine is a descendent of Carlotta creates a continuum in the story and marks her as a suspect figure despite her outward appearance. Her blood is not pure, and her fate is uncertain. This creates personal

tension in the film while alluding to larger national anxieties about race and ethnicity that continued to plague Americans after the World War II and into the prosperity and false cultural security of the 1950s. In *Vertigo*, then, “Her ethnicity is also abject in that it is the return of the repressed other; it threatens to break down the proper borders of the self, especially the borders of Madeleine’s white-American identity” (Oliver and Trigo 105). Madeleine embodies a “repressed other” that has never fully faded from the pages of California and national history, despite overt attempts at eradication. The very presence of this historical thread “threatens” hegemonic conceptions of whiteness and the cultural capital and power structures that come with it. Through linking Madeleine’s appearance of whiteness to a complex racialized past, *Vertigo* thus serves to disrupt the “borders” of white identity by revealing its unstable constructions and constantly shifting definitions.

This disruption is what gives Carlotta and the past that she represents a sense of agency in the film that the other female characters—namely, Madeleine and Judy—are never fully able to replicate. Despite her marginalization, her madness, and her silence, Carlotta is as a figure who gazes back, a woman who looks out. Like Scottie, Elster, the camera lens, and the audience, Carlotta too holds the power of the gaze. This challenges Mulvey’s conception of the male-centered gaze in film. I am not the first to challenge Mulvey’s assertions about the lack of female agency in Hitchcock films. In perhaps the most well-known critique of Mulvey, *The Woman Who Knew Too Much*, Tania Modleski sees women not as “ghostly manipulations,” but as outlets of (limited) expressions of female desire (1). Modleski asserts, “the strong fascination and identification with femininity revealed in them [Hitchcock films] subverts the claims to mastery and authority not only of the male characters, but of the director himself” (3). By having women in the

film that actively *gaze back* at both Scottie and the viewer, *Vertigo* imagines a San Francisco in which the sexualized and racialized ghosts of the past assert a strong sense of agency that dares us to remember histories that have long been forgotten and buried.

This sense of female agency is established from the very beginning of the film during the opening credits. The film begins with a close-up of an unidentified woman's mouth. The camera pans up to her eyes, and she gazes intently into the camera as her eyes shift back and forth, mimicking the motion of film. Soon, the woman's irises begin to widen and eventually give way to an image of a spiral, to a visual representation of vertigo. From this opening, then, it seems that *Vertigo* is a film about women *looking back*, about a female gaze that haunts not only the narratives, but the history that it calls on, as well. Furthermore, this opening makes the viewer slightly uncomfortable. The gaze of the female eyes suggests a sense of anxiety that haunts the film. As we see the eyes move back and forth, searching the outline of the screen, we feel like we are the ones being watched. This reversal of the "viewed" and the "viewer," also signals anxieties about the sexualization of women in the film. The movement of the pupils that we witness has a sexualized quality. As the unidentified woman's eyes widen, our own expectation about who she might be widens. The fact that she remains unidentified means that she could be *any* woman, in the film or otherwise. This not only reverses expectations about the power of the male gaze, but it also firmly threatens such hegemonic structures that lie at the center of gendered racialization in the film.

The construction of Carlotta lies at the crux of this in the film. It is through her gaze that Hitchcock crafts a riveting example of female agency and constructs a critique of the constructions of history in San Francisco. These sentiments are vividly brought to

life through the scenes in which the viewer encounters the painting of Carlotta at The Palace of the Legion of Honor. As Scottie shadows Madeleine across the city, one of the major stops that he makes is at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. The beginning of the scene shows The Palace of the Legion of Honor, empty and ghostlike, as Scottie begins to walk toward the entrance of the building. As Scottie follows Madeleine to one of the galleries, he watches her as she sits before the large portrait and gazes at the figure in the antique gold frame—Carlotta. Scottie then begins to notice the similarities between Carlotta and Madeleine. Slowly, the camera pans to the flowers in their hands, the French twist coil of their lush blond hair, the delicate features of their faces. As Scottie watches the women from the shadows outside the doorway of the gallery, he asks a museum guard, “Who is the woman in the painting?” The guard nonchalantly explains, “That’s Carlotta. Portrait of Carlotta.” This scene is often read as an imagining of the lack of female agency in the film. For example, one critic notes, “In The Palace of the Legion of Honor, we watch Scottie watching Madeleine watch Carlotta in the painting, Carlotta in the picture frame, Madeleine framed by the doorway of the room, Scottie ‘framed’ not only by Elster’s plot but also by the edges of the screen. The screen epitomizes the technique of the film, mirroring, matching itself again, level after level” (Trumpener 182). While all of this is true, while all the characters are “framed” through a type of stylized gaze, I read this scene as a more complex relationship among race, gender, and power. In fact, the most important frame in this scene is the one in which the camera sees the portrait of Carlotta straight on. In this frame, Carlotta is not only looking at the other characters in the film; she is looking directly at the viewer, as well. She is gazing at everyone who gazes at her.

The portrait of Carlotta also makes a chilling commentary on the construction of history and the role of racialization in San Francisco culture. The portrait itself is a construction, a false icon. John Ferren painted *Portrait of Carlotta* especially for the film—it has no life beyond the imaginary that the film constructs (Auiler 83). But the life that it does have within the narrative of the film is highly significant. The museum catalogue that Scottie consults may tell us nothing about Carlotta and the heartache that she endured, yet the very presence of the portrait creates its own detailed narrative about the past of San Francisco and the way that it is remembered. While the portrait places Carlotta—and her story—in the past, it paradoxically serves as a constant reminder that the past is very much alive in the film. The portrait that Madeleine and Scottie gaze at provides a stark contrast to the story of the mad, downtrodden, marginalized woman whom Pop Liebl describes. The Carlotta in the portrait is a refined-looking woman, with delicate, regal features. Her features are *white* features. From the neatly combed blond hair, to the light-hued eyes, to the fair, creamy skin, the image of Carlotta erases her Hispanic identity by visually whitening her features. By projecting her features as white, the portrait serves to reconstruct her story in the film, to reimagine the marginalized past that she represents (Corber 156). In considering the trope of invisibility in Cold War politics of nationalism, Robert J. Corber reads *Vertigo* to suggest, “In recovering Carlotta’s story, the film constructs a counternarrative of the nation’s history and culture . . . [S]tories like Carlotta’s provide crucial evidence of the miscegenated formation of the American people, thereby shattering the national myth of racial purity” (306). Furthermore, she is imagined as *desirable*. Scottie cannot tear his gaze away from her. While her likeness to Madeleine and her dark story contribute to this, we must also note

that she is portrayed not as a downtrodden woman, but as a beautiful and desirable one. This emphasizes her exotic sexuality in the film and creates a link between her and Madeleine that is not just related to a racial line, but to a continual perception of women as sexualized and fetishized objects that can be possessed. By calling attention to these connections, Carlotta's portrait in *The Palace of the Legion of Honor* is thus a space that both erases and maintains a history of otherness in San Francisco. Thus, Carlotta is "established entirely by tales" (Pomerance 248).

It is also important to consider the site of *The Palace of the Legion of Honor* in relation to this scene, for it establishes a sense of legitimacy for both the painting and the history that it recalls and questions for the viewer. Completed in 1924, the *Palace of the Legion of Honor* was constructed to commemorate and was dedicated to the California soldiers who lost their lives during World War I. Crafted in the Beaux Arts style (like the *Ferry Building*) and located in San Francisco's *Lincoln Park*, the *Palace of the Legion of Honor* looks over expansive views of the bay, *Golden Gate*, and city. Its collections include over 4,000 years of ancient and European art.<sup>66</sup> Like so many other haunting structures in the city, the *Palace of the Legion of Honor* can trace its roots to shadows of European history. Inspired by the *French Pavilion* at the 1915 *Panama Pacific International World's Fair*, the *Palace of the Legion of Honor* was constructed to be a

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<sup>66</sup> The early collections at the *Palace of the Legion of Honor* were largely furnished by financial backers Adolph and Alma Spreckels and their large circle of wealthy and influential friends. Alma made many significant gifts to the *Legion of Honor* over the years, including French furniture, silver, and ceramics; European antiques; and a large number of cultural artifacts related to dance and theater. In addition, as a private patron of renowned sculptor Auguste Rodin, she purchased his iconic statue "The Thinker" for the museum (Crisley 232).

three-quarter-scale adaptation of the eighteenth-century Palais de la Legion d'Honneur in Paris. Located on the left bank of the Seine, the original French palace was designed by Pierre Rousseau in 1782 for the German Prince de Salm-Kyrbourg. Serving as a royal residence for only a year, the Palace was eventually overtaken by Napoleon in 1804 and established as the home of the new "Legion d'Honneur" as a reward for civil and military merit. At the close of the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition, the French government granted San Francisco permission to erect a more permanent replica of the cultural and historical structure. While World War I delayed breaking ground for the project until 1921, the project was quickly completed during the early inter-war years and dedicated not only to the preservation of cultural artifacts, but also to the memory of local soldiers and their sacrifices. In his dedication address, Adolph Spreckels said that his purpose was to "contribute to the beautification of our Native city something not only beautiful in itself, but also something devoted to patriotic and useful ends: something which might be dedicated as a suitable memorial of our brave boys who gave their lives to their county in the Great War, and also lend itself, as a home of art and historical treasures, to promoting the education and culture of our citizens, and especially the rising and coming generations."<sup>67</sup> For the city of San Francisco, the dedication of the Palace of the Legion of Honor signaled a new phase of San Francisco history that both celebrated the past and looked toward the future.

This sentiment is echoed in the film. When Madeleine visits Carlotta's painting at the Palace of the Legion of Honor she is both present in the contemporary moment and looks

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<sup>67</sup> This statement comes from a speech that Adolph Spreckels delivered to the Board of Park Commissioners on January 5, 1920.

back to a past that continues to shape her experience in the city. The Palace of the Legion of Honor thus serves as a point of access to the past, the present, and the future. Perhaps more importantly, by setting this scene at The Palace of the Legion of Honor, Hitchcock provides a sense of cultural legitimacy to the portrait of Carlotta. Carlotta's portrait is rendered "as 'authentic' as anything else represented in the catalogue of the Palace" and is established as "the 'real' Carlotta" (Pomerance 248). The image of Carlotta at The Palace of the Legion of Honor and the tragic story that lurks behind the paint and golden frame conjure a sense of the uncanny that haunts the narrative. But instead of Freud's classic version that charts the uncanny as memories that continue to linger at the surface, *Vertigo's* notion of the uncanny is one in which memory is not repressed or assimilated, but is a constant strain on the present. While the story that Elster spins and Scottie wants to believe attempts to transform Carlotta's history into a stylized melodrama, this sense of the uncanny steers the viewer back into history, to the core of the marginalization that Carlotta recalls. As her heir, Madeleine is representative of the uncanny racial shadows that Carlotta's story dictates in the film.

While Madeleine has often been read as a submissive subject—the legacy of Carlotta's madness—as an extension of Carlotta, she represents a complex narrative that is more about the boundaries of racial agency than about a gender-oriented gaze. She is a character who, like Carlotta, *gazes back*. Madeleine recalls a past; she embodies the racial tensions that Carlotta lived. One of the most well-known essays about the women of *Vertigo* is critic Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which argued that all classical narrative films (feature films of the Hollywood era) are tailored to the male point of view—they signal and create a "male gaze."



Women, Mulvey claims, are represented in these films either as passive appendages of men or as ideally desirable bodies eager for visual exploitation. In this dual function, women serve both as a manifestation of the fear of castration that male viewers and characters alike fear and as a fetishized object of male desire. Mulvey goes on to consider the difficulty facing the female spectator at the movies, who, she claims, have no choice but to assume the male point of view, denying her own point of view as a woman, or to submit to male desire as dictated by the gaze. In detailing her argument, Mulvey cites two Hitchcock films from the 1950s—*Rear Window* and *Vertigo*—as prime examples of the dynamic of the male gaze inherent in American film from this period.

While any work on *Vertigo* that considers gender is indebted to Mulvey's critique, the fact that Carlotta and Madeleine have a sense of agency that allows them to "gaze back" at the viewer complicates Mulvey's reading of a singular and all-powerful male gaze in *Vertigo*. In Mulvey's essay, Madeleine is reduced to a constructed woman. And while Madeleine (and Judy) are constructions in some sense—she is a character in a film, she is a character being played by Judy, and she is fashioned by Elster and later Scottie—her character is more complex than a passive agent because of the history that she inherits from Carlotta. If Madeleine is constructed, then so too is the historical narrative that she derives from and represents for the viewer in the film. Madeleine (and Judy) is thus not simply a femme fatale figure in the way that Miss Wonderly from *The Maltese Falcon* is; rather, she is an allegorical figure for the way that history is constructed and manipulated in a California culture that is occupied with racial anxieties. As Modleski explains in her critique of Mulvey, "despite the often considerable violence with which women are treated in Hitchcock's film, they remain resistant to patriarchal assimilation" (3). In the

film, the female characters resist this assimilation by gazing back *into* a racialized past that is foundationally linked to their sexualized positions in the narrative. The fashioning of Madeleine in *Vertigo*, then, is an exercise in the fashioning of racial histories in California. If Madeleine is a construction, she is in fact a *reconstruction* of the narrative that Carlotta represents. In reality, “Madeleine is not what she seems; she is an illusion, Gavin Elster’s creation. Her trances aren’t any more real than she is” (Oliver and Trigo 100). Madeleine is a recreation of a long history, and her presence serves as a complex and detailed testimony of the injustices that run through her veins.

In an example of life imitating art, Kim Novak had more in common with the complexities of her character than the viewer sees across the screen. Like Madeleine, Judy, and Carlotta, she is fashioned and refashioned by Hitchcock. Bitterly resentful of his critiques and demands, the relationship between Novak and Hitchcock is now the stuff of Hollywood legend and lore (or, at the very least, gossip). In an essay titled “How I choose my Heroines” that Alfred Hitchcock wrote in 1931, the director explained, “I have to consider whether my potential heroine is sensitive to direction. In other words, whether she is the kind of girl I can mold into the heroine of my imagination” (75). This statement eerily foreshadowed the relationship between Novak and Hitchcock during the filming of *Vertigo*. The role of Madeleine/Judy was originally intended for Vera Miles, who had starred in Hitchcock’s film *The Wrong Man*. While the film was in preproduction, she became pregnant and had to relinquish the role. Novak was thus seen as an imperfect muse from the very beginning of the production. Like the woman she would play, she was constructed and instructed, marginalized as she struggled to gaze back.

Together, Madeleine and Novak create a ghostlike presence that haunts the film. These ghosts are symptoms of the larger cultural and racial problems that they call upon. Andrew Smith argues in his article “Hauntings” that “the ghost represents that which haunts a culture: its formulation of the self and its troublesome economy” (149). Madeleine’s ghostlike qualities are not about her mental state as much as they concern the history that she stems from, the legacy of race and madness that runs through her veins. By bringing the past into the present, it is not merely the past that haunts her character in the film, but also the haunting effect that she has on Scottie and the viewer. This double haunting produces a space wherein the past and the present visually collide on the screen, transporting the viewer from the contemporary moment and into the complex racial past that is so often ignored, buried, and silenced. Smith suggests that “ghosts are not just the spirits of the dead; rather they are in ‘high’ Gothic texts, ciphers for models of subjectivity which refer to culturally specific notions of psychological trauma” (Smith 148). The ghosts in the film—Madeleine and Carlotta—are not just hauntings of history, but also signal cultural traumas that haunt the nation.

The film achieves this by mapping the history of Madeleine’s body—and the history that it represents—onto the very landscape of the Bay Area, the western point of American empire. In the film, Madeleine’s body is not only an object of male desire, it also traces the history of violence that such desire is symbolic of. Her very existence testifies to the long legacy of racial tension and erasure in California as San Francisco rose to become the center of American empire in the West. This consideration of history is what makes the narrative of *Vertigo* an interesting case study. Robert Corber suggests, “I know of no other Hollywood film from the cold-war era that goes so far in

demonstrating how interwoven the histories of Anglos and Mexicans in the American West. But *Vertigo* does more than acknowledge this aspect of the nation's history and culture. It also exposes how its erasure has distorted the nation's self-imagining" (305). This conception of erasure is not only linked to Madeleine's embodiment of Carlotta's story, but also to the centrality of geography in the film. In "Fragments of the Mirror: Hitchcock's Noir Landscape," Alain Silver argues that geographical sites are the "fragments in the mirror." He explains, "The landscape becomes the ground for active communication with the past, like the Romantic concept of the ruined garden. It fulfills organically as well the archetypal notion of a timeless, Edenistic existence" (118).

This "ruined garden" is vividly brought to life during the scene at the Redwoods. In this scene, Madeleine (possessed by Carlotta) traces the history of her life and the commodification of her body through the history of major global events. As Scottie and Madeleine approach the grove of colossal trees, Madeleine observes that they are "the oldest living things," placing them beyond dates and fleeting moments and establishing them as part of an imaginary permanence. The camera then follows the pair as they approach a park display that includes a cross-section of one of the ancient trees with a sign reading, "The white rings indicate the width of the tree when the various events took place." Scattered across the lines are several key historical moments:

1066: The Battle of Hastings  
 1215: Magna Carta Signed  
 1492: The Discovery of America  
 1776: Declaration of Independence  
 1930: Tree Cut Down

These dates describe key moments that reveal a global context of domination and colonization. While the tale of the tree's rings begins with a moment of hope by dating

the Magna Carta, an English legal charter from 1215 that served as a legal foundation for charters around the western world, including the United States Constitution, the narrative that the cross-section illustrates quickly takes a much bleaker turn. The Battle of Hastings marked the decisive Norman victory in the Norman conquest of England, illustrating the power and bloodshed of determined conquests. The 1492 “discovery” of America begins a long legacy of conquest and genocide of native peoples in the Americas. The Declaration of Independence signals a declaration of an emerging American power that is dependent on both racial and gender constructions and marginalization. Together these narratives string together a long history of dominance, one in which there are always victors who obtain power and those who become marginalized subjects.

While these events are no doubt significant to the context of the film, it is Madeleine’s direct relationship with the tree that is most telling. As she gazes up at the cross-section displayed before it, she touches the wood with her hand and points: “Right here I was born. And here I died. It was only a moment for you.” With a melancholy look glazing over her eyes, she turns and begins to walk off the main path and into the tall shadows of the forest. As Scottie and the camera watch her from a distance, she slips behind one of the massive redwoods. Scottie, the camera, and the viewer must shift their perspective in order to find her as she walks from the darkness of the forest and out into the light of the seashore, where she has a vision that foreshadows her own death, explaining while in her trance that she sees a tower, maybe in Spain, that could only have something to do with her death. This scene links Madeleine to the history that the Redwoods represent in a very intimate way by tracing the historical ghosts of her

ancestry *through* the physicality of the trees and the landscape that they inhabit, establishing a link between Madeleine, Carlotta, and countless other women who were embedded in similar situations of forced dominance. Robert J. Corber gives an insightful read of the redwoods scene in his book, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America*. In considering Madeleine's observations that trace her life through the redwood's rings, Corber explains:

In the context of the dates marked on the tree, she [Madeleine] also seems to be calling attention to Carlotta's exclusion from the history they narrativize: there is apparently no place in official representations of the nation's past for the story of a Hispanic woman who was seduced and abandoned by her Anglo lover in the nineteenth century. Although the dates on the tree are clearly meant to emphasize the fact that the redwoods are the oldest living things on earth, they also represent American history as a continuous, linear narrative that began in 1066 with the Norman Invasion. In linking the "discovery" of America and the Declaration of Independence to the Norman Invasion and the signing of the Magna Carta, the tree suggests that the founding of the United States represents the fulfillment of British institutions and traditions . . . This historical narrative inscribed on the tree acknowledges the nation's Spanish heritage only indirectly in its reference to Columbus's "discovery" of America in 1492. In calling attention to the parts of the nation's past not represented on the tree, however, the film indicates the possibility of constructing a counterhistory of the United States, a history that more accurately represents the experiences of Hispanics born in the American West because it includes stories like Carlotta's. (154-155)

As Corber explains, Carlotta's "exclusion" from the history that the redwoods narrate is a type of double bind that creates a sense of racial tension in the film. On the one hand, this exclusion effectively highlights the erasure of Carlotta's story and devalues her racially branded body in both California and global history. However, as Corber suggests, this scene is much more complicated than this. By virtue of Madeleine's simple action of tracing Carlotta's story across the narrative that the redwood cross-section

details, she asserts a sense of agency that indicate a tangible counternarrative in the film. This counternarrative is what Hitchcock is primarily concerned with in the film—it is the source of the disorienting vertigo.

By tracing the scope of discovery and conquest, the redwood scene articulates the film's focus on the politics of racial erasure. While Carlotta and Madeleine serve as early indications of this erasure—Carlotta's sad story and Madeleine's foggy memory—it is through the construction (and reconstruction) of Judy Barton that Hitchcock solidifies the historical legacy that such radical attempts at erasure create. As Scottie attempts to refashion Judy into his idealized version of a Madeleine who never existed, he unconsciously takes the same path as Elster, Carlotta's rich lover, and so many other privileged men who came before him. In refashioning Judy, Scottie solidifies a legacy of controlling and contriving politics of identity. It is through Judy that the real injustices that Madeleine and Carlotta faced are brought to life. This is compounded by the fact that, despite being part of the plot to seduce Scottie and fake Madeleine's death in order to allow Elster to get away with murder, Judy is the most victimized woman in the film—she is destined to live through the injustices that Carlotta and Madeleine endured again and again. She is destined to be a woman who is thrown away by various men as they are done with her.

It is this “realness” of Judy, this tangibility that makes her destruction all the more devastating. As one critic notes, “Judy is a poor substitute for Madeleine because she is real. Madeleine, on the other hand, wanders wordlessly, like a ghost, bathed in white light for most of the film” (Oliver and Trigo 105). The image that Hitchcock projects of Judy is a far cry from the ghostlike images of Madeleine that float throughout the film.

While the resemblance is undeniable, when the viewer first meets Judy in the film they are met with a shock of garish color and attitude to go with it. As Scottie continues to “wander” through the city after Madeleine’s death, he sees a woman—a vision of Madeleine in disguise—in front of the same flower stand where he once stood with Madeleine. In this scene Judy is simultaneously cast as the spitting image and polar opposite of Madeleine. Her deep brown hair, bright makeup of red lips and darkly shaded eyes, and bright green dress that stretches suggestively across her prominently displayed breasts mark her as more of a “pick up” than the fantastic lady that Madeleine was imagined as. She is the full realization of sexualized desires that Madeleine prompted. Complicating this desire, however, is the reality that Judy is imagined as any other shop girl in the city—as a working-class woman who is far removed from the erotic othering that Madeleine’s racialized past alludes to. But the chilling part of this image is the realization that Judy is very much part of the complex racialized and gendered past that Hitchcock is critiquing. After the viewer witnesses Judy’s flashback that traces her pact with Elster to murder Madeleine, she admits in her letter to Scottie, “I was the tool and you were the victim in Gavin Elster’s plan to kill his wife . . . Carlotta’s story was part real, part invented.” Judy is part of this “plan,” part of the “invention” of history that the film calls upon only to question. Like Madeleine and Carlotta, Judy is a fashioned woman, a construction, a product of time and circumstance who highlights grave historical injustices that never fully fade from the social fabric that creates them.

This is perhaps most evident in Scottie’s attempt to recreate Madeleine through Judy’s body. When Scottie forces Judy up the bell tower at Mission San Juan Bautista at the end of the film, he pleads, “I need you to be Madeleine for a while and when it’s done



we'll both be free." This need for Judy to be Madeleine drives Scottie to pursue a drastic makeover of her that encompasses not only her looks, but also her very existence in his world. This makeover is also highly sexualized. Both Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Dufrenoy in his book *Hitchcock Style* argue that the makeover scene of Judy can be read as a type of sex scene. Perhaps more accurately, we can think of Scottie's refashioning of Madeleine as a type of historical and figurative rape—an aggressive attempt to claim her body and mold it to a particular narrative. When Scottie takes Madeleine shopping, he is insistent that they find the same grey suit and black dress that Madeleine had previously worn. As she stands in the dressing room surrounded by shop women and under Scottie's watchful gaze, she sees the resemblance to the woman who she helped craft only to murder and states, "Scottie, I don't like it." Yet her desire to break from the ghost that Madeleine has become has no effect on Scottie's obsession. As he makes her into Madeleine, he whines, "Judy, it can't make that much difference to you" and "Judy, please. It can't matter to you." While these at first glance seem like the pathetic pleas of a love-torn wanderer, they are in reality moments in which we see the same manipulation that allowed Elster to murder his wife in the film's constructed "hero." In refashioning Judy, Scottie is no longer the innocent bystander or the "victim" that Judy has pegged him as. Through attempting to erase her history and craft a new one, Scottie becomes complicit in the cyclical marginalization around which the film revolves. But, ultimately, Scottie fails. He can no more rewrite the past than he can free himself from his own sinister role in the plot. At the end of the film, as Scottie looks at Judy with fury in his eyes, he declares, "You were the copy. He made you over, just like I made you over. Only better. Did he train you? Did he rehearse you? You were a very apt pupil." His

attempt to re-create what was never there was in vain—in the end he finds that he cannot bring historical ghosts back from the grave or shake them from his own muddled history.

### **Re-Imagining the Gaze: *Vertigo* and Beyond**

The problems of history in *Vertigo* are never fully resolved. In the end, Scottie is left to “wander”—to sift through the past that he has experienced, to wade through the history that he uncovered only to become a part of that history. At the heart of the film—and Scottie’s anxiety—are issues of sexuality and race, space and memory. In trying to discover who Madeline really is, Scottie must necessarily engage in complex questions about the past of the city and the haunting shadows of racial erasure. In questioning his own desire, he must also question the racial motivated modes of sexual conquest that the film engages with. Scottie’s madness and final realizations at the end of the film are symptoms of the historical fractures that all of the characters must contend with—and that we, as the viewers, must also confront. In reaching back into California’s past, *Vertigo* also asks us to think about the future of a city that has been divided along racial. In this sense, it leaves the “imagined future” of San Francisco unresolved.

But this narrative does not end with the final scenes of the film. *Vertigo*’s lingering concerns about California history continued to shape California films. The tropes that Hitchcock used *Vertigo* to deconstruct history have been reproduced and complicated over time. Hitchcock’s own film *Family Plot* from 1976 also picks up the idea of “haunted” California as it examines one family’s search for historical identity in Los Angeles and San Francisco. An example that extends the racial discussions of *Vertigo* is Wayne Wang’s 1982 film *Chan is Missing*. Just as *Old San Francisco* in

Chapter 2 details the extension of racially coded anxieties from indigenous and Mexican roots to Chinese identities, *Chan is Missing* extends the ideologies of time, space, and race that are conceived in *Vertigo* to modern immigrant constructions of urban identity. Recent (and ill-fated) television shows such as *Journeyman* (2007) and *Alcatraz* (2012) also consider the relationship between the past and the present, one that is often imagined between racial and gendered lines and images the “heredity” of the traits of the city. These contemporary example not nly extend the discussions that *Vertigo* engages in, but create new narratives of historical remembrance in that place we call “San Francisco.”

## **Afterword - *New Ceremonies for Racialized Ghosts***

As visitors to San Francisco exit the Alcatraz Island ferry boat and climb onto The Rock, one of the first things they notice against the stones of the crumbling prison walls are the splashes of color that pop against the gray concrete. As their eyes linger on these splashes of red and yellow, they begin to notice shapes and patters that form words and phrases: “You are on Indian Land,” “Indian Landing,” “We the Indians Discovered America,” “This Land is My Land,” “Free.” These displays are remnants of the 1969 Indian of All Tribes occupation of Alcatraz Island. The words remain, reminding visitors of a racialized past that is often glossed over on tours, in postcards, and in representations of The Rock. In encountering these signs we bump into memories of the past as Avery Gordon describes in her book *Ghostly Matters*. This process of encountering the lingerings of the past is an example of Gordon’s paradigm of *rememory*, of re-remembering and re-experiencing the past in the present – of bumping into a memory that continues to haunt and shape the space of the present, and that will continue to weigh on the future. Like Gordon’s conception of *rememory*, we end this project where we began – with questions surround the lingerings of the past, and the haunting reminders of what we have failed to leave behind.

“Mysteries and Miseries: The Racial Uncanny in the American West” is a project that is perhaps most concerned with this paradox of *rememory* - with the spaces that exist between the past and the present. In considering the role of race in the American West in relation to national and global conceptions of racialized identities, shifting definitions of whiteness, and empire, “Mysteries and Miseries” is a project that is necessarily concerned

with the historical foundations that create the cultural abstractions that signifies *San Francisco*. Each chapter in this project has worked to deconstruct myths and memories of the city that have furnished racial ghosts that haunt the relationship between space and race. Central to this is the issue of blood problems in California and the American West. As the texts examined here have illustrated, anxieties about racial mixing, racial difference, aristocratic lineage, gendered difference and racially coded violence are all forms of “blood” that have shaped understanding of race in the American West. Questions of race and problems of blood are constant themes that thread the chapters, histories, and theoretical conceptions of this project together. In ending this project with an examination of the 1969 Indian Occupation of Alcatraz, I revisit – and necessarily complicate – some of these same concepts while simultaneously looking towards contemporary struggles over racial and ethnic identities in the California historical and contemporary landscape.

Chapter 1 began with asking questions about Indian presence and absence in California through a comparative reading of the 1853 dime novel *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco* by A Californian and the anthropological case of Ishi, the perceived “last of the Yahi.” This legacy of presence and absence continues with more contemporary moments of cultural and political resistance. In considering these narratives as part of a larger trajectory, we can place the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz in the contextual framework of race studies in California and the West. When the activist group, Indians of All Tribes took over Alcatraz Island in 1969, they reflected on the complex history of California that these texts help illustrate. In considering the multiple shifts of empire, and in particular, the transitions from Mexican to U.S. controlled

California, they expressed, “Nowhere in this bloody exchange is there mention of the people living around San Francisco Bay prior to, during or after” (Indians of All Tribes 14). In reflecting on this moment, the 1969 takeover and occupation of Alcatraz Island was an attempt to rearticulate a sense of Indian presence in California in a post-modern moment of extreme change. On the morning of November 20, 1969, eighty-nine American Indians landed on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay and claimed the island as Indian land under the terms of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie,<sup>68</sup> which granted Indians the right to unused federal property that had previously been classified as Indian land (Johnson, Nagel, Champagne 27).<sup>69</sup> This moment begins an era of Indian resistance and activism that questioned conceptions of Indian presence and absence not only in the West, but also on a national scale. Furthermore, the Alcatraz Occupation did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it was part of a series of events in a larger national movement for social justice. In reality, “The occupation of Alcatraz Island occurred at the height of considerable urban unrest in the United States. To understand both the causes of the occupation and its consequences of American Indian activism, individual ethnic consciousness, and Native American community survival, it is important to recall the

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<sup>68</sup> Claims to rights over Alcatraz Island under the Treaty of Fort Laramie have been controversial over the years and were at the time of the occupation. Vine Deloria, Jr., one of the leading American Indian political, legal, and religious theorist during the period expressed the following: “Unfortunately, the treaty provision was a myth. Red Cloud had simply remained in the Powder River country until the government withdrew its troops from the Bozeman Trail and then, satisfied that the trail was closed, arrived at Fort Laramie in November 1868 to sign the treaty. During the Alcatraz occupation, when White House staff and Department of Interior lawyers looked at the treaty, they could find no phrase that justified returning the island to Indian occupants; consequently they were blocked from using any executive powers to resolve the crisis” (Deloria 47).

<sup>69</sup> The prison had been closed and the island had been abandoned by the federal government since 1963. At the time of the landing and the occupation, only a small staff of caretakers were regularly present on the island.

atmosphere of the 1960s and the changes underway in U.S. social and political life at the time” (Johnson, Nagel, Champagne 19). By considering this moment as a point in a larger historical shift, this act also illuminates enduring problems of race, space, and agency that are not just specific to the West. Rather, these conflicts speak to national concerns that stem from issues of Empire and American Exceptionalism.

The Indians of All Tribes were one of the major minority organizations during the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. An organization born in urban areas as a result of Termination and Relocation federal policies that were designed to disperse and assimilate Native peoples, Indians of All Tribes was committed to betterment through self-determination and pan-Indian, cross-cultural organization, activism, and education. These sentiments influenced not only the structure and activities of the organization, but were a foundational part of how the organization imaged itself in the political landscape of the Civil Rights Movement. In one of their initial statements from Alcatraz, the Indians of All Tribes declared:

Indians of All Tribes greet our brothers and sisters of all races and tongues upon our Mother Earth. We here on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay, California represent many tribes of the United States as well as Canada, Alaska, and Central and South America. We are holding the Island of Alcatraz in the true names of Freedom, Justice, and Equality, because you, our brothers and sisters of this earth, have lent support to our just cause. We reach out our hands and hearts and send spirit messages to each and every one of you. WE HOLD THE ROCK! (Quoted in Johnson 19)

From the beginning of the occupation, the Indians of All Tribes recognized the movement as a pan-Indian effort that was part of the continuing discourse of civil rights in America. Just as San Francisco has historically been a port city and served as a western hub for the flow of goods and people, the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz became a locus of *global*

ideology concerning the injustice of racialized forms of oppression. “Holding the Rock” became a way to assert ownership over alternative histories and complex memories of racial othering. Their purpose was made clear in the *Proclamation of the Indians of All Tribes*: “We native peoples of North America have gathered here to claim our traditional and natural right to create a meaningful use for our Great Spirit’s land. Therefore, let it be known that our stand for self-determination is on Alcatraz” (Johnson 3). Alcatraz, then, was not merely a symbolic gesture of resistance, but rather was an overt attempt to reclaim sovereignty under land title and usage laws. In assuming ownership of federal property, activist reversed the order of Manifest Destiny and assimilation policies.

Furthermore, these sentiments help uncover the deep historical legacy of Indian presence and absence that Alcatraz illustrates. Like the Golden Gate from Chapter 1, the canonical “history” of Alcatraz Island begins with its first recorded sighting by Spanish soldiers in 1769 (Martini 9). On August 12, 1775, Lt. Juan Manuel de Ayala of the Spanish Royal Navy navigated into the San Francisco Bay and, as he approached one of the larger mass of rocks in the harbor, observed, “It proved so arid and steep there was not even a boat harbor there; I named the island de los Alcatraces (Island of the Pelicans) because of their being so plentiful there” (Martini 11). As a European – and later American – space, Alcatraz is a place that is marked by the legacy of colonialism and the scars and violence of empire. The name of the island itself is derived from European origins, not from Miwok, or Ohlone, or the other tribal groups that inhabited the area and were familiar with the landscape.

Under Spanish and Mexican control, Alcatraz continued to be a vacant fortress island looming in the center of the bay. It was not until after the signing of the Treaty of



Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, and the cession of California and the southwest to U.S. control, that Alcatraz Island began to have a more complex relationship to American Indian presence and absence in San Francisco. As a United States military prison and outpost of American empire, the fortress of Alcatraz offered a unique opportunity to harbor perceived threats to emergent forms of American space and identity. While Alcatraz was a military prison, the U.S government incarcerated at least 32 American Indians (Martini 80), including Papagoes, Paiutes, Apaches, Modocs, Shoshones, Hopis, and even some of the government's own Indians scouts (Fortune Eagle 13). The first Indian prisoner was "Piute Tom" from Nevada, who arrived on Alcatraz Island on June 5, 1873 only to be shot dead by a prison guard two days later while attempting to escape (Martini 80). In August of 1873, two Modocs known as Boncho and Slolux were sent to Alcatraz to carry out life sentences for carrying rifles during the Modoc Wars near the northern border of California (Godwin 71).<sup>70</sup> In July 1884, the Chiricachua Apache chief Ka-e-te-na, a contemporary of Geronimo, was sent to Alcatraz and would spend two years on the island as part of the "reformation of his character" (Martini 81). In 1887, a group of five Apaches were sent to Alcatraz (Godwin 71). In January 1895, 19 Hopi were sent to Alcatraz for a sentence of hard labor, and were later sent to public schools in San Francisco as traveling curiosities (Martini 81).

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<sup>70</sup> Boncho died of scrofula on May 28, 1875 while he was still in prison and is buried on Angel Island. When Angel Island was closed in 1946, his body was disinterred and today he is buried in Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, California (Section E, Lot 357). Slolux was transferred from Alcatraz to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1878. His five-year incarceration is notable as the longest of any American Indian on Alcatraz Island (Martini 80-81).

The story of these prisoners provides an alternative to the canonical narrative of Alcatraz's Spanish "discovery" and incarcerated gangsters that are familiar figures in the history of Alcatraz Island and the modern American West. More importantly, they create a historical precedent for Indian presence in the Bay Area and San Francisco. Like the narrative of Ishi that was discussed in Chapter 1, Indian presence in San Francisco becomes an exercise in Gerald Vizenor's conception of "Post-Indian Warrior" identity. The experiences of these early prisoners can be read as the beginning of formal removal and termination policies in the American West. The attitudes and ideologies formed during this period continued to have a strong influence on Indian presence and absence in the Bay Area through the beginning of the twentieth century. After World War II, for example, San Francisco and the Bay Area became a center of both Indian presence and new forms of cultural identification. As Indian veterans returned to the U.S. after World War II (and later, from the Korean War and the war in Vietnam), urban, pan-Indian communities began to form to address urban Indian cultural, political, and economic needs. It is in these early formations that modern American Indian activism takes root in the Bay Area. Early expressions of cultural activism included the revival of the Sun Dance by the Arapaho and the Sioux from 1946 to 1950, the beginnings of modern Hopi and Six Nations resistance to outside interference in 1948-49, and the struggles of the Six Nations groups in 1957-58 (Forbes 130). While these expressions of activism did not take place in the far West, they do serve as foundational examples of political action during this period and illustrate the growing national discontent of Indian communities over their access to cultural and political agency. As a result, these early expressions of activism create not only a precedent for the occupation of Alcatraz Island, but also

furnish a legacy that connects the colonial past of San Francisco to modern expressions of post-Indian activism.

At the center of these political and cultural movements were the federal policies of Termination and Relocation. The National Relocation Assistance Program was first established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1952. The goal of the program was to help American Indian citizens find employment opportunities off reservations in order to secure a stronger financial future. The program was expanded in 1956 by the enactment of Public Law 84-959, which authorized the BIA to provide American Indians between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five with vocational training. The Relocation Program underwent further evolution in 1962, when it was renamed the Employment Assistance Program and expanded to include vocational training and placement on or near reservations, or in select metropolitan areas. Under these new expansions, those who relocated under the program were also provided with transportation to one of eight urban areas – including the Bay Area – and were promised vocational training, assistance with securing employment, and other cultural and psychological services to help aid the adjustment to city life (Johnson 8). In reality, the Relocation policy was yet another failed attempt at termination policies that attempted to “solve” the “Indian Problem” that has plagued the notion of American Empire in the West for centuries. Many indigenous people ended up not assimilating into urban societies, but rather returning to their reservations with new and deep psychological and cultural hauntings. These systemic failures led to the intensifying of other problems, including poverty, alcoholism, and cultural alienation. Federal statistics estimate that by 1967, more than 61,000 American Indians had been given Relocation “assistance” in urban areas (Fortune Eagle 36). The

BIA estimated that, when combined with the Adult Vocational Education programs and the effects of the legacy of Termination, “approximately 200,000 Indians [had] been moved to urban areas in the last ten years” [between 1958 and 1968] (Fortune Eagle 36). This mass exodus from reservations marks the most culturally complex migration of indigenous people since the policies of Removal in the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Fortune Eagle explains, “I called the Relocation Program the ‘Law of Unintended Consequences.’ What it did was to create a whole new segment of American Indians who existed aside from federal laws, apart from their own tribal laws, and at a growing distance from even their own tribal customs and cultures. That didn’t assimilate them as federal authorities had hoped” (Fortune Eagle 56). As a “Law of Unintended Consequences,” Relocation produced many issues that are closely linked to systematic forms of racial othering and anxieties over social and cultural mixing. Just as “Mysteries and Miseries” engages with the “unintended consequences” of the racial and colonial hauntings of the West, Relocation policies become a locus for political and racial remembrances that continue to linger in the history of spaces.

But rather than “solve” the “Indian Problem,” these policies and practices of termination led to new expressions of self-determination. Foundational to this are issues of sovereignty. In this context, the ability to self-govern becomes essential to reversing the colonial order. Native American writer and political activist, Vine Deloria, Jr., defines sovereignty as “continued cultural integrity” (quoted in Wilkins 98). In this sense, sovereignty is defined not only in terms of self-governance and political power,

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<sup>71</sup> There had not been such mass removal of Native Americans since the Trail of Tears in 1838 that had forced the Cherokee into Oklahoma Territory (Fortune Eagle 36).

but in relation to cultural expressions of historical difference that illuminate colonial relationships in the present. The Indian Occupation of Alcatraz was an expression of sovereignty for the Indians of All Tribes because it proved to be a catalyst for cultural and political expression of Indian identity for decades to follow. The Occupation of Alcatraz Island began a nine-year period of Red Power activism and mobilization that worked to transform national perceptions of American Indian identity and political reality. The period between the Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 and the Longest Walk in 1978 was a time of political occupations that included more than seventy movements and takeovers. These included occupations of the BIA headquarters in 1972, Wounded Knee II in 1973, and the June 26, 1975 shootout between American Indian Movement members and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Along with Alcatraz, these displays formed the core of the Red Power Movement.

One of the issues that these displays of pan-Indian political power illustrate is the developing connection between Diaspora Studies and American Indian literary and cultural studies. While Diaspora Studies has traditionally been discussed in relation to African American, Asian American, and Jewish cultural and political identities, we can apply them to the context of American Indian removal and subsequent movements to reclaim and reestablish a politically defined homeland. When tribes were “officially” and systematically displaced west with the enactment of the 1830 Indian Removal Act, Indian communities were forced from their ancestral lands as part of the solution to the “Indian problem.” As one of the first civically sanctioned acts of “termination,” the Indian Removal Act solidified a long history of forceful removal and displacement of

indigenous peoples on the continent. In *Removals*, Lucy Maddox explains argues that forced removal was not only an attempt to free lands, but also a means of “assimilating” Indians into U.S. cultural paradigms. Through the displacement of indigenous bodies, there is also a sense of cultural replacement. This struggle to regain a sense of history, and a sense of self, becomes manifest in modern political movements against such systematic forms of cultural genocide.

Gerald Vizenor’s 1999 novel, *Chancers*, illustrates and complicates these sentiments in graphic detail. *Chancers* is a tale of sacrifice in the name of reckoning. The novel centers on the University of California, Berkeley, providing a social commentary on the extensive Native remains collection owned by the university and held by the Phoebe Hearst Museums of Anthropology.<sup>72</sup> The novel traces the violent activities of a group of students known as the Solar Dancers who draw their strength from the mythic figure of the wiindigoo to create “their own theatre of cruelty at the University of California” (Vizenor, 29). In attempts to free Native remains from their colonial bondage at the museum and university, the Solar Dancers conduct a series of sacrifices on the Berkeley campus. Through vengeance, the solar dancers seek to rewrite the wrongs of history. Through sacrifice they vow to set souls of the colonized free and damn those of the colonizers. These events are framed as memories that revolve around colonial systems and structures. Through construction of memory and ritual in the novel, *Chancers* provides a social commentary that reflects the enduring force of colonialism in

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<sup>72</sup> This is the same museum where Ishi lived after his re-emergence from the forest. At the time of Ishi’s occupation, the museum was located in San Francisco near the medical campus (see Chapter 1). In Vizenor’s novel he focuses on the museum’s current location on the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

the historical memory of the Bay Area and the systems and structures of power from which they are born.

To produce this colonial commentary, Vizenor first rewrites history in the context of the Solar Dancers by reimagining historical narratives through the lens of the colonized body. In this way, *Chancers* provides an anti-colonial narrative in response to the colonial atmosphere that still pervades the United States and its museum system. In the novel, the Solar Dancers have two identities, the mythic monsters of the wiindigoo and students in the Native studies department at the University of California, Berkeley (Vizenor, 9). In the world of the novel, “the wiindigoo are winter monsters and cannibals in anishinaabe stories, but the new wiindigoo haunted the campus as native students and solar dancers. They were possessed by the ideologies of victimry” (9). These monsters, born out of traditional stories and myths, become part of the modern day through the colonial history that they have been forced to endure. The “victimry” that Vizenor describes is not only the reminder of colonialism, but also provides the fuel for the project of sacrifice that the Solar Dancers devise. In the trickster manner, the creep through campus in order to avenge the dead through ritualized forms of sacrifice.

Though they transform murder into a sacred ritual in the novel, Vizenor is quick to point out that this violence in refutation of victimry is far from traditional. He makes it clear that “the wiindigoo monster is not a tradition, but a wicked, cultural separation, and the customary sacrifice is the other side of victimry” (51). The wiindigoo monster is a creation of sheer violence and hatred, born out of a colonial context. In reality, the wiindigoo is “a cannibal monster” that feeds off of other dead human beings (Vizenor, 6).

In its quest for redress, the wiindigoo and the solar dancers that embody its spirit of vengeance and destruction. Vizenor explains:

The solar dancers, in a sense, were the mutant vampire of a secular, native separation in the city. You could say that the stories of the wiindigoo are the consequences of five centuries of abuse and cultural dominance. The hatred, you see, was a blood feud that may never end. The native students, it seems to me, have their own fears of being devoured by giants, the academic wiindigoo on campus. So, the antidote was to become a solar dancer and devour the evil enemy. (27)

These monsters feed off of the living and the dead. They act to overturn the “cultural dominance” that has been the result of five hundred years of colonial rule. The intense hatred built up causes the solar dancers to use violence to rewrite history. It is a response to fear. This newly designed and articulated sense of history is constructed to conquer fear and reverse the roles of the colonial other and the colonizer. This is illustrated in the fact that the solar dancers “were the apostles of an ironic absence, and they resurrected native chancers by sinister curses, resentment, possession, sacrifice, and victimry” (Vizenor, 51). The native chancers are the bones, the spirits, that are kept locked away in museums and warehouses, far from their ancestral places of belonging. The chancers become the focal point of a new, reverse-ordered form of conquest, in which the original colonizer is now being hunted by the spirit of the wiindigoo.

In the novel, the treatment of remains functions to create a new sense of memory that museums serve to perpetuate. This is articulated in *Chancers* as a misuse of the sacred. Vizenor argues that memories are sacred creations and that the “sense of the sacred is secret, and secrets are much closer to creation than authority, sacrifice, moral liturgy, or victimry” (11). This is a direct opposition to “objective” forms of science that



seek to dispel secrets and conceptualize and compartmentalize all aspects of human life. The secrets and the sacred of the memory that Vizenor envisions are related through the act of story. In *Chancers* Vizenor asserts that “stories create our memories and sense of native presence” (85). However, the stories that Natives create concerning their histories and belief systems and the stories that Vizenor is trying to combat in *Chancers* offer two very different visualizations of modern Native existence and the relationship between colonial histories and structures of power. As a result, he suggest that, “*Indians* must be some modern invention” (Vizenor, 92). This invention is far from the objective stance of science, but rather reflects the ideologies of conquest, colonization, and the violent set of power relations that have emerged from this history. The wiindigoo are a response to this in the novel. In *Chancers* “the wiindigoo monster lures those who have been weakened by contradictions, and devours the insecure with authentic stories” (Vizenor, 51). Through the reign of the wiindigoo, the true stories become a source of power; memory becomes a source of power.

This construction of memory is structured by overarching ideals of dominance and power that reflect the social stratifications along cultural and racial lines that this project engages with. In reality, “remembering past events, through either narratives of direct experience, permitted the development of systems of culture and facilitated the use of group reasons for asserting mastery and control over events” (Eber, 3). This creates not only false perceptions of other people and cultures, but also builds an American myth and system of ideology which serves to unite a nation through a common, shared past. Memory and representation become key components in the process of national myth making and perpetuation (Eber, 17). Through the process of selective memory and myth

making “memory is lost and history ill served” (Kavanagh, 2). This is the crucial point of *Chancers*. The false construction of memory creates a forceful opposition to the notions of memory and the sacred that Vizenor articulates in the novel. Vizenor points out that “the sacred was a secret, but who could ever name the sacred of native traditions? The sacred was in the story” (Vizenor, 17).

As the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz and Vizenor’s novel *Chancers* suggest, the relationship between race and space is one that is constantly in flux, shifting through multiple layers of history, ideology, and memory. These sentiments are echoed in this project. In considering the re-memory of these spaces, this project extends conversations about the haunting space of the West by linking formations to popular forms of cultural production. By paying attention to these lingerings and acknowledging the continual presence of the past in the ever-changing landscape of the present, we notice not only narratives of resistance, but of our own diverse histories. As a “native” Californian, and a woman of mixed racial descent, I must continually “bump into” the memories of my own ancestral past. In negotiating the geographical and ideological spaces that form my own identity, I have been drawn to these texts and discussions for personal and professional reasons. In exploring these shifting relationships between space and race, I propose that we all look inward to discover our own complex beginning, our own origins.

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