

SALLY BREEN

Hollywood Made Me

Introduction

Hollywood Made Me and the accompanying *Vertical Vegas* are both drawn from a larger study, *Future Frontier*, which explores ideas about the production of culture in postmodern cities and the exchange of external and internal processes that occurs between people and places. The project articulates what I see as particular cultural processes of the “new frontier,” cities which have developed in ways that depart from conventional understandings of what constitutes urban environments and urbanism. There are co-relations between cities developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the increasing global influence of American popular culture, and new millennium developments redefined by technological insurgence; via this convergence we have seen the emergence of a new kind of city, one that offers accelerated, ahistorical, and dispersed spaces and experiences. My theorising of the “new frontier city” is explicated and represented by Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Australia’s Gold Coast. All of these cities can be understood as sites which do not meet the usual expectations of urban

formations and cultural practices and as sites marked more by impermanence than continuities.

The relationship between urban formations and postmodern cultural signification is mimicked by my texts. Associations are developed whereby key characteristics of the new frontier city, such as spectacle, subterfuge, simulation and speculation, are manifested by my thematic and stylistic approaches. The work examines the collapse of distinction between the “real” (traditionally represented by the city and urban formations) and the hyperreal (presented by fictionality). I see and position the cities of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Gold Coast as texts—as new frontier cities where the language of signs, simulation and consumption permeates the cultural and urban fabric in intriguing ways.

I argue for the new frontier city as a site rich in narrative potential. I critique readings that privilege eurocentric, modernist notions of high cultural values and cosmopolitanism which continue to exclude the new frontier from “serious” cultural status. While the texts are influenced by and contribute to understandings in the realm of urban policy and analysis, each ultimately functions as a treatise on how the writer can merge both fictional and non-fictional perspectives to construct meaning and narrative in the seemingly random and impenetrable urban landscapes of the new frontier.

Fig. 1 Australia’s Gold Coast: Skyline (Gold Coast City Council)

Fig. 2 Australia’s Gold Coast: Q1, the tallest residential tower in the southern hemisphere (Sunland Development)

Fig. 3 Australia’s Gold Coast: Aerial View (Gold Coast City Council)

Fig. 4 Australia’s Gold Coast: Dusk (Gold Coast City Council)

Gittes

There's going to be some irate citizens when they find out they're paying for water they're not getting.

Cross

That's all taken care of. You see, Mr Gittes, either you bring the water to L.A.—or you bring L.A. to the water.

Gittes

How do you do that?

Cross

Just incorporate the Valley into the city so the water goes to L.A. after all. It's that simple.

Gittes

(nods, then) How much are you worth?

Cross

(shrugs, then) I have no idea. How much do you want?

Gittes

I want to know what you are worth—over ten million?

Cross

Oh, my, yes.

Gittes

Then why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?

Cross

(a long moment, then) The future, Mr Gittes—the future.¹

On a Sunset Boulevard overpass Jake Gittes gazes down at what's left of the Los Angeles Riverbed below. "Sun glazes off its ugly concrete banks. Where the banks are earthen, they are parched and choked with weeds."² This is a town where a man can drown in a riverbed in the middle of a drought and no one is supposed to figure it out. Just another riddle in the city, a riddle without a client. But Jake Gittes is not Jake Gittes, he's Jack Nicholson and this is not L.A. but *Chinatown*, a screenplay by Robert Towne.

This is a fiction. Scene 99. This is a story, a film noir drama about water and Los Angeles, but it is also part fact, part documentary and part historical excursion. Jake Gittes never actually happened, his nose was never sliced open for its flagrant curiosity, but the water did happen; the diversions, the run offs and the theft. Los Angeles did steal its own water. However, it is the first "fictitious" incident, Jake Gittes and his nose, that leads us to the water, brings us to the moment where we reflect on the possible reality and

consequence of Los Angeles' otherwise erasable development. It is the film and not the corrupt events themselves that are visible. We arrive at this recognition via fiction.

Robert Towne, the storyteller, navigates the public consciousness through the parched riverbed of Los Angeles history, aware that the history of this celluloid city, that histories in general, have always only been a series of fictions. And so in *Chinatown* we arrive at the point of intersection, where all Los Angeles' stories meet on pages and screens.

Los Angeles is one of the world's most mythologised cities but unlike other fabled metropolises, such as Paris, Rome or Jerusalem, its infamy is apolitical and agnostic. It has achieved unquestionable cross-cultural standing with an almost paradoxical lack of historical or religious subtext. L.A. has not been "created" so much from evolutionary or historical moments as through the poetic invention and supplication of words and images. It has been founded and sold on the promise, rather than the declaration, of meaning. This contextual ambiguity produces and infuses the city's textual and filmic representations. The literature of Los Angeles is loaded with images—appropriated, derivative and iconic—because LA is a borrowed, temporary landscape where the filmic vision of the city overwrites and/or underwrites every other representation of it. This self-referential tension is captured beautifully by the collaboration of auteurs, Robert Towne and Roman Polanski, in *Chinatown*.

In Towne's screenplay, Chinatown is manipulated as a site of extrinsic danger. As a distant metaphor for trouble it has strong dramatic effect and plays on the notions of organised crime that its municipal visibility invites and creates. It is the recurrent presence of this site for the character of Gittes that means we are invited to imagine, again and again, the "infamous" district and his place in it. And just like Gittes, the

consistent contemplation of Chinatown acts as our primary diversion, a process that mimics contemplation of the city itself. What we expect is not what we receive.

The corruption witnessed in the film is not a virus spreading from Chinatown to the rest of L.A. but is a defect already present in the business, corporate and official veins of the whole city. Polanski and Towne show us that the safety Gittes covets is not necessarily geographical and that his immunity to public conspiracies is not granted. Gittes has removed himself from the red light district, from the police force, from Chinatown but he can't escape the fallout of civic corruption. Now he can feel the danger but he can't see it. Gittes' failure to clarify and recognise in time the series of masked manoeuvres occurring around him results in narrative tragedy: a pattern of failed comprehension he inadvertently repeats.

Misunderstanding is at the heart of *Chinatown*, lurking even in the apparently innocuous phrases.... [Gittes'] inability to perform these traditional detective functions of clarification and explanation allows Chinatown to preserve its mystery.³

By deliberately focusing on a process of concealment, Towne and Polanski not only subvert the assumptions of noir cinema, they effectively interpret a period of Los Angeles' ambiguous past. Like their detective, this city does not adhere to convention. Like Jake, it is in rebellion against its past and therefore the representation of it is saturated by a series of perplexing illusions and tricks. The absence of history is the mystery. The incriminating secrets of the past equate to the contemporary riddle but rather than retrace, the film asks these questions by moving forward: the trip is more an investigation through the confusions of the present than a journey back. In this way the writer and director effectively map Los Angeles, a city with an invisible history.

I draw on *Chinatown* because it assists in contextualising my own narrative position; it provides an access point to the interpretation of new frontier cities and their methods of cultural production that is otherwise difficult to articulate. Cities like Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Australia's Gold Coast are places where images resonate, where pictures overlap and imitate each other. In this way *Chinatown* offers a valid and useful model of contradictory signification, for it becomes apparent in most analytical literature on Los Angeles that the sense of lack and failure which emerges is infused with a European imaginary. That is, a great deal of analysis is referred through an imaginary whose framework is embedded and striated with hierarchal structures, sedimented history, centrifugal systems of operation, a sense of permanence and a privileging of space that does not apply itself effectively to the new frontier.

Los Angeles is a virtual city, a discontinuous narrative. Its "meaning" cannot be discerned from the fictions it spins but from the gaps that open up between them. This kind of communication occurs not on the page, the postcard or the placard but in the open air. It requires an absence of things in order to move. Like a satellite dish it faces out, to the sky and preferably to the sun, receiving messages that simultaneously travel through and bounce off matter. It engages with the type of transmissions that one cannot see. In a city like this no monument can ever compete with the unlimited access the imaginary provides. There is no boundary—the recall extends to a vanishing point where what is supposed to be remembered is already forgotten. Without grounding, these images continue to proliferate:

There would be about a hundred teenagers dancing in front of a huge screen on which the videos were played; the images dwarfing the teenagers and I would recognise people whom I had seen at clubs, dancing

on the show, smiling for the cameras, and then turning and looking up to the lighted, monolithic screen that was flashing the images at them. Some of them would mouth the words to the song that was being played. But I'd concentrate on the teenagers who had forgotten them; the teenagers who maybe never knew them.⁴

Such images form the variances of my own cinematic recall, from the atmospheric, to the specific, and the sublime. Edward Norton kicking a black man's skull into the kerb in *American History X*. Robert Downey Jnr. slumped against a sculpture wall, reflecting a blue pool in *Less Than Zero*, the camera panning in slow motion across the perfectly still water to his face. Steve Martin talking to a road sign. The acid rain in *Blade Runner*. The anti-urban flight of Los Angeles skateboarders in *Dogtown And Z Boys*. *Colours* and its gang warfare—the world reduced to blue and red. Death's face on *Mulholland Drive*, and the “white male panic”⁵ of pre-colour noir. And then there are those long-line streets dotted at precise intervals with one hundred and twenty-nine different species of palm tree; all of it hyperreal, and all of it in my head; an audiovisual junkyard of inherited memories and inscriptions out of which I can only build a replica of Los Angeles, an amorphous shell. To expect these images not to lie would equate to trusting my own sick eye:

If according to Kafka cinema means pulling a uniform over your eyes then television means pulling on a straitjacket, stepping up an eye training regime that leads to eye disease, just as the acoustic intensity of the walkman leads to irreversible lesions in the inner ear.⁶

Writing the City

A cab ride in Los Angeles will take you through spaces that have more life on the screen than they do off it. There is where this film was shot. That is where this actor was. This is what “they” made here. On and on as you alternate between the only states that matter in

this city, speed and gridlock. And before you know it you have already passed by the scene you are trying to re-imagine. There was the week, the person, the moment that wasn't. The space of Los Angeles is like high-grade slate—the only thing it captures and reflects is light; everything else slides away. This evasive sense of identity and placement is reflected succinctly in literary representations of Los Angeles. Californian essayist and novelist Joan Didion is revered for her “studiously anti-climactic and fragmented fiction” and for her ability to render “uneasy,” “self-conscious” and “remote” female protagonists who all display large degrees of “passive detachment.”⁷

The anxious narrators of her disjointedly elliptical novels are always interrupting, challenging, undercutting themselves. By fits and starts: that is how they write, a stylised stuttering that has become Didion's trademark delivery. That is also how her characters live. The Didion protagonist is a woman adrift in history, her own and America's.⁸

The remote position of principal narrators in Didion's work is also prevalent in the majority of fiction written in and about California. It is a position that both contradicts and confirms popular notions of the territory as a site of cultural excess and confusion, for while these characters appear loose, indiscriminate and fragmented they often display acute levels of external awareness—a characteristic not often recognised immediately as geographically attributable alienation. Theirs is not an introspective intelligence nor do they indulge often in extravagant emotional display, rather the narrative characters reveal unhinged but controlled temperaments concerned with the outside, with a reserved capacity for mute reflection. Like Didion, many other Californian writers have been, “expert at coolness, numbness in hot climates’.”⁹ In the memoir *Where I Was From*, Didion is startled by the “pragmatic” detachment of the voices of her own family and their contemporaries in the crossing accounts, diaries and oral histories which describe

the harsh immigrant journeys to California across the unforgiving territories of the western frontier. These were people “given to breaking clean with everything and everyone they knew,”¹⁰ who sometimes suffered and lost irrevocably in their quest to arrive:

The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried. They were women, these women in my family, without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation, and later when there was time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight or major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on schedule.¹¹

Migratory quests and odysseys of faith, where other people’s children were left for dead, where people survived on the cut throat of a deer, or froze to death in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, had infused the women in Didion’s family with a resistance towards hesitation as well as imbued California with a peculiar tradition of heroic embellishment and a characteristic narrative position that tended towards the mythological. The reserved and distant points of view so prevalent in Californian literature resonate with a dark luminescence and a barely concealed sense of imminent danger that are as much a reflection of a contemporary sense of displacement and alienation as they are an attempt to capture the brutality and heroism of its fabled frontier past. In *Where I Was From* Didion questions the “artlessness” of the crossing story: “There survives in their repetition a problematic elision or inflation, a narrative flaw, a problem with point of view: the actual observer, or camera eye is often hard to locate.”¹² Of one such account she asks,

Who witnessed this moment of departure? Was the camera on Josephus Cornwell’s mother, following her son with the last look? Or on the son

himself, glancing back as he vanishes from sight? The gravity of this decisive break demands narrative, conflicting details must be resolved, reworked into a plausible whole.¹³

Curiously this is not a demand Didion makes of her own creative work, nor is it a defining trait of much Californian fiction. The problematics of the omniscient narrative and the displaced witness continue to define the Californian narrative position, even when, as it is in Didion's case, the story is delivered in the first person. Ruptures, confusions, second-hand accounts, secrets, mysteries and diversions saturate California's cultural landscape to the point where narrators, however they are drawn, are meant to be brought into question and distrusted. In the following extract from *American Tabloid*, James Ellroy shifts and distorts the "camera eye" without actually changing the point of view. The reader is drawn into one position and is just as quickly relocated to somewhere else. We are not sure at times whether we share the view of the main protagonist or remain solely in the viewfinder of the omniscient narrator—the narrative voice shifts from a beat not unlike relentless television to a slower tempo which gives the impression that Ellroy is backing up favourably against the inside of one of his character's heads. This level of paranoid narrative distortion means that we are never really convinced of who is speaking or who is actually watching who:

He always shot up by TV light. Some spics waved guns. The head spic plucked bugs from his beard and fomented. Black and white footage: CBS geeks in jungle fatigues. A newsman said, Cuba, bad juju-Fidel Castro's rebels vs. Fulgencio Batista's standing army. Howard Hughes found a vein and mainlined codeine. Pete watched on the sly—Hughes left his bedroom door ajar. The dope hit home. Big Howard went slack faced. Room service carts clattered outside. Hughes wiped off his spike and flipped channels. The "Howdy Doody" show replaced the news—standard Beverley Hills hotel business. Pete walked out onto the patio—poll view, a good bird-dog spot. Crappy weather today; no starlet types in bikinis. He checked his watch, antsy.¹⁴

The fragmented perspectives shared by Didion, Ellis and Ellroy are the extreme reactions and manifestations of the frontier experience no longer with anywhere else to go. It finally ruptures here, at the edge of the country and turns back on itself, annihilating but at the same time offering a distance that separates the protagonist from the agonies and corruptions s/he perceives.

In this way the position of the “native” Californian is as inflated and elevated as Didion claims it always has been. For the frontier generations of the American West, ideological possession of California was something that had to be earned. It was a test of initiation Didion often experienced as a randomly attributable “Code of the West.”¹⁵

New people, we were given to understand, remained ignorant of our special history, insensible to the hardships endured to make it, blind not only to the dangers the place still presented but to the shared responsibilities its continued habitation demanded... but the ambiguity was this: new people were making California rich.¹⁶

This pervasive notion of an elusive but “real” or “native” Californian underwrites the remove of California’s literary characters. These are voices that speak from the inside of a culture seen to be inhabited by strangers, impostors, aberrations and amoral events. Often the protagonist hovers at the edge of apparent horrors not quite participating but not quite looking away:

When we get to Rip’s apartment on Wilshire, he leads us to the bedroom. There’s a naked girl, really young and pretty, lying on the mattress. Her legs are spread and tied to the bedposts and her arms are tied above her head. Her cunt is all rashed and looks dry and I can see that it’s been shaved. She keeps moaning and murmuring words and moving her head from side to side, her eyes half closed... Spin kneels by the bed and picks up a syringe and whispers something into her ear. The girl doesn’t open her eyes. Spin digs the syringe into her arm. I just stare. Trent says, ‘Wow.’¹⁷

Characters such as Blaire in Ellis's *Less Than Zero* coast through the city barely raising an eyebrow or a pulse; acting as if the world owes them a future while remaining simultaneously incapable of deciding what that future may be; because, as the narrative paradoxically reveals, often their fate has already been decided for them.

This pervasive combination of passive intelligence, apathy and fatalism separates these voices from the characters penned by a generation of Californian writers who went before them. Rather than expressing an abhorrent rage at the disintegration of "paradise," the reader is left with an overriding impression that these contemporary characters have thrown their hands up at the end of a long journey and submitted California to the endless onslaught of "new people," to anyone who wants to take a shot. In the case of Huxley, Chandler, Waugh and West, the detachment of the narrator was much more sardonically disengaged and compounded by a marked European influence; both the language and the point of view were inherited and removed to the point of condescension in a way that the complicit protagonists of Ellroy, Ellis and Didion could never be:

Aimee Thanatogenos spoke the tongue of Los Angeles; the sparse furniture of her mind—the objects which barked the intruder's shins—had been acquired at the local high school and University; she presented herself to the world dressed and scented in obedience to the advertisements; brain and body were scarcely distinguishable from the standard product, but the spirit—ah the spirit was something apart; it had to be sought afar; not here in the musky orchards of the Hesperides, but in the mountain air of dawn, in the eagle-haunted passes of Hellas. An umbilical chord of cafés and fruit shops, of ancestral shady businesses to the high places of her race. As she grew up the only language she knew expressed fewer and fewer of her ripening needs; the facts which littered her memory grew less substantial; the figure she saw in the looking-glass seemed less recognizable to herself. Aimee withdrew herself into a lofty and hieratic habitation. Thus it was that the exposure as a liar and a cheat of the man she loved and to whom she was bound by the tenderest vows,

affected only part of her. Her heart was broken perhaps but it was a small inexpensive organ of local manufacture.¹⁸

The observational device Waugh utilises here not only allows the narrator to keep his distance, it also allows him a position from which to pass absolute judgment, for the remove of the character is reiterated by the conservative language of permanence, tradition and a sense of history that Waugh has brought with him from Europe to the territory. This is not the language of Los Angeles, nor is it the language of Aimee Thanatogenos, rather it is the language of the critique of both. It is the collision of these contrary sensibilities that gives these imported narratives their intriguing tension. The confusion arises for the narrators when the acute alienation they feel is confounded by the ingénue of Los Angeles, however she is symbolised or fashioned. Their descriptive desire is so repressed, so guiltily formed, that it manifests itself in a twisted wish for the annihilation of their heroines and ultimately, for the city's apocalypse. Take West, for example:

None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that her platinum splashed against the red plush of the chair back. The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they really didn't illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognised how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical. It worked that night; no one even thought of laughing at her. The only move they made was to narrow the circle around her.¹⁹

In the first half of the twentieth century Los Angeles was the perfect setting for European and East Coast artists in exile to project such apocalyptic visions of the future. Caught as they were slumming it in paradise, the stage was set to substantiate Los Angeles as the top-billing star of noir. Writers such as Brecht, Huxley, Waugh and West

holed up in their bungalows in the orange groves and told the world that hell was a movie set full of *femme fatales* who drove you mad until they were avenged:

I would read books like *The Loved One* or *Day of the Locust* or *Ape and Essence* by Aldous Huxley. The point of these books as far as I, a bleached blond teenager growing up in Hollywood, was concerned was that though the authors thought they were so smart—being from England or the East Coast and so well educated and everything—they were suckers for trashy cute girls who looked like goddesses and just wanted to have fun. These men could say what they liked about how stupid and shabby and ridiculous L.A. was, but the minute they stepped off the train, they were lost. All their belief in the morals and tenets of Western civilisation was just a handful of dust.²⁰

As Eve Babitz suggests, the weight of such powerful fictional representations has continued to infuse perceptions of the city and its people, perhaps to the detriment of contemporary writers and filmmakers who see the city altogether differently. The apocalyptic canon that Los Angeles carries on its back tends to override contemporary citations because of its enduring enchantment and success. The harsh and detached point of view—the shadow of noir history—has formed the mainstay of the Californian literary canon. In the wake of the disparaging proclamations of visiting writers in the first half of the twentieth century (especially Waugh, Huxley and West) a noir sensibility was inculcated and developed into a kind of folklore, an underbelly identification the city could not be separated from (particularly in the hands of Hammet and Chandler).

In the latter half of the twentieth century the narrative mood ruptured, unsurprisingly, into despair (with Ellis and Didion) and further into self-destruction. Alongside these commercially celebrated writers, Charles Bukowski emerged as Los Angeles' cult figure of confessional doom. In his prolific catalogue of works (forty-two publications of poetry and prose from 1962 to 1998) the protagonists are not fighting an

urge to surrender to the city or to its temptations—they have already done so—and this devil-may-care admission attracts and speaks to the culture of California held for so long under the pressure of narrative abuse and attack. These are “insiders” hanging by a thread, seeking at all times to unplug themselves from a sense of association with a reviled and fractious system:

I must have been mad. Unshaven. Undershirt full of cigarette holes. My only desire was to have more than one bottle on the dresser. I was not fit for the world and the world was not fit for me and I had found some others like myself, and most of them were women, women most men would never want to be in the same room with, but I adored them, they inspired me, I play-acted, swore, pranced about in my underwear telling them how great I was, but only *I* believed that. They just hollered, “Fuck off! Pour some more booze!” Those ladies from hell, those ladies in hell with me.²¹

A recent anthology of Los Angeles-based writers heeds the canonical influences of its literary past while encouraging the irruption of difference. The title, *Absolute Disaster: Fiction from Los Angeles*, emerges as more of an effective marketing strategy than an accurate reflection of the content. The editors have attempted to position the works in a familiar apocalyptic vein with sections dedicated to “Disasters in Love,” “Disasters in Cars,” “Disasters in the Hood” and “Disasters in Spirit Imagination and Thinking,” but the tone, style and nuances of the writing begin to unhinge the framing through predictable doomsday rhetoric. “Disaster” is rather a position from which to start: from the end of the world back, these emerging writers retrace human threads through what might have been caricatured or regurgitative noir narratives.

The language operating in *Absolute Disaster* is closely, sometimes cruelly intimate; the “camera” is not outside the head—the view comes at you from the inside. The protagonists often want entry points more than they want exits:

Behind him, he could hear Carolyn and his brother shouting and running after him on the pavement, but he kept going, feeling the speed as the skateboard started to rattle beneath him, and he heard dogs barking at the noise behind him, howling, and the whole world seemed to be opening. At the bottom of the hill was a thin film of blue that covered the world. With enough speed he could puncture it and tumble through....²²

This Californian voice of confusion, at once sharp and oblique, surfaces in its most dystopian form in the filmic landscapes of Los Angeles and Hollywood. The narrative shift from pragmatism into what Didion referred to as an “eccentric” delusion is complicated by David Lynch to great cinematic effect in *Mulholland Drive*. The leading character’s interior monologue is manifest as a grand metaphysical delusion: a surreal visual narrative which spirals out of her own reach to a state of being in which nothing, not even her own mortality, is beyond reinterpretation. Lynch directs the characters of *Mulholland Drive* into a kind of possessed oblivion, wet-nursed by the Hollywood machine, a place where he questions the randomness of intersection, and the ownership of dreams:

The notion of Hollywood as the world capital of corrupt, twisted fantasy is hardly new, thanks to Nathaniel West, Raymond Chandler, Roman Polanski and countless others. But in wrestling with that notion, Lynch makes an extraordinary leap to embrace the irrational. Its sheer audacity and the size of its target make the director’s earlier eviscerations of idyllic American oases and the rot beneath them seem comparatively petty.... For ‘Mulholland Drive’ finally has little to do with any single character’s love life or professional ambition. The movie is an ever-deepening reflection on the allure of Hollywood and on the multiple role-playing and self-invention that the movie-going experience promises. That same promise of identity loss extends to the star-making process, in which the

star can disappear into other lives and become other people's fantasies.

What greater power is there than the power to enter and to program the dream life of the culture?²³

What emerges from an analysis of the Californian narrative position is a number of distinct and significant movements all of which gravitate back to, and have their thematic roots in, the formative frontier experience: that of the loner, the disconnected individual adrift in a new hostile territory, given up on his/her history and possessed at all costs by the enchantment of an unfounded promise. We have seen the confusion of European writers in exile who revelled in the baroque opulence of their disdain; the coke addled anti-heroes and despairing heroines of Ellis and Didion; the self-destructive shadows of self led into infamy by Bukowski; the jackhammer post-noir of James Ellroy; and the cinematic ruin of Scott, Aaronofsky and Lynch. Theirs are characters who have completely fragmented and surrendered to the seductive tropes of Southern California's desired but elusive mythos.

Where then, post-alienation, post-rebellion, post-apocalypse, can the Californian narrative take us? It is a question that editors Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia are asking in *The Misread City: The New Literary Los Angeles*. This collection of "author profiles, literary journalism, and speculative pieces" attempts to liberate Southern California from its pervading literary history, for though the editors acknowledge it has been a successful legacy, it is one that has left L.A. battered and torn. Timberg and Gioia want to "get at the Los Angeles that came after" the disdain, disintegration and despair, to pierce through the chimera of dark tales that has become the city's literary trademark:

Without ignoring the city's rich past, we have tried to focus on the present—living writers active in the final decade of the last century and the first few years of the new one. One guiding conviction is that the literary arts have taken their own shape in Southern California; from its poetry to its pulp fiction, a shape that often baffles its Eastern and British visitors.²⁴

Here again, the dichotomy between Los Angeles' success and the invisibility of its contemporary reality surfaces. In a region founded on blind perseverance it is not surprising that some reputations, especially the successful ones, remain difficult to shake. The contributors to *The Misread City* seem to be suggesting that an alternative viewpoint is possible from the inside of the heap. Reading this text, and others like it, one gets the impression that an emergent narrative position is surfacing for Southern California, a point of view in which despair and disdain have settled into a kind of mutual reverence, a recognition of displaced kinship, however perverse, between the territory and its people.

...It is a cycle and I question
 The urge to deliver, every few years,
 The baby of oneself whole to a new home.
 I am so certain I should live alone. But over
 And over, I have taken the long road to the obvious.
 I want to call this new way what it is:
 How I am finding in sand, in dust

Enough for bloom, enough for sustenance.²⁵

In this extract from Jenny Factor's poem, "Letter From Headquarters," we can still hear that call—the transitory mentality of the new frontier which has always infected the Californian narrative. Here though, it offers something different, not just a fabled promise or an empty black pot, but a recognition of the reality inherent in perpetual journeys and arrivals, a willingness to call this penchant *as it is*. Illusion and disappointment are not gone, just faced head on, and this more nuanced capacity for self-reflection separates these fresh literary voices from those before them.

In Wanda Coleman's poem, "Prisoners of Los Angeles," the speaker wakes to the sounds of "workbound traffic," to the world "going off," and instead of curling in on herself (as you could imagine some of L.A.'s previous heroines would have) she faces first her own face in the mirror, and then, through the frame of an open window, the reflection of herself that she registers in the panorama of the city:

so this is it, i say to the enigma in the mirror
 this is your lot/assignment/relegation
 this is your city

i find my way to the picture window
 my eyes capture the purple reach of Hollywood's hills
 the gold eye of sun mounting the east
 the gray anguished arms of avenue

I will never leave here²⁶

Interestingly, Coleman chooses to capitalise the "I" only in the last phrase, lending extra weight and determination to her final declaration, *I will never leave here*. And while the title of the poem suggests that this may not be a choice, in the end it emerges as one. She has seen in the mirror, and in the window, an unmistakeable if somewhat reluctant affinity with her city. These examples and the essays in *The Misread City* suggest that a potential for emotional and spiritual rearrangement is occurring in contemporary Californian narratives. In these more recent fictions the authorial position has dramatically shifted. The protagonists are no longer outside the frame. They are enmeshed in the landscape. The city is inside them. The need for remove and the passing of judgment is no longer applicable. Like the complicit protagonists of Ellis and Ellroy, these characters are not exempt from responsibility but they also seek a kind of personally defined freedom from redemption.

In this way the current manifestations of Californian literature remain less useful for the kind of social deconstruction that theorists like Mike Davis²⁷ employ because they are, more often than not, first-person narratives where the liability of misery, sexual abuse and apocalypse is shared. If we consider how pervasive and how useful the Armageddon depiction of Los Angeles remains as a primary source of its self-perpetuated and external persecution, then the alternative viewpoint of contemporary Californian fiction will struggle to extract itself from invisibility precisely because it offers a way out. The emerging position is informed—it is more mature in that it references the ridicule, the peculiar ambiguities, the popular forces and the whacked templates of Los Angeles’ culture but also dares to suggest that they may indeed be unique instigators of resilience, circumnavigation and change. “The pace of endings thus can become the place of beginnings.”²⁸ Such a renewed sense of connected autonomy provides a freeway to possibility which the fatalism of apocalypse denies. It also provides a warning to other *misread* new frontier cultures (such as the Gold Coast and Las Vegas) that certain seeds can only germinate after fire:

As the poets of Los Angeles gradually rescue their city from the mortmain of stereotype and situate it, newly discovered, in our consciousness, we may find it as familiar, and as strange, as our own transfigured neighbourhoods.²⁹

As the primary instigator of the new frontier, Los Angeles has both enjoyed and suffered a persistent tension between the projected ideal of itself and its convergent reality. It has, in no uncertain terms, written itself off in order to find itself. Is it possible then (and to borrow from *Bladerunner*) for its *replicated* cities—its outreach *colonies*, such as the Gold Coast and Las Vegas—to accelerate this process of self-identification? Could these

cities and others like them, which have imitated the grand narratives and ceremonies of Los Angeles' dreams, circumvent its disasters? As derivative territories they are in the unique position of being able to see where they are headed.

Picturing the City

When we visualise a city we often recall and reflect on monuments or icons that signify municipal identity or form a frame for its placement in the world. If the reflections are not personal then they are usually associated with the trade fair of public imagery. Even if we have not visited a city we can imagine its iconography: all cities are remembered, visualised and sold on images of monumentality. At the mention of a city's name a score of persistent images flash in our minds. We see these architectural monuments, effortlessly. The Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, St. Paul's Cathedral, *L'Arc de Triomphe*, are manifested realities but they are also virtual, digital, transferable municipal signs, which traverse the earth and bounce back from space as images. As pictures. Such sites are known and recognised by millions without ever being "seen" in their locations. Their power is not limited by their three dimensional reach. What we recognise in the process of general association is not the place, the icon or the building, but its surface. What we remember about these monuments does not require physical experience. What we remember is the impact of their transference.

As the consumption of images augments, it follows that all cities, not just those constructed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will be affected by the predominance of imaginary access. The new frontier city emerges then as a marker for future developments because it has never sought to separate the actual and the visualised.

The desire to revert to a particular concrete reality is removed from the equation. Living and remembering in the new frontier do not necessitate recognition of the original experience, for simulation will generally carry with it new forms of usage. In cities like Las Vegas, for example, the reconstitution of wonder replaces the desire for the original with the desire for sensorial convergence. In the new frontier, recall is dominated almost entirely by free-floating images that have no connection to the spaces they represent but are images for the sake only of other images. There is no track back to the site itself.

“When John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams.”³⁰

In cities like Las Vegas, Los Angeles and the Gold Coast, celluloid images are not just consumed, they are mimicked, reflected and reproduced. From a flat screen, from a shallow surface, new frontier cities construct an identity based on replications; from an already compressed notion of culture they reproduce and produce their own culture. It follows then, that a confusion of the effects of this process can lead to misinterpretation; that reading these derivative cultures at the surface level results in the idea that they are merely weak substitutions. The weakening, eradication and ultimate absence of the original, of the real is posited by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* as a symptom of what he refers to as the four phases of the image: reflection, perversion, masking of absence, and finally total absence which results in pure simulacrum.³¹ He suggests that the culture industry deliberately collapses structural boundaries thus inviting sensorial overload and consequent mass apathy.³² What a more nuanced reading suggests, however, is that an absence of a concrete reality (or the original subject otherwise captured by the image) can also be a liberation—an opportunity for new frontier cultures

like Las Vegas and the Gold Coast not only to epitomise this contemporary state of flux but to translate and reinterpret the evolution of (im)pure simulation.

¹ *Chinatown*, dir. Roman Polanski, screenplay Robert Towne (Los Angeles: Long Road Productions, 1974).

² *Ibid.*

³ N. King, "View From The Couch: Robert Towne" (Sydney: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2002), n.p.

⁴ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), 194.

⁵ Martin Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 79-80.

⁶ Paul Virillio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso), 97.

⁷ Ann Hulbert, *The Last Thing We Expected* (<http://slate.msn.com/id/2944/> - 1996).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (London: Flamingo, 2003), 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ James Ellroy, *American Tabloid: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1995), 9.

¹⁵ Didion, *Where I Was From*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

¹⁷ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), 189-90.

¹⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1951), 103-4.

¹⁹ Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1957), 386-7.

²⁰ Eve Babitz, "Bodies and Souls" in R. David, ed., *Sex Death and God In L.A.* (London: Random House, 1992), 108-9.

²¹ Charles Bukowski, *Hollywood* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1998), 167.

²² Peter Craig, "Appease The Natives" in L. Montgomery, ed., *Absolute Disaster: Fiction from Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Dove Books, 1996), 314.

²³ Stephen Holden, *Hollywood Seen as a Funhouse of Fantasy* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/06/movies> - 2001)

²⁴ Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia, eds., *The Misread City: The New Literary Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2003), xiv.

²⁵ Jenny Factor, "Letter from Headquarters" in Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia, eds., *The Misread City*, 153.

²⁶ Wanda Coleman, "Prisoners of Los Angeles" in Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia, eds., *The Misread City*, 149.

²⁷ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990).

²⁸ David Fine, "Endings and Beginnings: Surviving Apocalypse" in Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia, eds., *The Misread City*, 66.

²⁹ Laurence Goldstein, "City of Poems: The Lyric Voice in Los Angeles Since 1990" in Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia, eds., *The Misread City*, 142.

³⁰ Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 30.

³¹ Mark Poster, *Introduction to Simulacra and Simulations* (<http://www.hku.hk/english/courses2000/7006/introbau.htm> - 2004)

³² Byron Hawk, *Baudrillard and Simulation* (<http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk/semiotics/ baud.htm> - 2004)

SALLY BREEN

Vertical Vegas

We have been express lifted to the thirty-first floor of *Monte Carlo* Casino. I'm standing at the window of our room, one of three thousand, and they are all full. The bed is a mess. You have already left—too busy to look at the view. I am gazing at the sheer elevation of the hotel as it runs on beside me, at the cream surface of its right wing, higher and more expansive than ten football fields. I am standing alone, framed by one window, a frame that repeats itself identically in hundreds of long lines. I look into the other rooms, notice the same details. The gold lamps, the dark wood furniture. The striped luxurious wallpaper. The inherited flourishes of a Mediterranean past. And only when I have fully registered the immensity of this thing I'm in, can I cast my eyes out. To the mighty stretch of Las Vegas. To everything getting bigger. To the city of endless lengths, endless heights, endless concrete and endless sand.

I remember the flight over the majestic red rock canyons. How you reached to squeeze my fingers. The parched mountains pierced with snow. The city stretching across the flat plain of the desert, the thousands of houses spreading back from the strip in the brown and dusty earth. It hardly ever rains in Las Vegas. Nothing grows roots. There are

no drains. Instead the city is settled, held down with concrete and it is only concrete that can give this desert's incessant horizon line any vertical symmetry. I look left and right at the massive casinos, knowing there are more of them I cannot see, and I am impressed, full of wonder, caught by the thrill and the horror of their size. I look further to the distant ragged horizon, to the giant red mountains that ring this city. Finding myself caught in this strange symbiotic exchange between the constructed topography of the casinos and the colossal real. And it's as if the casinos are trying to be the mountains; trying to call out to them across the expanse of the great American plain—this big, unforgiving country—and I know why bones, human and animal, used to litter the Spanish Trail.

From this grand height I cannot see the giant convention centre you have gone to with your loaded suitcase and your samples. It is somewhere further down the Strip at the other end of the desert. But I can see the impression of your skin. I look instead toward the back end of the *New York New York*; to where the twin towers are still standing; to the architectural gestures of a casino masquerading as a city, lined up as different levels, as different colours, textures, facades and shades, as separate buildings, interconnected by a rollercoaster that runs between them, out into the desert air and back in. I can make out the tip of the Lady Liberty's flame held aloft somewhere on the other side. Later, when I enter the *New York New York* on foot (via a quick tour of Manhattan and over the Brooklyn Bridge) I will see it is a dark casino. A space that imitates the crush and rush of its muse metropolis. After visiting the infamous Downtown Deli I will wander along the narrow alley ways of Greenwich Village, cobblestoned and lined with false-front tenement buildings, while also trying to navigate my pastrami sandwich, which is more like a giant mound, replete with a whole green pickle longer and almost wider than my

hand. And while I'm traipsing through Coney Island and gaming floors modelled on Central Park and laughing at the change machines which are actually New York Cabs I will be lost in *New York New York* for hours. It will happen in every casino, in every fake city. There is a moment on entering where you must relinquish the idea of ever finding a quick way out. I learn fast that the illusory effect of the mirage, of the distant oasis, is something that defines this city.

Every morning you make your way to the other end of the desert strip and I venture out. Walking alone doesn't bother me until I'm tired and hail a cab and the driver tells me only working girls walk the strip alone. I tell him I have never walked so much and he laughs and I wonder if that would bother you. It does not take hours to walk the strip, it takes days. It does not take days to visit every casino, it takes weeks. I can see the hotels looming in the distance ahead of me, behind me and even off the strip to the east and west their massive forms conjure and cajole. Everything is instant but seems to take on time and space forever. "After five days in Vegas you feel like you've been here for five years."¹ A strange circumstance where physical reality contradicts imaginary signification. "The buildings are so gargantuan that [you] think them closer... the distance boggling, unclear, otherworldly."² In Las Vegas size matters. I must allow for the time it takes just to leave our building. And then finally, I spill out of the casino with the thousands of other tourists, slightly bemused and relieved. I merge with the crowds amassing 24/7 on the expansive sidewalks of Vegas, all of us making our way slowly along the strip, held together by its long lines, intent on gazing and moving forward as if on some kind of perverted pilgrimage.

And the casinos know it. I tell you all about it later when you're back at the hotel after dark about the walkways that run the length of the strip purposefully convoluted—lined by barriers and directional diversions like complicated stairway structures and narrow escalators—leading me on tangents and one way directions. At times I have to wind my way through the casinos just to get back out onto the street. I have no choice but to follow. I am transported over side streets, carried into elaborate foyers, required to bottleneck at certain points and therefore be tempted to stop. I get caught in rooms which, “smell like plain hugeness, the smell of a room big enough to have weather.”³ And nothing is exempt from this game of snagging human attention—I'm swamped by the incessant affects of the “architecture of persuasion.”⁴ The holograms, dancing girls, choreographed waterfalls, spruikers, voice-overs, giant LCD screens the size of buildings, oxygen bars, the imitation Elvises, curling lights and flashing signs all get in my face, in my head and under my skin without any actual contact. Hovering just beyond me. I move and absorb and I'm saturated; and it is not until later that the effects of this engagement will appear like magic, like neon stigmata.

Las Vegas *is* about cruising and gazing but it is also high speed and fly-by. It is all these things. I freewheel along the Strip on my own two feet, on a Harley, in a helicopter, a Corvette, and a Cadillac. They sell all kinds of movement here, to alleviate the vertigo, the pressure of open skies and flat open space. People hire choppers, private planes, and strange celebrity-style people-movers that look like elongated A-Team vans. Limousines are as prevalent as dimes. And nearly as cheap. But I keep walking because gazing at the surfaces of these buildings in slow motion is just one part of a series of simultaneous experiences dealt out at street level, eye level and from the sky. My sense of placement is

shaken. I feel distorted—like the physical subject in an impressionist painting—my presence here is always only a glimmer in an atmosphere big enough to consume it. The monumentality of Vegas’s urban formations encourages this merging of physicality and surface, of awe and veneration, for as casino developer Steve Wynn famously declared, “Las Vegas is what God would have done... if he’d had the money.”⁵

Flying down the Strip at night, in the back of a limousine, holding your hand, drunk from Las Vegas, drunk from the effects, I swallow the light. The lights as they swirl and flash at seventy miles per hour reflecting on everything, the car, the glass, the mirrors, your face. My face hanging out the window for air, head facing up at the sky, the lights relentless. My skin drinking in the light, the dust and the roar of engines, the wind in my face carrying me and the sharp desert air. The pictures so rapid you take photos that never turn out. The neon fantasies, the words, the signs rolling over my chest. At high speed the casinos roll past us, immense and merging. The black screen of sky is pierced with multi-coloured mansards and minarets; sky needles and laser light. The world is full of edges, of vertical flashes, and we trip through it on a wigged out horizontal passage. The Strip is the live feed. This cab the current. The city electric.

Las Vegas is not the kind of town I associate with “getting real” or “growing up.” It is not a place where I am supposed to have a composed meaningful moment, a significant epiphany. It is not the kind of town where I suspect I might find out what is true to me, what really moves me, what I care about. Las Vegas, it seems, is a place I’ve come to escape the tide of these things. But like most cities you make presumptions about, the promises of escapism and wish fulfilment are often reversed. This is a city

which markets distraction, which promises a liberation from reflection and analysis, but often instigates such introspection by default.

It happens late at night when I'm near tears in the Romanesque bath tub searching for reasons why this emptiness has opened up between us. I wrap myself in a towel; bypass the bed. You're sleeping quietly now, naked body snuggled under a wash of gold embossed brocade. I can hardly see you. Moving to stand by the window in the dark looking out at all the lights of Las Vegas, I wish I could blame the vacuous desert, this crazy place for the emotional chasm I'm experiencing. Watching faces the size of houses ripple up giant screens I realise the emptiness I feel is not an effect of this city, rather, it is something I have brought with me. That's the thing no one gets about simulations—they can teach you about your own; they can highlight the distance between your dreams and the lies you tell yourself to make them happen. That's why, not long after our feet touch down in Australia you let go of my hand.

Because I left you, in Las Vegas.

¹ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (London: Flamingo, 1972), 193.

² Bill Roorbach, *The Smallest Colour* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 262.

³ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴ David Spanier, *Welcome to the Pleasuredome: Inside Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992), 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.