

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ERASURE AND REFORM:
LOS ANGELES LITERATURE AND THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST.

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My dissertation is a literary and cultural history of Los Angeles from 1930-1950. I argue that this particular time and place—this era of Los Angeles history—provides a rich site for an exploration of American identity formations. It was during these years that Los Angeles experienced the extraordinary demographic and cultural changes that transformed the city from a place that in 1930 was still heralded by boosters as a small western outpost of white Americanism into what was by 1950 perhaps the nation's most multicultural and multiracial city. Yet, this complex history of cultural change has been long invisible, for not only is Los Angeles among the most multicultural U.S. cities, it is also the most heavily mediated of places, and the pervasive images and myths of the city and its

past constructed via Hollywood films and Chamber of Commerce postcards have functioned to erase this multicultural past.

My study seeks to recover this hidden history of Los Angeles by examining the work of writers who represent and explore the lived complexities of existence in this dynamic setting. I focus on such writers as Chester Himes, Hisaye Yamamoto, and John Fante, who, I argue, not only portray something of the city's lost past but also examine the process by which marginal voices are repressed and oppositional histories are erased. In addition, I discuss contemporary Los Angeles writers, including Walter Mosley, James Ellroy, and John Gregory Dunne. Focusing on their works of historical fiction, I analyze how each re-imagines and reconstructs this era of Los Angeles's past and thus contributes to the construction of an imaginary archive of a lost history.

ERASURE AND REFORM:
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By

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DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad

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INTRODUCTION:

Los Angeles, Historical Erasure, and Literary Sites of Memory

"Past epochs never vanish completely, and blood still drips from all their wounds"

Octavia Paz, *A Labyrinth of Solitude* (11)

I. Reconstructing Los Angeles's Past

"Every City has had its booms, but the history of Los Angeles is the history of its booms," observed the city's first major social historian Carey McWilliams in his classic study *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946). McWilliams was referring to the series of dramatic surges in population and demographic changes that shaped and then repeatedly re-shaped Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century, effectively rendering modern Los Angeles a perpetual place of newcomers where, by 1930, less than one-fourth of its population were natives to the state (Sánchez 87). My work here shares in and is indebted to McWilliams's interest in the cultural effects of such shifts, for this study focuses on the dynamics of identity during the 1930s and 1940s, a period in the city's history that saw

the rapid and recognizable emergence of the multiracial megalopolis we know today. But I begin here with a different and more recent boom in Los Angeles, and one that not long ago would have been most unexpected: a boom in scholarship about the city.

After decades of neglect by scholars, Los Angeles has emerged over the last several years as a central site of American cultural studies. Remarkably, it is now only slightly more than a decade since historian Mike Davis lamented the "void of research" on Los Angeles and the city's "lack of a scholarly municipal history," yet today L.A. rivals only New York for the critical attention it has attracted from urbanists across the disciplines. Indeed, recent scholarship about Los Angeles from history, literature, film, sociology, urban studies, ethnography, and geography have collectively given birth to what has become a distinct branch of American cultural studies now known as "Los Angeles Studies." Long dismissed by the Eastern intellectual establishment as a place dominated by a Hollywood ethos representing the antithesis of culture and history, Los Angeles has become a crucial and compelling space for exploring the complexities of modern and postmodern America.

It was as recent as 1990 in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (1990) that Davis first remarked upon the absence of serious scholarship about Los Angeles, and it is that work more than any other that attracted the kind of critical attention to Los Angeles that ultimately led to the emergence of Los Angeles studies. To be sure, several important studies of Los Angeles preceded Davis's work. Most notable are the influential studies of Southern California culture and social history by the aforementioned Carey McWilliams, whom Davis acknowledges as his precursor. Recently heralded as "the patron saint of Los Angeles history" in the opening lines of the important collection of essays *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s* (2001), McWilliams was the first thoughtful analyst of the particular complex racial and demographic dynamics of Los Angeles that today is labeled "multiculturalism," and too, he was a great debunker of the popular myths of Los Angeles's history (Sitton and Deverell 1). McWilliams's early cultural studies of the place that he observed develop into "the great city of the Pacific" has ensured that, with the rise of scholarship about Los Angeles, his work, in the words of historian William Deverell, "seems to grow in importance with each passing year" (McWilliams

Island 376-377; Deverell 9). Complementing Davis's work is that of Robert Fogelson, whose useful *Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (1967) charts the spatial growth and demographic shifts of the emerging city to reveal a region that grew to be remarkably decentralized, its suburbs lacking the usual dependency on its downtown. Devoid of the traditional interdependence between the suburbs and the inner-city, Los Angeles, Fogelson compellingly argues, was from its American origins a "fragmented metropolis," divided between suburbs and city along political, social, cultural, and, of particular importance to its turbulent history, racial lines.

While building on the work of McWilliams and Fogelson, Davis's *City of Quartz* has provided new terms and set a new course for studies of Los Angeles for the 1990s and now into the new century. For Davis, whose work is heavily influenced by Marxism and post-structuralism, the task of a historian is to "excavate" the past, to dig beneath the often intentionally misleading surfaces—whether those surfaces come in the form of rhetoric, image, or myth—to find a hidden history. Davis's assumption that the past remains submerged is especially relevant in the case of Los Angeles, for L.A., more than

any other place, has been historically defined by rhetoric and images manufactured for the purpose of consumption and profit rather than truth. This city is of course the home of Hollywood, and it is also the site of the first and most successful Chamber of Commerce in history. It is a place that was introduced to the rest of the country through postcards and advertisements, or as the setting for Hollywood films, and consequently, its mythic status remains strong in the American imagination. As writer David Reiff observes, "Southern California was and remains the most heavily mythologized place in America, even by those who live there and really should know better" (44). Despite the power of the image and idea of Los Angeles, it is crucial also to remember that, as Reiff further notes, "[Los Angeles] is a concrete place as well" (44).

Like Reiff, Davis suggests that one of the greatest obstacles to understanding Los Angeles as a "concrete place," as a city with a material history, is that its own intellectual traditions have not escaped Los Angeles's "mythography" but instead have engaged in a contest of competing myths (20). Davis persuasively argues that L.A.'s boosters and detractors have offered alternative visions of Los Angeles that together function

as a mythic discourse wherein Los Angeles can be understood only as either a place of "sunshine or noir." The romantic, utopian vision of Los Angeles as the "land of sunshine" is of course the traditional booster's vision of the city that dates back into the late nineteenth century when such city leaders as *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harrison Gray Otis and writer Charles Fletcher Lummis (editor of the popular regional journal *The Land of Sunshine*) worked with and through the Chamber of Commerce to capture the attractive images—of the sun, palm trees, and ripe oranges and construct the appealing narratives of a romantic Spanish past and a luxurious American present that they used to sell the city to potential tourists and residents alike. What Davis dubs the "noir" Los Angeles vision emerged decades later as a response to the booster dreams that had already lured hundreds of thousands to Southern California. Primarily taking shape through the work of Los Angeles's writers and Hollywood filmmakers, noir Los Angeles is the nightmare response to the booster's Los Angeles dreams. It is the Los Angeles of Raymond Chandler's crime-ridden streets, James M. Cain's blood-red bungalows, Horace McCoy's dance marathon murder, and Nathanael West's movie-opening-turned-riot. It has often been noted by

critics that Davis's own work is something of a noir history of L.A., and thus he extends the tradition even as he writes about it. But more importantly, his work provides a model for studies of Los Angeles that seek to delve more deeply than previous work into the city's complex history, searching for and identifying forgotten roots of the conflicts that shaped L.A.'s past and continue to shape its present. That the 1992 Los Angeles uprising came so shortly after Davis's book only further confirmed the urgency of the task that his study modeled.

In the years since the publication of *City of Quartz*, numerous studies have begun to illuminate some of the important but forgotten stories, places, communities, and moments of Los Angeles history. As announced in the title of one recent collection of essays, these works are "Looking for Los Angeles"; that is, they seek to clarify and give a fuller shape to this place that historian Norman Klein aptly calls "the most photographed and least remembered city in the world." Among these works, Klein's study *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (1997) deserves a special mention, for Klein foregrounds the important role of "erasure" in Los Angeles history that my study also explores. As Klein compellingly shows, the "forgetting" of certain

histories—especially those of the city’s marginalized groups—is not always a passive process. Rather, such histories often have been effaced in order to maintain the city’s myths, which, as selling points for the city, ultimately served to profit the powerful. As William Deverell notes in his *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (2004), “Los Angeles matured, at least in part, by covering up places, people, and histories that those in power found unsettling. Los Angeles became a self-conscious ‘City of the Future’ by whitewashing [its] past” (7).

Like Deverell’s study, many scholarly works about Los Angeles in the past decade have sought to fill in the gaps left by historical erasure by furnishing fuller accounts of the experiences of specific racial groups in the region. Not surprisingly, considering the city’s pueblo origins as well as its vast Latino population, the majority of these studies have focused on the complex history of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. George J. Sánchez’s *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (1993), Lisbeth Haas’s *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (1995), Douglas Monroy’s *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great*

Depression (1999) each contribute to this effort by focusing on Mexican American, Hispanic, and Latino identity formations in a region that, writing in the same vein, Victor M. Valle and Rudolfo D. Torres have dubbed the "Latino Metropolis" (Valle and Torres). Other studies have analyzed more specific places or key moments in Los Angeles's Latino history such as Don Normark's *Chavez Ravine, 1949; a Los Angeles Story* (1999) or Eduardo Obregón Pagán's *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime Los Angeles* (2003). Although there have been far fewer studies of other racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles history, these too are valuable contributions to the shared scholarly project of reconstructing Los Angeles's past. Historian Josh Sides's new study *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (2004) and journalist Lynell George's collection of articles *No Crystal Stair: African Americans in the City of Angels* (1992) each provide a glimpse "behind the veil" of L.A.'s myths and official histories to illuminate African American experiences in the city's past and present, while William Alexander McClung's *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles* (2000) explores

the way that Anglo American fantasies and desires have shaped the "idea" of Los Angeles.

While each of the works in this catalog of revisionist, racial histories of Los Angeles has helped to fill the void of research that Davis lamented, the practice of treating racial histories as separate scholarly projects also has the unfortunate effect of reinscribing the balkanization that has historically characterized the racial and cultural geography of the city. Writing in the 1940s, Carey McWilliams described Los Angeles as a racial "archipelago," a place where, as a consequence of segregation and migration patterns, separate racial groups were clustered together in "large blocks or aggregates" which functioned as "more or less closed communities" (*Island* 314-315). As important as it is to remember the histories that took shape within each of Los Angeles's segregated and balkanized communities—that is, the separate racial and cultural "islands" of whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos that McWilliams identifies as making up the "archipelago"—, it is equally important to recognize that within the shared space of Los Angeles, these "closed communities" were always also in contact with one another, and their

histories are as much a product of their intersection as their separation.

It is such intersections that my study explores. To do so, I stray from the path of traditional "totalizing" histories that attempt to somehow tell the whole story or provide a definitive tale of the city's past, an approach which is particularly futile in the case of such a "fragmented metropolis." But I also do not seek to contribute another compartmentalized history of Los Angeles by way of a single group's experience there. Instead, I approach Los Angeles history through certain "sites of memory." As Robert O'Meally and Genevieve Fabre define the concept that was first dubbed "lieux de memoire" by French historian Pierre Nora, "sites of memory" are "certain landmarks of the past." They may be places, artworks, dates, or individuals, and they may be "public or private, well known or obscure, real or imagined," but they each serve to illuminate something that has been absent or incomplete in official histories but nevertheless is deemed essential by those who remember them (O'Meally and Fabre 7). As writer Hisaye Yamamoto says of one such moment that I will explore in these pages, it was "something forgotten that should have been remembered" ("Fire" 120)

In this study, I use a variety of types of "sites of memory." These include places, like the historical community of Bunker Hill and the once vibrant Central Avenue, as well as events, such as the zoot suit riots of 1943 and the black dahlia murder of 1947, and especially the lives and work of individual people, including writers John Fante, Chester Himes, James Ellroy, and Hisaye Yamamoto. Each of these "sites" offers an entryway into the history of Los Angeles that allows for a multidimensional vision of Los Angeles's past. My belief and my hope is that exploring Los Angeles's past through these multiple sites will contribute to the ongoing scholarly project that Dolores Hayden describes as that of "making visible the history of this city where the majority of its residents are women and people of color" (xiii).

II. Los Angeles History and a Literature of Reform

Writing in her essay "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison highlights the important role that literature can play in re-shaping and re-forming our understanding of history when writers take a site of memory as the subject of their work. Morrison explains that when

writing about the lives of African American slaves, she was confronted by a void of information left by historical erasure. Even in the written documents of former slaves, Morrison found "no mention of their interior lives"; such crucial knowledge was kept out of the official, recorded histories, hidden behind "the veil" of secrecy (183). Thus, Morrison explains, "memory weighs heavily on what I write" (199). To fill in some of the gaps of history, Morrison had to "trust her own recollections," that is, those which "came out of the material that went to make me." And too, she had to "depend on the recollections of others" (199). But memory itself was not enough. She explains: "Memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me" (200).

My study proceeds from the assumption that, as Morrison indicates, acts of the imagination are essential to the recovery of hidden and erased histories. Here I explore a diverse collection of literary works that represent and explore various dimensions of the lived experience of Los Angeles during the 1930s and 1940s, a twenty-year span in which the racial and gender demographics of the city underwent an extraordinary

transformation. Some of the works I discuss were written during that era, such as several by John Fante and Hisaye Yamamoto, as well as a novel by Chester Himes. Each of these, in their distinct ways, offers a view into the complex multicultural history of Los Angeles that, as each reveals, was forgotten or erased even as it was ongoing. Other works I analyze look back into the past from a more contemporary moment and, like Morrison's novels, strive to recapture some of what was erased or never recorded, thus filling historical voids and refiguring our sense of that past. Novels by Walter Mosley, James Ellroy, and John Gregory Dunne, as well as certain works by Fante and Yamamoto, all function in this way.

With such a diverse but until recently neglected collection of Los Angeles authors as those included here, this work is intended to be a revisionist literary history of the city. As such, I join in the project of expanding and updating the canon of Los Angeles and California literature undertaken in recent years by critics such as David Fine, Julian Murphet, and David Wyatt. My work, like each of theirs, reshapes the region's literary tradition by including writers who do not simply reflect the city's multiculturalism by virtue of their race, but who engage in creative and compelling

ways with the city's multicultural past. Yet even as I discuss some of the same writers explored in Fine's *Imagining Los Angeles* (2000), Murphet's *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* (2001), and Wyatt's *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe, and the Shaping of California* (1998), I also redirect the discussions of these writers to unexplored areas of their fiction and of the histories they represent. Further, one of the contentions of my study is that these writers are worthy of much more than inclusion in the canon; rather, each deserves serious and increased scholarly attention.

A literary history of Los Angeles also provides a special opportunity to explore the complex relationship between literature and history. From Edmund Wilson's early literary history of the city to more recent analyses of the city by postmodern theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, Los Angeles has often been perceived as an "unreal" place, a site that, like a façade for a Hollywood movie, is more imaginary than it is real. In Baudrillard's terms, the city itself is a "simulacra" (166-84). But urban geographer Edward Soja has recognized a more complex dynamic between the discursive and material histories of Los Angeles. As Soja proclaims it, Los Angeles has always been "simultaneously

real-and-imagined" (239). Such a view of the city encourages literary history as an approach to understanding the city's past, albeit the literary history that I am suggesting, and that Murphet and Wyatt both engage in also, is an unconventional one. This type of literary history does not follow the traditional approach of tracing the development of the literature of a region, highlighting its key texts and major motifs, as Edmund Wilson's "Boys in the Back Room" and Franklin Walker's *A Literary History of Southern California* (1950) first did for Southern California. Nor does it take a strictly New Historical approach, a method that employs literature more strictly as a means to get at the past, a valuable practice to be sure, but one that tends to reduce literature to the service of history. Rather, this literary history is one that foregrounds the complicated intersection of literature and history, where the place, as historical context, is understood to shape the literature it inspires, while it also, as an idea or "imagined" place, is in turn shaped by that literature and the images it offers. Focusing specifically on histories that have been purposely erased, my study explores the effort of writers to reform the incomplete

or distorted histories by refiguring what has been lost into a literary site of memory.

III. Multiculturalism Made Visible: The Zoot Suit Riots as a Site of Memory

"Perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning," Ralph Ellison wrote in a 1943 article ("Editorial" 296). Ellison's concern is specifically the meaning of the zoot suit fashion as an African American cultural expression, but his suggestion that the dress may contain important but hidden political meanings is borne out most powerfully by the events surrounding the zoot suit in Los Angeles during WWII and primarily affecting the young immigrant and second generation Mexican Americans. As Shane White and Graham White have noted in their study of the evolution of this strangely subversive style marked by baggy but narrow-cuffed pants pulled up far above the waist and a long, wide-shouldered "drape-shaped" coat, the zoot suit "erupted into American consciousness" during WWII (249). In Los Angeles that eruption was a violent one.

The ten-days of "Zoot Suit Riots" in 1943 Los Angeles marked the first large-scale home-front

disturbance during WWII, and it was among the most violent. But the zoot suit riots remain an important site of memory today less due to the physical costs of the riots—which left hundreds injured but resulted in no deaths—than to the highly symbolic nature of the violence. Beginning June 3, 1943, in alleged response to a series of confrontations between white servicemen and Mexican American youth wearing zoot suits, increasingly large groups—and ultimately mobs—of white military servicemen stationed in and around Los Angeles began roaming the Mexican American neighborhoods of downtown and the barrio of East Los Angeles in search of “zoot suiters.” Aided by supportive civilians and often overseen by police who did not intervene until the violence was complete, the servicemen seized their victims from the streets, off of streetcars, from inside movie theaters, or even from their homes, beat them into submission, and then performed the ritual that defined the riots: the stripping off and destroying—often by burning—of the zoot suit. Beaten, bloodied, and undressed in front of an audience of civilians, the victims of these attacks were often then arrested for “disturbing the peace,” while the serviceman moved onto their next victims.

As Maurico Mazón argues in his study of the riots, these disturbing attacks amount to a "symbolic annihilation" of the "zoot suiter," who had emerged in WWII Los Angeles as a source of extraordinary anxiety. Indeed, by the time of the zoot suit riots, the mainstream local press, the police, much of the Los Angeles public, and certainly the servicemen who initiated the riots had come to perceive zoot suits and the young Mexican Americans most associated with them in Los Angeles as a serious threat to the city, if not the Allied cause, that required an aggressive, militaristic response. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, the *Daily News*, and especially Hearst's *Herald-Express* each even used the language of war to describe and to implicitly if not explicitly endorse the attacks on zoot suiters. In the *Herald-Express*, for example, East Los Angeles was "the Eastern Front," while the Los Angeles Examiner suggested zoot suiters were "the enemy . . . right at home" (qtd. in Mazón 38-39). As for the military men who committed these literal and symbolic acts of violence, despite their obvious aggressiveness in the riots, most did not imagine themselves as the aggressors in their "war" with the zoot suiters. As Eduardo Obregón Pagán has noted, they saw themselves as

"responding only defensively to the aggressive behavior of the other" (165).

But the perceived aggressiveness of zoot suiters in Los Angeles was more imaginary and symbolic than it was literal. Certainly there were daily verbal and physical confrontations between soldiers and zoot suit-wearing youth in the days preceding the riots, and it is likely that these were initiated as often by zoot suiters as by soldiers. These incidents were generally minor, however. Few resulted in serious injury, and there were no deaths credited to such disputes. In contrast, there were numerous deaths resulting from confrontations between soldiers or between soldiers and other, non-zoot-suited civilians. Thus, as Mazón notes, "it appears that the greatest threat faced by the servicemen was the serviceman himself, not the zoot-suiter, and the second most formidable threat was the armed civilian" (68-69). But to the serviceman and to the public that supported the riots, the zoot-suiter was a threat on a deeper level. What mattered to rioters was not what zoot-suiters actually did, but what they could be imagined doing. And indeed, the false rumors abounded: zoot suiters killed soldiers; they raped white women, especially soldiers' wives; they plotted with the Nazis and Sinarquistas in

Mexico to attack the U.S.; or they were being used by communists. That little evidence existed to support such claims did nothing to stop the outrage targeted toward zoot suiters. For the anxiety-ridden soldier or civilian, evidence enough of a dangerous aggressiveness was somehow visible in the suit itself.

The zoot suit certainly was not a sign of un-Americanism as it was perceived to be by so many in Los Angeles, a perception that ultimately led to its outlaw by the city council. But it was a pronounced expression of difference from and resistance to mainstream conceptions of American identity, and as such, it triggered a deep and widespread anxiety in the context of wartime Los Angeles. As Robin Kelley has noted about the zoot suit, its wearers rarely employed it as a conscious political statement, but often the "context rendered it so," and that certainly was the case in the war city of Los Angeles, which during that era was home to one of the largest concentrations of military personnel and was also a weekend leave destination for tens of thousands more (Mazón 67). With its flamboyancy and its flaunting of conventions, the zoot suit clashed with the uniform culture of these military men. Theirs was a culture that

valued homogeny and conformity, and the zoot suit declared difference and suggested defiance.

But it was not the war and the military presence alone that made zoot suiters the source of such uneasiness for so many Angelinos, and the zoot suit riots were not just a product of "war jitters." As significant as the military presence was in shaping the city's culture during WWII, Los Angeles was much more than a collection of military installations and war industries. Indeed, the city in 1943 was already well into its extended period of extraordinary population growth and cultural transformation that historian Robert Fishman has called "the most fascinating single story in American urban history" ("Foreword" xv). Having grown from a "pueblo" in the 19th century and a "distant Western outpost" in the early 20th century, Los Angeles was by 1943 home to one in forty Americans, making it the third most populated U.S. city, trailing only New York City and Chicago, the latter of which it would overtake by the 1950 census (Verge xii; Nash 62). And it was also by this time the most multiracial and multicultural of American cities. As early as 1930, in fact, L.A. trailed only Baltimore in its percentage of a "non-white" population, and unlike Baltimore where those numbers came almost

entirely from a vast African American population, Los Angeles was the site of a much broader multiracialism, as McWilliams suggested with his Los Angeles as racial archipelago metaphor (Fogelson 82). With its array of racial groups and with the absence of the traditional Euro-ethnic enclaves found in other American cities, Los Angeles indeed made for the "new type of community" on the American cultural landscape that McWilliams once declared it (*California* 14). Here was an emerging multiculturalism defined by race rather than ethnicity. But just as the zoot suiters' style clashed with the homogenous military outfits, so too did the city's multiculturalism contradict its popularly imagined racial homogeneity.

When Mexican American or African American zoot suiters boldly declared their difference from the mainstream through sartorial means, they also, as embodiments of racial difference, made hyper-visible the shifting racial demographics and dynamics in Los Angeles. Although Los Angeles was never the "Anglo city" it was advertised to be by racist boosters dating back to the 19th century, the myths that Los Angeles was, or the "fantasy" that it could become, in their words an "Anglo Eden," an "Iowa by the Pacific," or "the whitest of

American cities" nevertheless remained strong even in the 1930s when the actual demographics already stood in stark contrast to such claims. As late as 1935, *Los Angeles Times* writer Harry Carr, a close friend of *Times* editor Harry Chandler, touted Los Angeles in his booster tract *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* as "an epic—one of the greatest and most significant migrations in the long saga of the Aryan people" (31).

Thus, it is not surprising that there was a slippage in both the discourse of the riots and the actual violence between the targeting of zoot suit wearing youth and more general attacks of any youth who, by virtue of their skin color, were perceived as potential threats to such racialized conceptions of L.A. culture even if they were not dressed in zoot suits. An eye witness to the riots, the writer Chester Himes recognized these racial implications. "Zoot Riots are Race Riots," Himes's article in *The Crisis* proclaimed in its title a month after the riots, when such a viewpoint was still unpopular. As Himes saw it, zoot suits were merely an excuse for racial violence against "dark skinned people" so as to make the changing city again feel "safe for white people" (201). Locating the zoot suit riots in a much broader racial history of the U.S., which he

suggests was still fighting the Civil War in the 1940s, Himes perceptively saw the riots as a battle to define the racial culture of Los Angeles. And for Himes, the broad public support in L.A. for these "race riots" was a sure sign that "the South has won Los Angeles" (201).

Opening in Los Angeles in July of 1978, thirty-four years after the riots it portrays, Luis Valdez's play *Zoot Suits*, like Himes's 1943 article, locates the event as a landmark moment in the city's and the country's multicultural history. But for Valdez, looking back on the zoot suit riots as a site of memory from a later present, the riots are not as they had earlier appeared to Himes a final defeat in a war to define the racial culture of the city. To be sure, they are represented as a battle in such a war, for as one character sets the tone of the times: "L.A. has declared an all-out war on Chicanos" (30). But whether that moment and the events leading up to it mark a triumph or a defeat in the "Chicano" L.A. history Valdez re-constructs is less certain in the play. Even as *Zoot Suits* offers a self-conscious exploration of the meaning of this past from the perspective of the present, it suggests that this meaning remains unfixed.

What at first appears to be a devastating defeat where affirmations of difference signified by the zoot suit "died under fire here in Los," the play suggests may yet be re-interpreted or re-imagined as something of a triumph for the Chicano community where, as protagonist Henry Reyna says, "we won this one because we learned to fight in a new way" (88). But such a clearly affirmative ending too is ultimately undercut. In the play's final scene, the narrator interrupts the action to announce to the characters and the audience that there remain "other ways to end this story" (94). Which of the possible outcomes of the play, and of the history it portrays, will ultimately emerge as its dominant interpretation, however, remains undetermined at *Zoot Suit's* end. Such a conclusion, the play suggests, depends as much on narratives of the present and the future as those constructed in the past.

CHAPTER ONE

"Out of an American Pale": John Fante's Los Angeles and the Fictions of Whiteness

One is unlikely to be introduced to John Fante in the classroom, and one will not find him in the standard anthologies of American literature, despite the broadening of the "American literary canon" in recent years. Most Fante readers instead have discovered him by word of mouth or sheer chance. For poet Charles Bukowski, it was in a downtown L.A. public library in the 1940s where by good luck he found a copy of Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), which he later proclaimed to be the first book he read that "related to me or to the streets or to the people about me" ("Preface" 5). For *Chinatown* screenwriter Robert Towne, a brief mention in Carey McWilliams's classic *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1948) led him also to *Ask the Dust*, which served as an important resource as he wrote his extraordinary screenplay that itself offers a repressed version of Los Angeles history. Of *Ask the Dust*, Towne said: "If there is a better piece of fiction written about Los Angeles, I don't know about it" (qtd. in Warga,

22). Most of the rest of us less famous readers have found Fante in a similar fashion: thanks to the recommendation of a friend or teacher, or perhaps because of the praise of the likes of McWilliams, Towne, or Bukowski. Such is the gradual process by which repressed voices and repressed histories tend to emerge. In Fante's case, his literary "arrival" has come after his own passing in 1983 from complications due to diabetes. Since shortly before his death, however, Black Sparrow Press, at the urging of Charles Bukowski, began reprinting his work. Today, nearly his complete body of work is in print, and this long forgotten literary voice that, to use Bukowski's words, first "scream[ed] out" from the margins of Los Angeles in the 1930s is demanding critical attention.

Much of the recent interest in John Fante's fiction stems from his relationship to the economic and cultural margins of 1930s Los Angeles. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Fante did not go west seeking an opportunity to write for Hollywood. Indeed, he is one of the few who became a Los Angeles writer before becoming a Hollywood writer. A second generation Italian American from Boulder, Colorado, Fante arrived in California soon after the stock market crash. "Poverty drove me to

California," he later explained (qtd. in Cooper 53). His journey west took him first to the Los Angeles neighborhood of Wilmington, where he labored in the canneries and on the docks of L. A. harbor, and then to Bunker Hill, where he worked as a waiter and began his career as a published writer, thanks largely to the support and encouragement of H. L. Mencken, with whom he initiated a correspondence in the early thirties. It is of Bunker Hill that Fante wrote most compellingly, and it is this downtown Los Angeles neighborhood with which Fante continues to be most closely associated, despite a lengthy career as a Hollywood screenwriter that began in the 1940s and spanned four decades.

Ask the Dust, Fante's first novel set in and around Bunker Hill, remains his most important contribution to the literary and cultural history of Los Angeles. In *Ask the Dust*, Fante illuminates a world of downtown Los Angeles that rarely appears in the Los Angeles literary tradition, or for that matter, in the popular and scholarly histories of the city. However, as Norman Klein has shown, the invisibility of the old downtown is not simply a failure of historical memory. Rather, it is the result of a process of "systematic erasure" that was well underway even as a young John Fante wandered through and

wrote about these downtown streets in the 1930s. Although much of downtown had a long tradition of poverty and crime that dated from the 19th century when the plaza area was known as the notorious "Negro Alley," the popular perception in the 1930s that downtown was the very epitome of urban blight was less reality than myth (Pitt and Pitt 353). Tapping into the Anglo anxiety over the racial and ethnic diversity of downtown neighborhoods, this myth was a powerful one perpetuated by both city boosters who pushed for "urban renewal," as well as by the writers of noir fiction and film who seized upon these neighborhoods as representations of the California dream gone wrong, a tactic applied most famously in *Chinatown* (1974), where the neighborhood itself symbolizes an indefinable evil at the heart of this false Eden.

These myths and stereotypes precipitated the physical erasure of downtown neighborhoods. Of course, to supporters this process has been known benignly as "urban renewal," but as both Klein and scholar and photographer Phillip Ethington have compellingly argued, only racially mixed and minority neighborhoods were targeted for redevelopment. In fact, Ethington points to an "obsession with race" evident throughout government housing

documents from the 1930s that were designed as guidelines to distinguish the "good from the bad neighborhoods" (43). Frequent references to "subversive racial elements" characterize the descriptions of downtown neighborhoods, and throughout the documents, the terms "melting pot" and "slum" are consistently conflated, suggesting that, in the eyes of the "experts" producing these studies, racial and ethnic diversity is really what needed to be eradicated.

Such logic led first to the razing of Chinatown in the early 1930s. Slotted next for "renewal" was the Mexican Plaza, the city's oldest neighborhood that stood on the site of "El Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles," the original Spanish colonial settlement. But the old Plaza met with a stranger fate. Instead of simply leveling it, city booster Christine Sterling "saved" the Plaza by transforming it into the new Olvera Street, a "theme park style Mexican Marketplace" advertised as "a Mexican Street of Yesterday in a City of Today," and complete with Mexican merchants and entertainers who, as part of their contract, dressed in traditional Mexican garb (Kropp 35-36). Yet it is Bunker Hill itself that provides the most striking example of downtown erasure, for today its name no longer refers to the actual hill

but only to a place where the hill once stood. The hill was leveled in the 1960s to make way for steel office buildings in what has been the city's most elaborate project of urban erasure. Today, Bunker Hill is a mere memory of a place, and a neglected one at that.

Bunker Hill would stand for another thirty years after Fante's narrator Arturo Bandini awakens in his hotel room on the hilltop and heads down Angel's Flight at the beginning of *Ask the Dust*. Yet even then Bunker Hill was, in a sense, invisible. In writing *Ask the Dust*, Fante set out to illuminate this neglected place, as well as some of the invisible lives that passed through it and the neighborhoods thereabouts. Writing in his 1939 "Prologue to *Ask the Dust*," Fante asserts that "the real Los Angeles" exists in these downtown neighborhoods, and he vows that his writing will eschew the more familiar Los Angeles settings of Hollywood and the west side for what he finds to be a richer, more complex world of downtown:

Do I speak of Hollywood with its tinsel blah? of the movies? do I speak of Bel Air and Lakeside? do I speak of Pasadena and the hot spots hereabouts?—no and no a thousand times. I tell you this is a book about a boy and a girl in a different civilization:

this is about Main Street and Spring Street and Bunker Hill, about this town no further west the Figueroa, and nobody famous is in this book and nothing notorious or famous will be mentioned because none of that belongs here in this book, or will be here much longer. (147)

Fante was captivated by the activity and diversity of downtown Los Angeles. It was a place "teeming with people" and reflecting a racial diversity that belied Harry Chandler's famous claim that Los Angeles was the "whitest of American cities," not to mention *L. A. Times* writer Harry Carr's even more absurd racist touting of the city's Anglo destiny (Fante 149; Fine 48). While Chandler and Carr fantasized about their "Anglo Saxon Eden," Fante's fiction provided an early glimpse of a visible and vibrant multiculturalism in Los Angeles, a world that existed "out of an American pale," as Fante once described the Filipino community of Terminal Island that also attracted his literary attention (Reiff 149; Fante, *Letters* 100).

These same downtown and industrial neighborhoods that Fante lived in and wrote about also prompted his close friend Carey McWilliams to proclaim ten years later that L.A. contained "a new racial dynamic," and that it

was taking shape as "new type of community" marked by its multiracialism. In the years to come, the racial diversity of downtown Los Angeles of course would continue to grow and expand outward to reach much of the rest of the city and the county, especially after the 1965 Immigration Act. Thus, in *Ask the Dust*, Fante offers a view into an important formative moment in what has become America's most multicultural city.

But what is finally most important about Fante's literary Los Angeles is not simply *that* he depicts the city's "invisible" multicultural places but *how* he reveals and explores them through his fiction. Fante brings to his subject an aesthetic strategy that he considered literary truth-telling (*Letters* 130). Modeled on the modernist fiction of Norwegian Nobelist Knut Hamsun, Fante's early works strived to achieve what Hamsun called an "unselfish inwardness" and was intended to reveal something of the inner life of the self (qtd. in Collins 126). To be sure, Fante did not allege that his fiction revealed objective truths, nor was this mode of "truth-telling" autobiographical, at least not explicitly so. Rather, he strove to express the subjective repressions and revelations of a fictional narrator. In the case of *Ask the Dust*, it is Arturo

Bandini who expresses his confused and conflicted inner thoughts as he finds himself in this multicultural world that both excites and unsettles him. These thoughts are often politically incorrect and disturbing, as they reveal how he struggles with, and often gives into, racism, sexism, and ethnic self-hatred. But in confessing his narrator's deepest anxieties, convictions, and contradictions, Fante's fiction also offers a fuller vision of some of the struggles that defined his historical and cultural moment, and he represents something of the lived complexity of existence in what Ethington calls the "ghost neighborhoods" of downtown Los Angeles.

I. *Ask the Dust* and the "Real" Los Angeles

Local folklore has long maintained that Los Angeles provides a melting pot for "white" ethnics, those descendants who have migrated west from the eastern, mid-western, or southern states. Writing in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, UCLA sociologists Roger Waldinger and Michael Lichter have declared that "the local folklore has it right," explaining:

Relocated [European] ethnics discover shortly after moving to L.A. that local parlance has no place for the ethnic distinctions taken for granted on the East Coast. No sooner are they transplanted to Southern California than the Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York, Boston, or Chicago find themselves transformed into "Anglos." (413)

As Waldinger and Lichter argue, there is some truth to this lore. In the less ethnically but more racially stratified far West, discrimination towards Euro-ethnics that was so common in the older eastern and mid-western cities did not hold the same kind of power or pervasiveness. As a result, many Euro-ethnic migrants found in Los Angeles fewer obstacles preventing them from being included within a mainstream "American" identity, which in Los Angeles, as throughout the U.S., really means becoming "white."

Fante's *Ask the Dust* tells a fuller version of this story, and it is more complicated and less benign than the lore Waldinger and Lichter affirm. Like the ethnic migrants of which they write, Fante's Arturo Bandini comes to imagine himself as part of the city's white majority, but this new racial identity is not magically conferred upon him at his arrival. Rather, it is

constructed through a process of exclusion and omission, and it is rationalized through a series of repressions. Through Arturo Bandini's story, and through his narrative voice, *Ask the Dust* exposes and explores the process by which assimilation is imagined, as well as how its secret history is erased even as it is enacted.

A kind of alter-ego for Fante, Arturo is an Italian American who has come from Colorado and arrived in Bunker Hill, which the novel's first sentence locates at "the very middle of Los Angeles" (11). Here Arturo is confronted with a new world and a new racial order. The complexity of his position within this structure is suggested in the scene of his arrival at the Alto Loma Hotel in Bunker Hill on his first day in Los Angeles. As he later recalls, Arturo is greeted by the landlady Mrs. Hargraves, an elderly widow from Connecticut and one of the "broken, uprooted people from the East" who, like Nathanael West's Angelinos, have "come to California to die" (Fante 94; West 22). Mrs. Hargraves treats Arturo coldly and peers at him curiously until she reveals the reason for her concern: "Young man . . . are you Mexican?" she asks, explaining bluntly: "We don't allow Mexicans in this hotel" (49). Clearing up this momentary racial confusion by asserting that he is in fact "not a

Mexican," but rather "an American," Arturo is granted, and accepts, entrance into the hotel.

The brief tale of Arturo's tepid "welcome" to Los Angeles, his difficulty gaining entrance into the Alta Lomo Hotel, as well as his decision to stay, suggests the issues confronting Arturo Bandini as he begins his new life in Los Angeles. As implied by Mrs. Hargraves' ultimate acceptance of Arturo into her hotel, he has achieved some measure of assimilation upon arrival in Los Angeles. Although it is one of the many ironies of the novel that his apparent assimilation only gets him a room in a run-down hotel, he has nevertheless been accepted as one of the included—and presumably "white"—as he often declares himself. But the scene of his admission is also rich with omissions and exclusions. Not only is his acceptance briefly in doubt because of his dark complexion, but it may only have been gained through the omission of his ethnic identity. His identification of himself as "an American" is true enough of course, but it noticeably omits his Italian heritage that he at other times proudly touts. Such a declaration of his ethnic past to Mrs. Hargrave would likely have complicated his admission, however, so Arturo evades it through his carefully chosen words.

In choosing to join the "fine," "honest people" of the Alto Loma, Arturo also willingly submits to the logic of racial exclusion that keeps out Mexicans, as well as unmentioned African Americans, Asian Americans and other racial minorities who experienced segregation in Los Angeles. That Arturo is expected to concede to the worldview of the white majority--despite his own past experiences as a victim of a dominant group—is suggested by another odd exchange between Arturo and Mrs. Hargraves in that initial scene. As Arturo signs in on the guest register on that first day, he writes his birthplace as Boulder, Colorado. Mrs. Hargraves says "Boulder is not in Colorado" (49). Despite Arturo's assurances that in fact he just arrived from Boulder and his family still lives there, Mrs. Hargraves insists that Boulder is in Nebraska and implies that her hotel may not be the right place for somebody who does not value honesty. Thus, to remain at the Alto Loma, Arturo finds himself forced to "correct" his "mistake" in the register, thus effectively erasing his own history to re-construct it in a manner that suits some uninformed worldview. It is only after he does so that Mrs. Hargraves is suddenly "very pleased" and enthusiastically declares: "Welcome to California! You'll love it here!" (49).

To be sure, Arturo does not often need to be coerced to shed his ethnic past and identify with the dominant group. A kind of "angry white male," as one critic has recently called him, Arturo at times revels in racism, occasionally reverting to slurs like "Spick" and "Greaser," and engaging in jingoism: "I was American and goddamn proud of it," he says as he points to alleged American triumphs over the Southern California landscape and compares them to what he perceives as Native American failures. His poses, however, require an active repression of his own "old wounds" of ethnic marginalization. Even as he now participates in racist name-calling, he struggles to forget the "hideous names" like "Wop, Dago, and Greaser" that he was called by "Smith, Parker, and Jones" (46). As the memories resurface, and he is reminded that "he had never been one of them," Arturo tries to reconcile the contradictions and tensions between his new racial self and his old ethnic past (46). Framed within Arturo's journey to become a writer—a journey that requires that he achieve some self-knowledge—Arturo faces the vexing question that he once posed to himself: is he a "traitor to [his] soul[?]" (20).

Commentary on *Ask the Dust* has concluded that Arturo proves not to be a traitor to himself, that he achieves a remarkable resolution of his internal struggle by, as Richard Collins has written, "literally embrac[ing]" other outsiders and thus "learning how to embrace his own status as alien and outsider" (137). The evidence of this transformation has been found primarily in Arturo's relationship with Camilla Lopez, a Mexican waitress whose story comes to dominate much of his narration. As critics have noted, Arturo finds himself drawn to Camilla because of the otherness she represents as a Mexican American in Los Angeles, an "alien" status that is underscored by the Alto Loma's policy of excluding Mexicans. When Arturo first sees Camilla, he perceives only this otherness: "She was a racial type," he states. Throughout the novel he remains obsessed with her racial status, whether in romanticizing her as a "Mexican princess," criticizing her as a "Mexican peon," or fetishizing the huaraches she wears.

Like Arturo's story, Camilla's is an odyssey of assimilation, but it does not end with the achievement of American acceptance but with rejection and self-destruction. Camilla's quest for assimilation is told through her dysfunctional relationship with the awful,

abusive white man, Sammy Wiggins. The fable quality of Camilla's story of unrequited love is underscored by Arturo's insistence on calling Sammy simply "the American." For Sammy's part, Camilla is a "spick," and "they don't like to be treated like human beings" (121). Despite such remarks and his physical abuse of her, Camilla remains inexplicably dedicated to him. Ultimately, however, Sammy shuts Camilla out altogether, and even when Arturo goes with her to see him, Sammy, "the American," significantly declares: "You can come in, but not her" (137). Such rejections initiate Camilla's downfall, a tragic path that leads her to the drug-infested "dark corridor[s]" of Central Avenue hotels, and then to the Del Maria mental institution, and finally to wander off into the Southern California desert alone, a lost soul, rejected by America's great "melting-pot" metropolis.

The parallels between Arturo and Camilla evident in this brief summary are implied throughout the novel. Both outsiders in America because of their racial or ethnic heritage, Arturo and Camilla each desperately seek American acceptance and assimilation, and they use similar strategies to achieve it. Just as Arturo neglects to mention his ethnicity when speaking with Mrs.

Hargraves, Camilla also passes for Anglo at times, occasionally using Camilla Lombard instead of Camilla Lopez "for fun" (64). Both also engage in the unfortunate practice of using racist slurs and belittling others to bolster their own precarious sense of self. While Arturo refers to one Mexican man as a "Spick," Camilla taunts Arturo as a "Dago," and dismisses a group of Japanese as "Japs" (132). Perhaps most tellingly, their words even mirror each other's. When Camilla says "I'm not a Mexican . . . I'm an American," she echoes the words spoken by Arturo in his conversation with Mrs. Hargraves (61).

Although *Ask the Dust* presumably tells the story of Arturo's achievement of self-knowledge, it is not Arturo but Camilla who perceives the similarities of their struggles. Camilla sees through Arturo's performance of confident Americanism. She sees in him the same self-doubt and yearning for acceptance that she acknowledges in herself, but while she admits these feelings, Arturo does not. Camilla does not conceal from Arturo that she uses the name Lombard on occasion, thus passing as Anglo. When she inquires whether Arturo also wishes his name was "Johnson, or Williams, or something," he insists that he does not, that he is "satisfied," but Camilla knows better and she suggests as such as she simply states: "No

you're not. I know" (64). In another scene, Arturo cruelly taunts Camilla for the white heels she has taken to wearing in place of the traditional Mexican huaraches that so fascinate him. "You look like a cheap imitation of an American," Arturo says harshly, and Camilla responds in kind: "I'm just as much an American as you are. Why, you're not American at all. Look at your skin. You're dark like Eytalians. And your eyes, they're black" (122). Camilla's comments are as discerning as they are cutting. She is indeed "just as American" as Arturo, but within the racial logic that controls American identity, this can mean that they are equally "not American at all." Arturo's only response is to assert weakly that his eyes and hair are brown, compared at least to the "black eyes of Camilla" (114). Unwilling to look honestly at his own situation and its many parallels to Camilla's, Arturo instead continues to hold dear what he sees as his superior rank—however slight—within this flawed system.

Critics have found that Arturo's perception of Camilla and his attitude toward her convincingly evolves. As Camilla heads toward her tragic fate, the once extraordinarily egotistical Arturo discovers a "newfound human sympathy" (Cooper 92) and reaches out to her, even

trying to nurse her back to health when he finds her physically and emotionally "broken" (147). In some of the novel's most powerful and elegant passages, Arturo describes his desperate attempt to save her and his grief upon failing, and it is these moments that have directed most interpretations of the novel. Indeed, it is the powerful effect of Arturo's most sensitively expressed sentiments that has led critics like David Fine to remark upon Arturo's remarkable sympathy "that extends to even the less fortunate ones" (187) and Richard Cooper to point to the "extraordinary sympathy that informs the book" (130). Despite Arturo's genuine sympathy for Camilla, he does not, as Collins suggests, come to embrace her otherness nor his own. Rather, it is through Camilla's tragedy that Arturo comes to accept his own assimilation. Indeed, it is through her mental and social disintegration that Arturo achieves integration.

Ultimately, Arturo tells Camilla's story of assimilation as the antithesis of his own. While his assimilation is portrayed as inevitable, hers is impossible—a "hopeless scheme," as he calls it, destined to fail (142). Directing Arturo's depiction of Camilla's failed plan is a logic of essentialism that persists even as Arturo "embraces" Camilla and tries to save her from

what he believes to be her fate. Her tragedy, as he tells it, is that she has the wrong dream. She yearns for assimilation into the modern city of Los Angeles but is better suited for the natural landscapes of her "Mayan" roots. She was "deeper rooted than I," Arturo concludes, and thus her race proves to be an essential, defining difference while his ethnicity proves to be a relatively minor obstacle to Americanization.

That Arturo's vision of Camilla is more of a rationalization than a faithful representation of her story is most compellingly evident in a scene late in the novel when he visits Camilla's apartment for the first time. Coming after her final rejection by Sammy, Camilla is near her breaking point in this scene—even stopping to buy marijuana on the way home—and her apartment reflects her disordered state. But Arturo's description of her dirty, disastrous apartment does not speak to her current psychological state; nor does it speak to the segregating practices of hotels like Arturo's Alto Loma—a practice in which he is implicated as a beneficiary of it—that have relegated her to a Los Angeles slum. Rather, Arturo interprets her disheveled apartment as evidence of the impossibility of her assimilation:

It was as I had imagined. This was her home. Blindfolded I could have acknowledged the place, for her odor possessed it, her fevered, lost existence proclaimed it as part of a hopeless scheme. An apartment on Temple Hills, an apartment in Los Angeles. She belonged to the rolling hills, the wide desert, the high mountains, she would ruin any apartment, she would lay havoc upon any such little prison as this. It was ever so, ever in my imagination, ever part of my scheming and thinking about her. This was her home, her ruin, her scattered dream.

Even as Arturo here articulates his essentialist view of Camilla, there is a persistent suggestion in this passage that his vision is less a representation of her life than it is a product of his imagination. Indeed, Arturo's representation is "part of his scheming and thinking about her"; it is less a depiction of what he sees in her apartment than what he had already "imagined" he would see. Perhaps Arturo is accurate in suggesting that he could have just as effectively seen the place "blindfolded" for it is a scene that was "ever in [his] imagination" and one that is already determined in his mind before he walks into her apartment.

Through Arturo's eyes, Camilla's story comes to represent a romantic alternative to assimilation. As critic George Guida has written, to Arturo she is "Indianness" as an alternative (137). Fante suggests as much in his "Prologue to Ask the Dust," where he alludes to Helen Hunt Jackson's *Romana*, the classic 1884 Southern California novel about a "mestiza" heroine who chooses Indian life over a privileged life in the colonial Mexico of Southern California. *Ask the Dust*, Fante notes, is "Ramona in reverse," for here Camilla chooses to pursue American life—suggested most obviously in her pursuit of Sammy "the American"—and not some alternative path that would have been allegedly "true" to her Mexican or "Mayan" heritage. Just as *Ramona's* racial romanticism makes it clear that the "Indian" choice is the right and natural one for the novel's "half-breed" heroine, Arturo views Camilla through a similar lens and thus portrays her decision to pursue assimilation as a sad distortion of her nature. It is her failure to embrace her essential otherness, her "Indianness," that ensures her tragic end, her final exile into the desert and dust of the novel's title. The satisfying closure of the novel's end that most readers experience suggests that Arturo effectively represents Camilla's tragedy as inevitable and

appropriate. As critic Grant Hier has written, one finishes *Ask the Dust* with a sense that "[s]omehow the entire story has closed back upon itself, the chapter and the book ending with a sense of completion, of just so-ness, if you will. Although [Camilla] is finally lost, things are as they should be" (146). Indeed, as Arturo portrays it, Camilla dies because she must die.

It is important to note that Camilla actually does not die in the novel, although Arturo twice envisions her death. The first of these scenes comes only mid-way through the book and suggests that Arturo anticipates Camilla's end with a certain eagerness. While Arturo is in Long Beach, an earthquake shakes the region, and rumors circulate that "thousands are dead" in Los Angeles. Arturo rashly concludes: "Thousands. That means Camilla" (100). Momentarily absorbed with his vision of her death, Arturo describes the very posture of her corpse, and he gloats in a morbid satisfaction at being alive even as she is dead: "She was dead and I was alive. Good. I pictured her dead: she would lie still in this manner; her eyes closed like this, her hands clasped like that. She was dead and I was alive" (100). Again, at the novel's end, Camilla is not actually dead, or not confirmed so. After Sammy rejects Camilla one final time,

she wanders off into a desert exile with only a bottle of milk and the little white dog that Arturo had given her—two white images that suggest Camilla never does abandon her desire for assimilation. Regardless of her actual fate in the desert, Arturo again envisions her dead, here using a romantically rendered essentialism: "You could die, but the desert would hide the secret of your death, it would remain after you, to cover your memory with ageless wind and heat and cold" (164). Here Arturo presents his romantic ideal whereby Camilla is not only dead but forgotten. Her life and death will become a "secret," her "memory" erased by the landscape itself.

Of course it is not the landscape but Arturo's narrative voice that erases Camilla and relegates her story to that of a "secret." Writing as Arturo Bandini, Fante states in his Prologue that it is "her story I want to tell" (161). Arturo does tell her story, but it is told only in service to his own. It is in her death that he finds life, through her exile that he makes his return to Los Angeles, and finally, it is through her rejection and exclusion that he realizes his dream of assimilation. Ultimately, it is not Camilla's fate but his own that he represents as tragic. If Camilla signifies to Arturo the romantic embodiment of racial difference--the "Indian"

alternative—his own story is told as the tragic dissipation of ethnic difference. It is the loss of his old ethnic self and soul that Arturo imagines in the end of the novel:

I looked at the faces around me, and I knew mine was like theirs. Faces with the blood drained away, tight faces, worried, lost. Faces like flowers torn from their roots and stuffed in a pretty vase, the colors draining fast. (161)

He has become, in the end, one of "them," another of the Smiths, Parkers, or Joneses. But Arturo accepts this fate. He does not come to "embrace his otherness," but chooses assimilation even if it requires that he erase himself and his past as he did when speaking with Mrs. Hargraves, even if he has to distort and erase Camilla's story, as he does in the end. Arturo does follow her to the desert's edge. He walks out searching for her "a hundred yards into the desolation," but he turns back and accepts his own now tragic fate of assimilation—that fate which he had so long schemed to achieve. But he chooses it in the end, as the novel's last line suggests: "Then I got in the car, started the engine, and drove back to Los Angeles" (165).

II. "A Writer Once More in the World":

Dreams from Bunker Hill

For forty-three years, *Ask the Dust* stood as the culmination of Fante's "Saga of Arturo Bandini," the cycle of novels that trace Arturo's journey to become a man, an assimilated American, and a writer. Arturo's story begins in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), which tells of his youth in Colorado and his desire to escape his ethnic past by becoming a writer. It continues in the long-unpublished novel, *The Road to Los Angeles* (1982), which presents Arturo in the troubled days of his young adulthood in Wilmington, California, where he turns to literature and fantasy to escape the realities of a life of poverty and ethnic marginalization. In the final pages of *Ask the Dust*, Arturo's long journey seems to be brought to a successful close. He has become a novelist, and he has come to perceive himself as American. For forty-three years, Fante seemingly agreed with critic Grant Heir's words: "things were as they should be" at the Saga's end. Arturo Bandini's story was complete.

With *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, Fante not only revives the long dormant character of Arturo Bandini but he also reconsiders and re-writes the kunsterroman of *Ask the Dust*. *Dreams* is not a sequel to *Ask the Dust*, for it does

not begin where the earlier novel ends. In *Dreams*, Arturo is again an aspiring artist living in Bunker Hill and is yet to write the novel that marks his artistic maturity at the end of *Ask the Dust*. Thus, *Dreams* does not resume Arturo's story but refigures it. Arturo again narrates a story of his journey to become an artist, but here he offers a different tale, one that is ostensibly less concerned with ethnicity. Camilla makes no appearance in this novel, and Arturo never worries about being a traitor to his "ethnic soul." Rather, Arturo's struggle in *Dreams* is to resist becoming a traitor to his talent, to be true to his vision as a writer. Yet like *Ask the Dust*, *Dreams* also proves to be a tale of assimilation and loss. In *Dreams*, however, it is tale of loss informed by Fante's experiences as a writer in the many years that have passed since he first wrote about Arturo Bandini and Bunker Hill.

That Fante would turn to the subject of writing for his final novel is not surprising. Writing fiction had been Fante's life's work. His career spanned fifty years from the publication of his first story in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury* to the 1982 appearance of *Dreams*. Yet the path his career had taken also produced its share of disappointment. Following a productive 1930s that saw the

completion of his first three Arturo Bandini novels and a collection of short stories, *Dago Red* (1940), Fante's literary production slowed to a trickle. In the years to come, Fante would add only the popular success *Full of Life* (1952) and *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (1977) to his list of published books before writing *Dreams*.

Between the height of his fiction in the 1930s and his return to form just before his death in the 1980's, Fante came to follow a different path as a writer from the one he had set out on in the 1930s. He became a Hollywood screenwriter. That Fante remained in this trade for so long is rather remarkable considering the very few screen credits he received in his many years of writing scripts. Yet on the strength of his modest success for Columbia Pictures with *Jeanne Eagles* (co-written, 1957), an adaptation of Nelsen Algren's *Walk on the Wild Side* (co-written, 1962), a screenplay version of his own *Full of Life* (1956), and primarily because of his many scripts that were deemed promising but never produced, Fante achieved a level of economic success that would have been a mere fantasy for the young man who had lived "down and out in Bunker Hill." Indeed, Fante's path through Hollywood led, ultimately, to a life of economic success and a house in Malibu, where he and his wife Joyce would

move in the late 1950s, and where he would remain until his death in 1983.

Fante's work in Hollywood enabled him to live "the good life," at least economically. Still, he often expressed his disdain for screenwriting, once calling it "the most disgusting job in Christ's kingdom." The story of a writer who "sells out" in Hollywood is, of course, an oft-told tale that can be found in biographies of many American writers, most famously in those about three of Fante's most famous contemporaries: Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Nathanael West. Like these writers and others, Fante also struggled with the Hollywood system and its disregard for a writer's aesthetic aspirations. But Fante's internal struggle with life in Hollywood is also much more than that. For Fante, becoming a Hollywood writer meant a loss of self akin to the assimilation stories that he had so often explored in his fiction.

What Fante lost in Hollywood was both more and less than ethnicity, for it meant the sacrificing of his personal literary vision that had taken shape first as a desire to represent "the true Italian American scene." In Hollywood, the "truths" of a writer's imagination tend to be sacrificed to the more practical concerns of fulfilling an audience's desires, and Hollywood's

mainstream American audiences were not aching for a view into the marginalized lives and neglected worlds of Fante's fiction. Just as Arturo submits to Mrs. Hargraves' uninformed worldview when he enters the Alta Loma in *Ask the Dust*, Fante, it seems, submitted to Hollywood's when he became a screenwriter. Indeed, it is appropriate that the one screenplay Fante adapted from his own work was *Full of Life*, the "autobiographical" family drama that was "full of happy touches," as one reviewer noted (qtd. in Cooper 256). Fante, on the other hand, dismissed it as a "lie" that he wrote for profit.

With *Dreams*, Fante refigures Arturo's tale as his assimilation into the deluding and deforming world of Hollywood. Originally entitled "How to Write a Screenplay," *Dreams* tells of Arturo's foray into screenwriting and its damaging effect on his ability to become a "true" artist. In learning to write a screenplay, Arturo learns how to be silenced. During Arturo's time in Hollywood, nearly all that he writes is omitted from the films. Indeed, he receives no film credits and writes only two words that ultimately find their way into a film. Watching a Western that he had originally written, then collaborated on, then quit out of frustration, Arturo finds that only "Whoa" and

"Giddyup" escaped deletion. "Whoa and Giddyup, my fulfillment as a scriptwriter," Arturo remarks.

More than just the silencing of his voice, assimilation into Hollywood comes to represent a sin against himself. Arturo gets his first job as a screenwriter after he has spent the night in jail for loitering in Pershing Square. After being bailed out by his much older lover with whom he has an oddly oedipal relationship, Arturo announces that he has been hired to write a screenplay. His lover, Helen Brownell, remains disgusted by his arrest and says only "At least you'll be clean" (42). Helen's words prove to be ironic, for screenwriting functions not to cleanse but to corrupt Arturo morally as well as artistically. When Arturo goes to the Catholic Church to pray that he be given a screenwriting assignment he desperately desires, he finds himself with "nothing to say," unable even to articulate a Hail Mary (71). Similarly, when Arturo receives his first pay check, a "staggering sum" that he has earned by writing nothing, his friend Frank Edgington responds to his visible guilt by saying, sarcastically, "Go and sin no more" (49). Finally, it is when writing for the picture *Sin City* that Arturo comes to realize the "misery of the craft" of screenwriting. In his one great act of

defiance, Arturo removes his name from the script's credits and abandons Hollywood to set out to recover his dream of becoming an artist.

While Arturo's sins against himself are presented as largely aesthetic, his story continues to have an important ethnic dimension. Compared to *Ask the Dust's* Arturo, this version seems comfortably assimilated. In *Ask the Dust*, Arturo only gains entrance to the Alto Loma through the rather tense scene with his landlady. In *Dreams*, on the other hand, Arturo has a love affair with Helen Brownell, the novel's counterpart to Mrs. Hargraves. Arturo's affair with his Anglo landlord, a widow from Kansas, suggests that he has embraced whiteness, and his narration expresses no reservations about joining the "Smiths, Parkers, and Jones" that once rejected him. In *Ask the Dust*, Arturo buys a house for Camilla outside of the city, for to him she represents the alternative to assimilation, a possible escape from the melting-pot metropolis. With Helen, however, Arturo imagines buying a house in Woodland Hills, well-ensconced on the city's wealthy and white west side. It would be "the Kansas type, with a chickenyard and a dog" (145). In *Ask the Dust*, Arturo submits to Mrs. Hargraves's pressures to erase his past and adopt a new worldview. In

Dreams, Arturo embraces his Anglo landlady and her worldview. He not only wants to marry Helen, but he is prepared to re-create her past life as his own, to live a life that re-imagines her Kansas past. Evoking the popular myth that Los Angeles could be "Iowa by the Pacific," Arturo seeks to invent a life with Helen as Kansas by the Pacific.

It is through Arturo's relationship with a character known as The Duke of Sardinia that he is forced again to reconcile with the ethnic past he so effectively represses throughout *Dreams*. He meets the Duke on Terminal Island, where Arturo has retreated after his *Sin City* debacle. Like Bunker Hill, Terminal Island is for him the antithesis of and an antidote for Hollywood. Hollywood is a place of "enchanted lies" where his words—and his identity—are erased. The setting for much of *The Road to Los Angeles* and, significantly, also the place from which Fante had written that first novel, Terminal Island provides for Arturo a context in which he again can begin to write. Terminal Island gives Arturo "a warm feeling" and represents the possibility that he may still become an artist: "I saw myself in one of the shacks with my typewriter. I longed for the chance to work there. . . . I wanted to live there and write there

(48). Here, away from Hollywood and even Helen Brownell, in a fisherman's shack on the margins of Los Angeles, Arturo again imagines that he may "become a writer once more in the world" (98). But, in making this return to the margins, Arturo must confront all that he fled from, all that he has repressed. Thus, here he again experiences what he calls "the incessant sense of my peasantry, the old conviction that somehow I did not belong" (132). When the Duke appears in Arturo's Terminal Island paradise, he appears to be an embodiment of these long-repressed ethnic anxieties.

A dull-witted but "rugged Italiano," the Duke of Sardinia is the kind of extreme ethnic stereotype that Arturo—as well as Fante—would have been expected to produce for Hollywood screenplays. Although the Duke is not a product of Hollywood, he is involved in a performance of another kind: he is a professional wrestler. It is never clear whether the Duke has invented his persona or if, as he insists, he actually is the son of the Prince of Sardinia, but Arturo disbelieves his story, dismissing his ancestral claim as "absurd," and later calling him "a fake and a farce" (112). Ultimately, what is crucial for Arturo's narrative is not whether or not the Duke is "fake," but whether Arturo

will come to identify with him despite the stereotype he represents.

For his part, the Duke immediately identifies with Arturo, for he perceives an ethnic kinship between them. "Italiano?" the Duke asks upon meeting Arturo. "Sure," Arturo answers with an ambivalence that suggests that he does not feel or will not acknowledge any deep connection to their shared heritage. Nevertheless, a tentative friendship begins between the two, and it is with the Duke's encouragement that Arturo returns again to writing. In Hollywood Arturo was paid *not* to write but only to be available for the rare occasion that his words would be needed. In contrast, the Duke tells him "write some more Don't stop" (106). The Duke even pays Arturo to write. Arturo becomes the Duke's ghostwriter, selling him love poems to give to his "woman in Lompoc" and pass off as his own, an arrangement that empowers Arturo's voice by encouraging him to speak for the Duke. Certainly, Arturo's brief time writing for the Duke as a "love poetry hack" does not signal his fulfillment as a writer, but it does provide Arturo with some artistic outlet and with an audience, both of which he lacks when working as a writer in Hollywood (Collins 153).

Arturo's allegiance to the Duke is tested with the arrival of his wrestling match. Like a stage or a screen, the ring provides a setting for a performance, and when the Duke steps into it, he stages an absurd ethnic stereotype for an eager audience. For his part, Arturo sees the scene as something out of a Hollywood screenplay. It is designed to manipulate a willing audience, and in this case, even whip them into a frenzy of ethnic violence: "It was what the crowd came to see and paid its money for" (114). The audience is "Mexicans, blacks, and gringos" who come to root for the Duke's opponent, "Richard Lionheart." Garbed in a white robe with "lovely blond hair carefully coifed," Richard Lionheart embodies a vision of white dominance that this audience identifies with despite their background. The Duke's part is that of the "enemy" (113). He is the outsider, the object of the audience's deep hatred. They heckle him with slurs and "croon with pleasure" at his pain. When he appears to be winning, they try to intervene in order to "rip his body to shreds." As Arturo perceives even before the match begins, the Duke cannot win, for the outcome, like the stereotypes, are overdetermined: "The drama was clear He would dish out a lot of punishment, for he was the devil, but

Richard Lionheart, blessed with purity, would conquer him in the end" (114).

For Arturo, the Duke's match precipitates a crisis of identity and ethnicity. It forces him to choose a side, to commit to an allegiance with the Duke for the sake of ethnic identity or, like the crowd that despises him, to reject the Duke as an outsider and pledge himself to the white hero, Richard Lionheart. Initially, Arturo resists the match altogether. "I didn't want any part of that goddamned fight," Arturo says, as he begins to work himself into a "frenzied protest" against attending the match (111). He becomes so desperate to avoid the match that he tries to slip away, but the Duke stops him: "As I turned the starter key a hand clutched me by the throat. There stood the Duke" (112). Although he first responds by rejecting the Duke and calling him a "new good peasant wop!" he ultimately commits to join him. It is not the force of Duke's will but the force of his plea that finally convinces Arturo. The Duke says simply, "I need someone in my corner" (112). Unwilling to let him stand entirely alone, Arturo relents and becomes the one person in the Olympic Auditorium on Duke's side.

In choosing to stand in Duke's corner, Arturo begins to reconcile with the ethnic past he has long repressed,

and which he abandoned for Hollywood. Despite the stereotype the Duke embodies, Arturo's identification with him only deepens as he observes the crowd's unanimous hatred and rejection of him. It is a painful identification. Arturo feels the force of the ethnic hatred directed at the Duke: "I walked beside him and felt the breaking waves of hate," Arturo says. Later he adds, "The hatred he generated entered my bones" (113). Yet this time Arturo does not seek to flee from the pain. He comes to see the Duke as "my gladiator," and remains with him until the end of the match and the melee that follows it. Afterward, he returns with the Duke, who is badly bruised and beaten, back to Terminal Island.

Yet it is not in Terminal Island, nor Bunker Hill where Arturo sets down to write his novel at the end of *Dreams*. An apartment on Temple Street provides the setting. It is a room above a Filipino restaurant, "two dollars a week without towels, sheets, or pillow cases" (125). Arturo has been here earlier in *Dreams*, but in having him return here at the end of the novel and of the "Saga of Arturo Bandini," Fante evokes *Ask the Dust* with the Temple Street setting, where it is Camilla Lopez who lives in a Temple Street slum. For Arturo, Camilla's apartment seemed the very epitome of America's margins,

assuring him of the impossibility of her assimilation. At the Saga's end, Arturo has returned there to try to "become a writer once more in the world." Having lost himself in his Kansas fantasy with Mrs. Brownell and then again in the "enchanted lies" of Hollywood, Arturo now seeks to find himself and his literary voice on the margins.

The end of the novel suggests that Arturo has again found his voice, that he has become an artist. Unlike *Ask the Dust*, becoming a writer here is not an act of assimilation. Rather, Arturo has become a writer of the margins. Like Fante in the 1930s—before going to Hollywood and learning "how to write a screenplay," Arturo is set to become a writer of both the Los Angeles margins and the ethnic margins. In writing *Dreams*, Fante provides Arturo with a different fate from his own. When Arturo arrives at his Temple Street apartment he finds his typewriter waiting for him: "It startled me, not because it was there, but because I had completely forgotten it" (146). He sets down to write with Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* at his side. The novel he will write is surely *Ask the Dust*, the novel Fante insists *Hunger* inspired: "[It is] Hamsun's *Hunger*, but this time a hunger for living in a land of dust" (152). Perhaps

writing from Temple Street, Arturo will provide still a different version, one that does not seek to erase Camilla and "cover her memory" in service to his own assimilation, but rather one that speaks from a position on the margins and seeks to remember her story.

CHAPTER TWO

Noir Mystery and L.A.'s Hidden Black History

One might expect to find something of the hidden history of Los Angeles in the city's well-known tradition of "noir," that loosely defined genre of hard-boiled crime fiction and film consisting primarily of urban detective stories and mysteries. As Joyce Carol Oates has written, noir narratives are generally fueled by the "wish to penetrate facades" (106) and to uncover forbidden secrets, and this certainly has been the case in L.A.'s extensive noir tradition. Indeed, L.A. noir has been nothing short of obsessed with exposing what is concealed by the city's heavily mythologized and overly produced image. Whether debunking those early myths of modern L.A. as a "golden land" of sunshine and dreams-fulfilled or challenging the more recent multicultural boosterism that touts L.A. as a successful melting-pot and "world city," noir narratives have provided the primary oppositional vision of the city and its history. As Mike Davis writes in *City of Quartz* (1990), L.A. noir has "come to function as a surrogate public history," an

alternative, anti-booster way for Los Angeles to "understand its past" (44, 36).

Even as this noir "history" has been guided by an impulse to expose the city's secrets, it also has been marked by its own omissions and repressions. And L.A. noir's most striking omission is its failure to tell of the city's racial history, a story that includes officially sanctioned segregation and institutionalized oppression and would seem to lend itself to the kind of exposé of municipal crimes and indictment of the city's power structure that make for a characteristic—and compelling—noir tale. But L.A. noir has largely proven unable or unwilling to see racial oppression or to *reveal* any part of L.A.'s hidden history of race. Only recently has this begun to change, thanks to an ambitious literary undertaking by Walter Mosley. In his six-novel Easy Rawlins series, Mosley has produced what has been accurately called a "social history" of black Los Angeles (George 194). Indeed, Mosley's project self-consciously contributes to L.A. noir's archive of unrecorded and imagined histories. But Mosley's work is also a radical revision of L.A. noir, for its focus is on those racial "secrets" that have been only further submerged by the traditionally "white" noir vision, and its guiding

impulse is the recovery of some of that history rendered invisible by noir.

To appreciate Mosley's achievement, it is important to consider first the striking absence of any significant treatment of L.A.'s multiracial and multicultural history in the noir tradition. Despite the form's focus on downtown settings, noir seldom portrays a minority population that has been a presence in the inner-city since the late nineteenth century. By the time the first "hardboiled" stories began appearing in H.L. Mencken's *The Black Mask* in the late 1920s, racial minorities made up a substantial seventeen percent of L.A.'s total population, and the vast majority lived downtown (Fogelson 82). But it was not only the size and downtown locations of L.A.'s minority neighborhoods that should have made them visible in the early days of noir, it was the dramatic rise in discrimination that they were experiencing even as noir was emerging as L.A.'s popular oppositional discourse.

The late 1920s and 1930s was a turbulent and transforming period in L.A.'s racial history that saw the southernization of Los Angeles and the rise of segregation. From the turn of the century until the mid-1920s, racism had been at a relative low-point in L.A.

During these years, most men and some women of color were able to find a place in the still-small city's fast-growing economy, typically working as laborers or small businessmen and often purchasing land and property. Long-time resident and *California Eagle* publisher Charlotta Bass was only slightly exaggerating when she recalled L.A. of that era as a place where minorities lived "where they could afford to buy" (Bass 97). Visiting in 1913, W.E.B. Dubois also found L.A. to be a racially progressive place. Speaking to a crowd of "2,300 people from white, yellow, and black races," DuBois declared: "Out here in this matchless Southern California there would seem to be no limit to your opportunities, your possibilities" (DuBois 192; Bunch 101).

But racism began to increase in 1920's L.A. after a population boom brought an influx of white Southerners and an active Ku Klux Klan to the region. When a 1919 California Supreme Court decision upheld the infamous "restrictive covenants," which were used to bar minorities from purchasing or occupying property in specific areas, the legal means for achieving segregation had been put in place. Although segregation would take shape slowly over the next decade, by 1927 Bass could see a "definite movement" aimed at "restricting Negroes and

other minorities to certain slum areas for living purposes" (97). By 1930, the city's minority population had been effectively ghettoized into neighborhoods located within or bordering on the downtown. Communities like Chinatown, Little Tokyo, the "Mexican" Plaza district, and the African American district along Central Avenue became severely overpopulated, as both newly arrived minorities and long-time residents forced out of their old neighborhoods by covenants found few other housing options (DeGraaf, "City" 349). Increasingly, these became blighted areas, marked by slum conditions like deteriorating buildings and substandard housing, vast poverty and unemployment, and widespread disease—including an alarming 1924 outbreak of bubonic and pneumonic plague that led to a quarantine of a "rat infested Mexican shantytown" just a few blocks from the old Plaza, the historic center of downtown (Davis, *Ecology* 255).

Yet racial ghettos and slums such as these are rarely seen or visited in noir. No mere oversight, this absence is rather indicative of noir's unstated but essential race and class based ideology. As Norman Klein has noted, noir has always been "very fundamentally [about] white males building a social imaginary" (79).

And these almost always have been middle-class white males who have grown disillusioned by the failure of their American dreams to materialize, especially during the years of the Great Depression and especially in California where American myths remained strong enough to lure hundreds of thousands across the country, many of whom would find, as Nathanael West wrote, that "sunshine isn't enough" (West, *Locust* 192).

L.A. noir expresses some of this middle-class anxiety and resentment and channels it into a critique of what it portrays as an unproductive and corrupt leisure class. It identifies with the cynical and unfulfilled company man who yearns to "crook that wheel" and exploit the system for themselves, as in Cain's *Double Indemnity*, and it makes heroes of private detectives like Marlowe who symbolize, as Mike Davis notes, "small businessmen locked in struggle with gangsters, corrupt police, and the parasitic rich" (Cain 23; Davis, *Quartz* 38). But its critique makes no gesture of solidarity with an underclass, and especially not one representing racial difference. Rather, L.A. noir often implies a yearning for the "white city" or the "protestant Eden" promised by boosters, even as it exposes this "dream" as unfulfilled. It is in service to this racial fantasy that noir turns

to Bunker Hill as its quintessential downtown setting. Characterized by old Victorian mansions that once made for a middle class enclave in the heart of downtown, Bunker Hill was a place of shabbiness and disrepair by the 1920s, but it still remained largely white in its racial make-up, due to exclusionary practices in housing. As such, it would come to serve noir as a powerful symbol, one that expresses an anxiety about a growing urban disorder while also evoking nostalgia for that lost dream of white, middle class Los Angeles.

On those rare occasions that minority communities appear in noir, they do so as "dark" places that embody a powerful but mysterious threat and signal an impending or realized urban chaos. Such is the implication in the opening pages of Chandler's classic *Farewell, My Lovely* (1941) when Phillip Marlowe enters a "colored joint" on Central Avenue and is confronted by "the dead alien silence of another race" (7). But it has been some of the major "neo-noirs" of the last thirty years that have made more explicit use of noir's conflation of moral darkness with racially "dark" populations. Roman Polanski's otherwise brilliant *Chinatown* (1974) is the consummate example of this use of race as a "metaphorical shortcut," to employ Toni Morrison's term (Morrison x). In

Polanski's film, a heavily orientalized Chinatown functions as a metaphor for a corrupting and unknowable evil that infects the city. In the futuristic *Blade Runner* (1982), Ridley Scott provides a similarly racialized vision of L.A.'s dark future. In Scott's film, L.A. in 2019 appears as a vast Asian and Latino slum teeming with violence and hostility, while the city's former white populous has fled to "the colonies" of outer-space. Unfortunately, such anxiety-ridden stereotypes of L.A.'s racial communities often have been taken as deeply authentic and revealing, as is evidenced by the seriousness with which a possible "blade runner scenario" is treated in the city's official "L.A. 2000" report. City leaders would do better to look instead into the complex histories of oppression and resistance that are hidden by such representations and begin to reconstruct, as Walter Mosley has, some of what has been erased not only by the boosters but also by the noirs.

I. Central Avenue Erasures and the Repression of Black History

During the era that saw noir's rise as a major form of urban narrative, L.A.'s most visible racial ghetto was the African American community located along Central

Avenue. This was L.A.'s "black belt," the center of the largest black community on the Pacific by 1930 and in the West by 1945. Unlike the larger Mexican American population that was quite dispersed throughout the Central and East-side city districts and the bordering sections of the county, African Americans were densely concentrated into a rigidly defined racial ghetto that spanned about thirty blocks of downtown and extended south into Watts. By 1930, this single district was home to 70% of L.A.'s African Americans (DeGraaf 328). It was also frequently in the public's eye, for it supported two muckracking black newspapers in *The California Eagle* and *The Liberator*, an active UNIA, a vocal NAACP, and a thriving cultural and entertainment scene. Sometimes called a "miniature Harlem," Central Avenue was an important western outpost for black America during the 1920s and in the years to follow.

Although generally invisible in the noir tradition, Central Avenue and its environs do appear in the work of Raymond Chandler on two occasions, one of which is Phillip Marlowe's brief visit to the Watts bar in *Farewell My Lovely*. In an earlier, lesser-known story, Chandler provides a more extensive and revealing treatment of this terrain. Set almost exclusively on

Central Avenue, where the white protagonist works as a narcotics officer and has taken up residence, "Pick up on Noon Street" establishes Central Avenue's place on Chandler's noir "map," his detailed vision of this diverse and decentralized city. But the meaning of "Noon Street" runs contrary to critical claims that Chandler's representation of L.A. is a totalizing one that, as Frederic Jameson writes, "serves somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together" (Jameson 629). "Noon Street" in fact sends a very different message, one that does not challenge Central Avenue's isolation but rather reinforces it by offering an implied endorsement of segregation.

To Chandler's credit, "Noon Street" does not portray Central Avenue—called by Chandler's detective "the Negro Quarter"—as an isolated world of *black* crime but as a nexus of *white* and *black* criminal activities. In fact, the story's two villains are both white. Trimmer Waltz is "Noon Street's" true tough guy gangster who runs the Juggernaut Club on Central Avenue, while dealing also in prostitution, extortion, and murder. John Viduary, on the other hand, wears the typical false face of the privileged in Chandler's fiction. Although Viduary is a Hollywood actor blessed with a "perfect profile," he is

not above committing "unscrupulous" acts to revive his declining career. "Noon Street's" complicated plot involves Waltz and Viduary conspiring together to fabricate extortion threats against Viduary as a publicity stunt. But Waltz, the more savvy criminal, double-crosses Viduary, who he plans to blackmail by threatening to make Viduary's part in the plot public. To distance himself from the initial conspiracy, Waltz proceeds to murder or frame all those who could put the police on his trail. In carrying out his brutal plan, Waltz proves responsible for two murders, that of a black prostitute and of his own henchmen, the "big Negro" Rufe.

Central Avenue's intricate web of crime, and the dead black bodies that accumulate as a result of it, are of little consequence to Pete Anglich, the hardened detective and prototype for Phillip Marlowe. Indeed, when Anglich encounters Rufe's corpse, he comments only that he is "no longer menacing. No longer important" (311). What is important to this unmistakably named Anglo detective *Anglich* is the fate of Token Ware, a "down and out" but "innocent eyed" white woman who works at the Juggernaut Club and plays a relatively minor role in Waltz's elaborate criminal schemes. As Anglich surmises, a desperate alcoholism has led Token Ware to work for a

gangster on Central Avenue, but she has thus far resisted his efforts to coerce her into prostitution. However, Waltz hopes he can force her to "say uncle" and submit to prostitution by falsely implicating her in his scheme to double-cross Viduary, and thus leaving her vulnerable to prosecution and in need of his help.

Amidst all of the crime and violence that confronts Anglich in "Noon Street," it is only the fear of Token Ware's sexual and racial violation that moves him from apathy to action. When Anglich is first introduced in the story, he is as much a participant in this criminal underworld as he is an officer patrolling it. An ex-boxer who "hasn't fought for several years," Anglich is a drunk who gambles too much and becomes mixed up with and, in a moral sense, indistinguishable from the "darkness" of Central Avenue (296). Indeed, the story's opening pages show Anglich cover-up a murder he commits while being robbed of his gambling winnings. But if Anglich has lost his ability to distinguish good from bad—or in noir's color-coded terms light from dark—the sight of Token Ware on Noon Street restores his ability to see such contrasts. Located just off of Central Avenue, Chandler's fictional Noon Street is, in Anglich's terms, "a bad place for a white girl" (321). It is immediately clear to

Anglich that "she doesn't belong" there, and he becomes determined to save her, despite the inherent risks and the fact that the investigation involving Ware has little to do with his official capacity as a narcotics officer.

Ultimately, Anglich does save Ware from Trimmer Waltz and from Noon Street, where he finds her "locked up in a whore house" (323). In the process, he also saves himself from the "darkness" that enveloped him, emerging as one of Chandler's heroic knights of L.A.'s mean streets. But if this former boxer has re-emerged as a fighter for goodness and morality, his heroism is decidedly selective in its application. Saving Token Ware proves to be Anglich's single "token" gesture, his one symbolic act of resistance against an overwhelming urban disorder. Regarding all that his investigation reveals about the sources of crime on Central Avenue and its connection to white power (Waltz) and white respectability (Viduary), Anglich remains undisturbed. In fact, Anglich actively suppresses some of what he uncovers when he leaves Viduary out of the official record of events, allowing him to return to Hollywood untarnished by his crimes and effectively repressing any implication of the respectable white world in the problems of this isolated "dark" place.

Even as "Noon Street" makes L.A.'s black community visible on Chandler's noir map, it is essentially a story about *seeing* blackness as otherness. For Anglich, who provides the story's moral perspective, what is at issue in "Noon Street" is that the alcoholic Token Ware cannot clearly see the darkness of Central Avenue; she is not properly aware of *where* she is. "Shows you where you are," Anglich once growls at Ware whom he believes is "lost" when he first sees her. His objective, then, is to make her see "what kinds of folks belong" in L.A.'s dark places "and what kinds don't" (321). At the end of the story, Anglich proves successful in this regard and Ware leaves Central Avenue to return to her parents in San Francisco. Along with the death of Trimmer Waltz and Viduary's return to Hollywood, Ware's departure signals the re-establishment of a racial order. Indeed, closure is achieved in "Noon Street" when everyone is ostensibly back where "they belong," and the city's racial lines are again clearly established.

With its articulation of a segregationist vision of L.A., Chandler's "Noon Street" makes manifest what is latent in much of the noir tradition. However, an important early counter-current to noir's racial

conservatism can be found in Chester Himes *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Written during and set within the early 1940s, *If He Hollers* is both a product and a representation of an extraordinary time in L.A.'s racial history that was marked by demographic upheaval and racial tension. Having arrived in L.A. in 1941, Himes was a statistical participant in what Gerald Nash calls the "first great black migration" to the West, although Himes arrived a bit earlier than most of the 340,000 African Americans who swept into the region during WWII. Himes was also an atypical in-migrant in that he came as a published writer, and with an unpublished novel in hand, seeking work as a screenwriter in Hollywood. However, prejudice against African Americans in Hollywood would ultimately force Himes to find employment in the war industry alongside the many southern blacks who had gone west after FDR's Executive Order 8802 officially forbade racial discrimination in the defense industry. Informed by his own difficult experience working in the war-industry, where Himes would hold, and quit or be fired from 24 different jobs in three years, *If He Hollers* provides a vivid portrait of an unrelenting and inescapable racism that infects every interaction and

every moment of existence for an African American unwilling to submit to L.A.'s system of segregation.

Called "black noir" by Mike Davis, *If He Hollers* is less characteristic of the noir tradition than Himes's later Harlem novels that earned him, in some circles, a reputation for being "the quintessential noir writer" (Davis 42, Bott 12). His first published novel, *If He Hollers* uses a hardboiled voice and narrative pace modeled on the styles of Chandler, Hammett, and other *Black Mask* writers who Himes read while serving time in an Ohio state penitentiary for armed robbery (Bandler 109). In *If He Hollers*, Himes blends these noir characteristics with the political urgency of black protest fiction and a vivid realism that fulfilled the Rosenwald Foundation's expectations that he would write a "sociological novel" with the fellowship he was granted. The result is a rich and complex narrative unequalled in Los Angeles literature for its exploration of L.A.'s racial geography in the 1940s.

If He Hollers tells the story of Bob Jones, an African American in-migrant from Cleveland who arrived in Los Angeles only months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Jones lives a few blocks off of Central Avenue and works in the San Pedro Shipyards, just as Himes did

in the early 1940s. When the novel opens, Jones is a "leaderman" of a black troupe of laborers for the Atlas Company. Because he is unwilling to submit casually and constantly to discrimination, Jones proves ill-suited for this token-authority position which was designed only to "keep down trouble between white and coloured workers" (29). Jones learns just how powerless he is at work when he responds to a white woman who calls him a "Nigger" by calling her a "cracker bitch." Despite the fact that the woman—Madge Perkins—is his subordinate, that she refused to work for him, and that she initiated the exchange of epithets, Jones is swiftly demoted and stripped of the prized military deferment that came with his position.

Steadfast and stubborn, Jones continues to rebel against the arbitrariness and injustice of discrimination, but he is always defeated, leading each time to greater mental and physical losses. The novel traces Jones's downward spiral to its culmination when Madge falsely accuses him of rape, leading to his incarceration and finally to his court-mandated enlistment in the army. That Jones is forced to fight for democracy abroad is of course the ultimate irony of *If He Hollers*, for his tale has been that of a war on the home-

front of Los Angeles where he has battled against the forces of segregation and discrimination and found that "the whole structure of American thought was against me" (187).

The particular power of *If He Hollers* comes largely as a result of Himes's use of an internal narration that foregrounds Bob Jones's mental experience. By revealing Jones's unspoken thoughts and even his subconscious dreams, *If He Hollers* depicts some of the psychological costs of segregation. And for "Mrs. Jones dark son," those costs are considerable. Indeed, *If He Hollers* not only traces Jones's loss of his job, his freedom, and his future, but also, it traces his loss of sanity. Jones descends into madness as he struggles to comprehend his destruction at the hands of the "crazy . . . business" of racism (172). Published several years before Frantz Fanon would write about the psychology of racism and the pathologies produced by the colonial context, Himes's novel anticipates some of Fanon's insights in its portrayal of a man trapped in an absurd racist system that drives him insane. "It was so funny because it didn't make any sense," Jones says as he contemplates "the notion" that he is "pushed around by" (130). As Jones comes to see, it is simply a "notion"—what we

might now call a racial construct—that has unjustly imbued whiteness with power in society and rendered him “scared and powerless and unprotected” as a black man in America (35). Unfortunately for Jones, knowledge of the system’s arbitrariness and absurdity does little to free him from it, for the system robs him of even a voice with which to critique it. In *If He Hollers*, Jones is not only powerless, he is speechless, unable even to tell the story of his own destruction.

Himes’s novel ultimately does “holler” out in protest of racism, but the character of Bob Jones cannot. Rather, Himes uses Jones to depict the repression of voice and the erasure of history. This motif is evident from even Jones’s first line of spoken dialogue, as he tries simply to ask a man the cost of a dog, but “he cut me off,” Jones explains (1). Throughout the novel, Jones’s attempts to speak are similarly silenced, as his words are regularly interrupted by those with more power in society, like his white boss Kelly, the police officers who harass him, or even the wealthy parents of his light-skinned African American girlfriend Alice. Only when Jones speaks with others who share in the oppression he experiences is his voice encouraged, as with his black co-workers at the Atlas Shipyard who all “want to hear

what he had to say" or the Mexican zoot suiters who ask him "How you doing, man?" and patiently wait for his reply as they all reluctantly proceed from a L.A. jail to the Army enlistment office (102, 203). Such moments of encouraged or "free" speech are rare in Jones's story. More often he finds his words policed by the forces of oppression that seek to stamp out the critique he might offer. But Jones realizes that even an oath of loyalty would not guarantee his freedom, for his racial consciousness is first formed as he watched "little Riki Oyana," sing God Bless America and head to the Santa Anita internment camp the next day. Thinking about Riki, Jones contemplates being "taken up by the roots, and lock[ed] up without a charge. Without a trial. Without [being] given a chance to say one word" (3). Such a tale of oppression and repression proves to be the case as much for Bob Jones as for the interned Riki Oyana.

The "one word" that ultimately dooms Jones is not spoken by him but by Madge Perkins. When Madge utters the word "rape," Jones's fate is sealed. Madge's claim is false, and it comes only after Jones has refused her sexual advances when he has accidentally stumbled into her in a dark, private room of a ship he is canvassing at work. Once she hollers the word "rape," however, Jones's

version of events becomes irrelevant to all those who will determine his fate. There are no words he can say that can challenge the power of "Madge's big brutal mouth yelling 'Rape'" (200). Jones does try to explain himself even as a white mob quickly descends upon him, but it is to no avail: "For one fleeting moment I tried to talk. 'Goddamnit listen,' I shouted. A fist in my mouth cut it off" (181).

This stifling attack on Jones's voice is only one of several ways that his speech is repressed in the novel's final chapters. When he returns to consciousness after that beating, Jones again tries to speak, but he discovers that there is no audience willing to listen to his story. "I'll tell anybody," Jones says to a guard, who replies: "Ain't nobody to tell" (184). His court appearance bears out the guard's remark, for Jones is given no opportunity to defend himself or to offer his account of events. Instead it is the President of the Atlas Corporation, Mr. Houghton, who is granted the power to speak. In his deeply false account, Houghton declares that Jones was "given every opportunity to succeed" at Atlas but that he instead succumbed to an "uncontrollable lust" and committed a crime that was "the act of an animal" (202). Despite the dropping of rape charges—

presumably because Houghton "grill[ed] Madge and learned the truth"—Houghton's speech is entered into the court record and thus it makes for the official history of this incident and of Bob Jones's life in Los Angeles.

By the novel's end, Bob Jones has been rendered nearly silent. The act of speech itself has become distorted and grotesque for Jones, and his words are almost inaudible: "My voice was a lisp. My lips felt like two balloon tyres beating together. I had to push the words half formed through the gap in my teeth" (184). Even his crucial final words are "lisped painfully" as he utters "I'm still here" (203). As critics have noted, these words signal Jones's survival; they announce that he is "still here," despite the physical and mental violence he experiences in the novel. Yet this assertion of his continued presence is not—like Himes's novel—hollered out. Rather, Jones's painfully lisped final line anticipates Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for they are the whispered words of the unseen and the unheard.

I. Walter Mosley and the Return of the Repressed

It is as fitting as it is surprising to learn that Walter Mosley had not read Chester Himes's *If He Hollers*

Let Him Go until after he had begun publishing his Easy Rawlins novels. The fact that this well-read native-born Angelino with a deep interest in black history did not discover Himes's novel until the 1990s suggests the extent to which *If He Hollers* itself had become an artifact from a repressed history, a holler of the unheard. But if Mosley did not hear Bob Jones's repressed voice, he still was deeply aware of the history Jones had striven to tell. Born in South Central in 1952, Mosley writes stories that are rooted in the same regional black experience of which Himes had written. For Mosley, a sense of this history came not only from what he saw as a child there but from what he heard, for a young Mosley had been an eager audience for those stories of the past often told by his family, especially by his father, the late Leroy Mosley, a Southern in-migrant to Los Angeles who was, the son explains, "by far the best storyteller on both sides of my family" (Shafner 9E). From his father and from the South Central of his youth, Mosley developed an appreciation for an "incredibly rich oral history" that was unknown to most Americans. Mosley's novels strive to capture some of this rich history in print, thus building a visible archive of L.A.'s little known past and consciously reconstructing a history of the city

that, as Mosley says, "black people had been edited out of" (Silet 11). In doing so, Mosley's Easy Rawlins Mystery Series renews and extends the literary tradition and the historical narrative that Himes began with *If He Hollers*.

Opening in the immediate post-WWII period, Mosley's series provides some remarkable—if coincidental—continuity with Himes's novel. Mosley's narrative takes up L.A.'s racial history shortly after Himes left it off with *If He Hollers* and with his less compelling second—and final—L.A. novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947). And Mosley's protagonist and narrator Easy Rawlins shares a similar background to that of Bob Jones. Like Jones, Rawlins is an African American in-migrant who joins the city's industrial labor force only to find intolerable racist conditions, which to him seem comparable to "working on a plantation in the South" (*Devil* 62). Rawlins too expected more from Los Angeles, which southern blacks believed would be "like heaven" only to arrive there and find that "the truth wasn't like the dream" (27). And Rawlins bristles at the reality of L.A.'s racist power structure and finds himself swiftly fired from Champion Aircraft when he refuses to submit to routine condescension. But while Jones's story culminates

with his firing, his imprisonment, and his "enlistment" into the military, such experiences provide only the prelude to Rawlins's tale. At the opening of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Rawlins is a WWII veteran, and his firing from Champion and his first of many unjust jailings are recounted in the novel's opening chapters. Thus, at the outset of the cycle of novels, it is clear that Mosley will extend his treatment of L.A.'s black history far beyond that begun in Himes's work. Indeed, the sheer size of Mosley's project—six Easy Rawlins novels, set in L.A. and a "prequel" tracing his youth in Texas—allows for a much deeper and more layered literary representation of L.A.'s black history.

Even as the Easy Rawlins series extends L.A.'s short tradition of black noir begun with Chester Himes, it also is both rooted in and a revision of the dominant noir tradition. Unlike Himes, who borrowed only loosely from the noir tradition for *If He Hollers*, Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels are more characteristic of the genre. Like Chandler's Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, Rawlins is a private detective, although his is an unofficial practice and much more covert, as he has no office and refers to his work as the ambiguous "business of favors" (*Red Death* 5). Each novel also follows the

conventional formula of a noir mystery, with Rawlins seeking out some secret that inevitably involves sexual intrigue, an alluring female—if not a *Femme Fatale*—as well as numerous corpses and unspeakable crimes. However much Mosley may be true to the noir tradition in style, plot, and even character, his Easy Rawlins series puts the genre to an alternative use.

That Mosley set out to subvert the racial discourse of noir is apparent from the much-discussed opening scene of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. As few critics have failed to note, the initial scene of that novel, and thus the series, re-writes Marlowe's encounter with the "alien silence of another race" in his brief excursion onto Central Avenue in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1941). Mosley subverts the implied racial perspective that frames Marlowe's encounter by narrating a similar scene through Rawlins's "black" narrative voice. Here Rawlins is introduced in the seemingly safe space of a Watts bar when a threatening whiteness intrudes, coming in the form of DeWitt Albright (read as "All Bright") whose whiteness is exaggerated by his white suit, shirt, socks, hat, and bone shoes, as well as his fear-inducing "pale stare" (1). It makes for a tour de force scene, "audacious" in the words of one reviewer, for it exposes the previously

unacknowledged whiteness that informs so much of the noir tradition while it also foregrounds the black voice and black racial perspective that will guide Mosley's noir vision (Jones 65). Still, this scene has received perhaps too much attention, for critics and reviewers have tended to overstate the importance of the Chandler precedent, as is evident in reviews that reduce Rawlins to that of a "black Marlowe." Rather, Mosley's subversion of Chandler's "white noir" should be seen as a starting point. What is most compelling about Mosley's Easy Rawlins series is not that he introduces a black perspective to noir but that he employs this black perspective to create a genuinely oppositional noir narrative, one that levels a compelling critique of L.A.'s effaced racial memory and an unrelenting exposé of its forgotten history of oppression and injustice.

As the narrator of the cycle, Easy Rawlins is something of an unofficial historian who holds no academic degrees but speaks with the authority of experience. To be sure, Rawlins is a "book reader," known to casually peruse Plato, Shakespeare, and Zola. And he is a "sucker for history," especially accounts of the Roman Empire and its struggle with the internal resistance and uprisings of the Visigoths, Ostrogoths,

and Vandals. But while Rawlins enjoys reading "white man's fictions and his histories," his life experience has taught him of their elisions and distortions (*Brawly Brown* 29). It was while serving in WWII that Rawlins first develops his distrust of master narratives. Unlike Bob Jones, Easy Rawlins willingly enlists in the military because he "believed what they said in the papers that I was part of the hope of the world." Such optimism proves naïve, however, for Rawlins finds the military to be "as segregated as the South" (98). The stark contrast between the accepted narratives of the war and his own experience leads Rawlins to see the ideological nature of history as well as its fictionality: "I didn't believe in history, really . . . History was like TV for me, it wasn't the great wave of mankind moving through an ocean of minutes and hours. It wasn't even mankind getting better either" (*Red Death* 223).

Rawlins presents his account of the past as a corrective to such mythmaking that masquerades as history. Speaking from the present, Rawlins tells a history of forgotten places and unrecorded events. The events, social movements, and political figures that usually define this era—WWII, McCarthyism, the civil rights movement, JFK's assassination, the black panthers—

-do shape the background of each of his stories, and they even at times intersect with and affect his life in a more immediate way. But Rawlins's focus always remains on the stories that "were never talked about in the newspapers or seen on TV" (*Yellow Dog* 25). His is an alternative history that is centered around places such as Bone Street, which ran like a "crooked spine down the center of Watts's jazz heyday," or Joppy's, an unlicensed nightclub hidden behind a market on the corner of Central Avenue and 89th place (*Butterfly* 61). In Rawlins's words, his is a "local history," but in fact it is much more than that. It is history-as-local; it is Los Angeles history and American history as experienced in and seen through Watts.

As a storyteller, Rawlins is rooted in a black vernacular tradition. Like the "tall tales and riddles and stories colored folks had been telling for centuries," Rawlins narrates "in the language we spoke" (*Butterfly* 54). True to this oral tradition, Rawlins's stories help to build a memory of a black culture by capturing something of the people and places of Watts. But his investigative work also encourages him to dig beneath even these rarely seen surfaces of material reality. While his cases usually begin as "the kind of

back page news" that whites would ignore but that "most colored people knew about," they always lead him into another realm of hidden history, invisible to most blacks and whites alike (8). Here Rawlins discovers L.A.'s most deeply submerged secrets, and the history these secrets tell illuminates the complex and troubled racial culture of modern Los Angeles.

As narrator, Rawlins is dedicated to serving L.A.'s black community by remembering its past. As a character in those stories, however, Rawlins's allegiances are more ambiguous and complex. Throughout the series, Rawlins often works for various representatives of white power. Among his employers are a mayoral candidate (*Blue Dress*), the FBI (*Red Death*), the LAPD (*Butterfly*), and the white and wealthy Cain family, who live in a plantation-like mansion in Beverly Hills (*Black Betty*). It is as a spy in the black community that Rawlins is of value to these agents of power. As Rawlins often notes, even the wealthiest and most influential white individuals and government organizations had little chance of accessing information or launching a successful investigation in L.A.'s black neighborhoods "back in those days" (*Red Death* 160). Rawlins explains: "the colored population at the time wasn't really willing to tell a white man

anything resembling the truth" (95). Thus, "black spies" were used to try to access crucial information or to just "find out what's goin on" in places like Watts, and "that's why they needed me," Rawlins explains (*Brawly Brown* 47).

Rawlins is a reluctant spy, however. It is only in desperate times that he accepts such work, as when he finds himself unable to pay his mortgage at the beginning of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, or when the IRS discovers his unpaid taxes and undeclared properties in *Red Death*. Rawlins barter his skill as an "invisible" investigator in the black community to save himself from bankruptcy or jail, but he never really sacrifices his independence as an agent. "I don't belong to anybody," Rawlins insists in *Devil in a Blue Dress* when his handler Albright demands to know more information than he is willing to provide (101). Likewise, in *Red Death*, Rawlins tells the FBI agent who hires him: "You got your secrets and I gots mine" (221). In these instances and many others, Rawlins carefully guards what he uncovers, refusing to reveal much to the "white world" even as he ostensibly serves it.

Maintaining control over his investigation and the information it uncovers is always a priority for Rawlins.

In almost every novel, Rawlins's services are initially retained for the relatively straightforward task of locating or observing an individual who has ties to Watts. Progressing through the cycle, Rawlins trails the mysterious blue-dressed Daphne Monet in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the Jewish communist organizer Chaim Wenzler in *Red Death*, a serial killer in *White Butterfly*, the missing maid of the wealthy Cain family in *Black Betty*, and the man-child urban revolutionary in *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*. In each of these cases, Rawlins takes his investigation down paths that are irrelevant to or even discouraged by those who initiated the search. Indeed, his are ultimately unsanctioned investigations, as he seeks to uncover secrets and solve crimes that, as he says in *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, "nobody asked me to solve" (300).

It is Rawlins's identification with the subjects of his searches that compels him to seek the deeper story behind their troubled lives. Rawlins is keenly aware of the racial oppression and victimization that has shaped their experiences, just as it has his own. And he knows from his WWII experiences that such narratives are often submerged beneath the official accounts and public records of history. Through his investigations, Rawlins

strives to discover their fuller story, their hidden history, but to do so, Rawlins often finds himself at war with those that seek to omit and repress these narratives that would indict L.A.'s racist systems of power.

White Butterfly, the third novel in the series, provides a particularly compelling treatment of the tension between official and hidden histories. In this novel, Rawlins's services are needed by the police when Robin Garnett, a white UCLA "coed" and daughter of a city prosecutor, is found dead and mutilated. Police tell Rawlins the disturbing news that she appears to be the fourth victim of a serial killer terrorizing L.A., murdering and mutilating women. As Rawlins realizes, it is because the first three victims were black dancers and "party girls" that their deaths created so little concern among police and politicians and garnered almost no newspaper coverage. With the discovery of Robin Garnett, however, the "stalker" had become front-page news. As a representative of the mayor's office says to Rawlins, it was now being treated as "an emergency in the city," and they needed his help to "bring this man to justice" (49).

Rawlins soon discovers that there is more to the story of Robin Garnett than what makes the front-page of the *LA Examiner*. Robin Garnett is not just the UCLA

student who lives with her parents in West L.A., she is also Cyndi Star, "the white butterfly," an exotic dancer who works at Melodyland, a club located at "Hollywood Row" on Central Avenue. As it turns out, Cyndi is not even a victim of the serial killer but of her father, who fakes the killer's MO using information about the crimes he has learned from his work at the courthouse. Garnett kills her, Rawlins learns, because she has threatened to reveal the family secrets about her racial transgressions and the interracial child she has borne as a result. But her parents silence her in the most brutal way, her father killing her and her mother helping to cover it up.

The police and the newspapers facilitate the Garretts' cover-up by reinforcing their account of Robin Garretts' life and death. Newspapers portray only the Robin Garrett of West L.A. and UCLA, complete with pictures of a "very conservative," buttoned-up young woman that "didn't give the slightest hint" of the sexually adventurous and border-crossing Cyndi Starr (56). Likewise, the police are satisfied with the highly suspect conclusion that Robin was a victim of a "crazy Negro" who they fear "is going to go on a rampage killing white women" (114). Her case is brought to a swift close when Rawlins leads police to the suspected serial killer,

J.T. Saunders, who is hiding out in Oakland. Although Rawlins learns that Saunders fled to Oakland after killing the three black women but before Robin Garrett was murdered, police have him "assassinated" and put the case to rest. "We got the killer," Rawlins is emphatically told by Detective Quinten Naylor, and when Rawlins continues to search into the Garnetts' life, he is promptly imprisoned on false charges of extortion (257).

Rawlins ultimately does manage to unearth the buried story of Cyndi Star. Despite the Garnetts' efforts to erase their daughter's other life, and despite the perpetuation of the Garnetts' lies by the papers and the police, concrete evidence of Cyndi Star's life remains. It is through Rawlins's discovery of Cyndi's interracial infant and her detailed diary that proof of Cyndi's Star's existence is established. And when Mr. Garnett attempts to erase this evidence by destroying the diary and killing the baby, he is finally caught and exposed. Thanks to Rawlins's investigation, Cyndi Starr's story does emerge, and her child—who is essentially the "product" of her history—is saved. Rawlins explains: "Everything the prosecutor wanted to avoid came out in public. His daughter's wild life, and death. The father's

murder. The mother's cover-up" (290). But even at the end of *White Butterfly*, the full account of Watts's serial killer remains untold. Despite evidence that J.T. Saunders murdered black women in Oakland as well as L.A., the police determine it "prudent . . . to keep the investigation secret," and even after Saunders is killed, those murders remain unsolved (216).

Black Betty, the fourth Easy Rawlins novel, extends Mosley's vision of L.A.'s hidden racial past by portraying the city's black history as a continuum of oppression extending back to America's slave past. Set in 1961, *Black Betty* is concerned with a reactionary racism and its nostalgia for the slave culture of a century earlier. It is while searching for the African American servant of the rich Cain family named Elizabeth Eady but known as "Black Betty" that Rawlins encounters this slave fantasy recreated on the Southern California landscape. As he says when approaching the Cain family's farm in the desert outside of L.A.: "It's like I drove out of California, back through the South, and all the way into hell" (155).

Rawlins notes early in *Black Betty* that "you could tell by some people's houses that they came to L.A. to live out their dreams," and that is certainly the case

for Albert Cain (32). A multi-millionaire and anti-modernist, Cain came to L.A. to live out a dream of the Old South, a dream of white supremacy and slavery. He achieves this deranged vision on his plantation-like farm in L.A. County, where families of Mexican, African, and Japanese descent toil to satisfy his depraved desire for food "that had human sweat attached to it" (155). Paid only "pennies an hour," these men, women, and children who Rawlins sees "plucking and climbing and baking in the sun" are in fact coerced "laborers," handled and retained through force and intimidation. As Betty explains, "People didn't say no to Mr. Cain," (279).

Kept in his Beverly Hills mansion, Betty is essentially Cain's house slave and concubine. It is from Betty's friend Felix that Rawlins ultimately discovers Betty's predicament. Felix explains that Cain "owns" her, that he "broke her" and took her freedom (221-222). Although Betty is portrayed as possessing extraordinary strength, Cain comes to control her by threatening to send her beloved T.B. stricken brother to prison if she refuses him. Evoking many an antebellum slave narrative, Betty is repeatedly raped by Cain and bears two of his children, of which the boy is shipped off to another

state while the girl is raised to be Mrs. Cain's servant, although she is never told of her parents' identities.

However, these long-buried family secrets threaten to surface when Albert Cain is murdered. Cain, it turns out, leaves his land and his fortune of about \$50 million to Betty and her descendants, apparently because he "started feeling guilty toward the end of his life" (299). Yet when the surviving white members of the Cain family get wind of this news, "the dark side of the family" starts to turn up dead, and Betty disappears. Of course, Rawlins ultimately finds the killers. It is the late Mr. Cain's son-in-law Roland Hawkes who is behind each of the murders. In hopes of claiming his father-in-law's inheritance, Hawkes plots Cain's murder, but he convinces Betty's brother Marlon and her son Terry to commit the act by revealing to them that Cain had enslaved and raped Betty. Hawkes promises them that they will receive "reparations" for Cain's sins against their family, but instead he sets out to kill off the entire Eady family to prevent them from making their claim to Cain's estate (337).

Hawke's promise of "reparations" suggests a second allegorical dimension to the novel. *Black Betty* not only portrays a historical continuum of black oppression but

it also suggests an active dispossession of this history. Indeed, in the novel's end, Betty has managed to survive the killing spree that leaves her family massacred, yet she is still denied her rightful inheritance. In an appalling erasure of her experiences, the Cain family lawyers distort Betty's victimization and make her "seem like a whore who beguiled Albert Cain" (343). Thus, Betty is not only refused any reparations, she is further victimized. As Rawlins notes, "the trial destroyed Betty" (343).

Underscoring this allegory of dispossession is Rawlins's failed attempt to build "Freedom Plaza." After several successful investments in Compton properties, enabled by funds recovered in his private investigations, Rawlins joins a group of black investors proposing a Watts shopping mall to be known as Freedom Plaza. Consisting exclusively of businesses "owned and patronized by blacks," this mall would signal African American participation in the region's post-WWII economic boom, for shopping malls were perhaps its ultimate icon (Berger 290). But the dream of Freedom Plaza is destroyed by a combination of white economic and political power. In a decision meant to eliminate "Negro competition" for Save-Co, a powerful white-owned Southern California

Supermarket with strong ties to city government, the County Planner's Office refuses the required permits to build, determining instead that the chosen site will be home to a new waste-processing plant. As Rawlins later learns, the proposed plant is only a ruse meant to justify the condemning of Freedom Plaza, for this site would shortly be deemed "unsuitable" and sold off to Save-Co at a desirable price. In this battle for "freedom plaza," Rawlins learns, as Elizabeth Eady has learned more painfully, that "freedom" for African Americans remains elusive in the face of the money, power, and influence of those who continue to wage a secret war against them. Indeed, Rawlins concludes that African Americans continue to wear slavery's chains, "chains we wore for no crime; chains we wore for so long they melded into our bones. We all carry them but nobody can see it—not even most of us" (268).

While Mosley's history of the hidden Los Angeles means to reveal the chains of racial oppression, his novels also tell stories of a radical resistance. In terms of character, several of those who make repeat appearances in the series live lives of resistance, although the kind of resistance they represent varies

considerably. Rawlins plays the traditional role of a trickster figure who routinely tells lies to those in power in order to survive or even profit, while his occasional "partner" Raymond "Mouse" Alexander is an outlaw akin to Jesse James whose murderous nature provokes fear in blacks and whites, powerful and powerless alike. Others in Mosley's vast cast of black characters rebel against the system by outsmarting it, as with Jackson Blue whose knowledge of differential calculus and ability to tap into the phone system helps him dominate the numbers racket, or Jewelle MacDonald who builds a real estate "empire" despite being "hardly out of childhood" (*Brawly Brown* 223). Mosley uses each of these characters to fill in the void of a forgotten black history, each character's story providing a "little piece of history . . . that went unrecorded," as Rawlins once says (*Black Betty* 195). But two novels in the series—*A Red Death* and *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*—each invoke more familiar histories of rebellion and radicalism in L.A.. With a focus on L.A.'s growing communist movement of the early 1950s in *A Red Death* and on the budding black revolutionaries of the pre-Watts "Riots" days of 1964, these novels each treat a radical history that has been remembered largely for their flaws and their failures.

Yet each of these novels tells of a secret war waged against these groups aimed at destroying and discrediting them and their members. In both novels, Easy Rawlins finds himself caught in the middle of this underground war of subversion and surveillance.

A Red Death, the second novel of the series, is set in 1953 at the height of communist red-baiting and blacklisting in L.A. and across the nation. However, at the start of the novel, Rawlins's life is little affected by the alleged threat of communism. In fact, he is not even aware of its growing presence in and around Watts until he is coerced by the FBI into trailing Chaim Wenzler, a communist organizer who works closely with the First African Baptist Church and the NAACP. To FBI agent Darryl T. Craxton, Wenzler is a "sly jew" and one of America's "real enemies," for he threatens the government while living "right here at home" (49-50). Even more troubling for Craxton, Wenzler looks American, but he is only *passing* as such, for "he is not American on the inside" (50).

As Rawlins comes to find, Wenzler does consider himself an enemy of the U.S. government, with whom he sees himself at war. As Agent Craxton suspects, Wenzler works in Watts in the hopes of generating support among

blacks for a communist revolution. But Wenzler is also genuine in his identification with the struggles of the black community. Indeed, Rawlins comes to see him as the only white man he knew who "thought we were really the same" (121). For his part, Wenzler's vision of this shared oppression was shaped by his experience as a child fighting Nazis in Poland, where he first became a "soldier of the people" (121). And in America, he continued his work for the communist underground by encouraging worker strikes and striving to expose corporate and government oppression of the poor. In fact, Rawlins later finds that it is Wenzler's intention to publish in a socialist newspaper some of "America's secret weapon plans" that have come into his possession (202).

Ultimately, Wenzler is killed by a government agent, although not one who works for the FBI. Rather, it is the corrupt, anti-semitic, anti-black IRS agent Reginald Lawrence who murders Wenzler as part of a crazed killing-spree directed at "Niggers and Jews" (235). Lawrence's actions are not sanctioned by the FBI or the government, and they are motivated by personal greed as much as they are by Lawrence's belief in the government's war against its internal "enemies." Still, Lawrence has simply turned

a corrupt system, and the prejudice that guides it, to his own advantage. In fact, Lawrence is never even aware of the secret weapon plans Wenzler intends to expose. Rather, Lawrence kills Wenzler only to remove an obstacle in his own plan to blackmail Easy Rawlins as part of a "tax cases for profit" scam Lawrence uses to take advantage of African Americans who have little recourse from the law. As another of Lawrence's blackmail victims says, in 1950s L.A. "black people don't hardly ever fight the law" (228).

Although Wenzler's murder is not the work of the FBI, it does serve its purposes. With his death, an "enemy" is eliminated, as is the threat of government secrets being exposed. For his part, Agent Craxton is elated with the outcome: "He had a dead communist [and] I imagined he'd get a promotion out of it" Rawlins says (241). "He was on top of the world." Rawlins adds. With Wenzler eliminated, the FBI proceeds to "hush up the whole thing," thus "sailing over a sea of death and silence" (243).

As Rawlins comes to see it, however, this outcome is both unjust and tragic. His investigation has revealed that Wenzler was "a good man," and he even calls him "a good friend," one of the few times in the series that

Rawlins makes such a statement without qualification (245). Still, even after Wenzler's murder, Rawlins remains ambivalent about the communist vision Wenzler advocated. Rawlins wonders if Wenzler was a "traitor" to the US, and he remains skeptical about how fully communist politics can represent and speak for the black experience in America. As the always philosophical Jackson Blue says to Rawlins, "One day they gonna throw that [black] list out. . . . But you gonna still be a black niggah (198). These words resonate for Rawlins, and he concludes: "I wasn't on either side. Not crazy Craxton and his lies and half-truths and not Wenzler's either" (199).

Rawlins's insistence on his independence here is consistent with his position throughout the series. In fact, Rawlins's reluctance to join any organized effort of resistance extends to black organizations just as it applies to the largely white communist underground of the 1950s. And the black organizations prove just as susceptible to the corruption and greed that infects the FBI or the LAPD, even when these radical organizations are guided by a mission that Rawlins sees as just. In *Red Death*, Rawlins uncovers a trail of internal corruption running through the NAACP, the First African Baptist

Church, and the Marcus Garvey-inspired African Migration Movement. But it is in *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, the most recent Easy Rawlins novel, that this issue receives its fullest treatment. In this novel, Rawlins infiltrates the incipient "Urban Revolutionary Party," or "First Men," a secret black organization plotting "an insurrection in the streets of L.A." (101). What he finds is an organization rooted in a powerful vision of resistance that appeals to him, especially in its battle for "better schools and jobs, and history books that tell the truth," as well as its policy that violence is only a last option (94). As Rawlins discovers, however, some of the First Men are not so honorable as the vision they profess, and it is ultimately the organization's own failures—the corruption of its leaders and the naïvete of its members—that ensures their downfall.

As in *Red Death*, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* portrays a war being waged between an arm of the government and a radical, underground organization. In this novel, the year is 1964, shortly before the Watts "Riots," and the fictional "First Men" seem to represent the early stirrings of something resembling Huey Newton's and Bobby Seale's Black Panther Party, which was officially founded in Oakland in 1966 and would achieve a significant

popularity in post-riot Watts. In *Brawly Brown*, the LAPD are closely monitoring even these early developments of "First Men," and they even create a special "secret squad" to "take down" First Men, which they deem an "enemy of democracy" (154, 308). Still, it is only with the complicity of Henry Strong, one of First Men's charismatic leaders, that the LAPD manages to destroy and discredit the organization. Strong accepts a pay-off from police for helping to "set up members of First Men" (294). Working with the LAPD, Strong sets a trap for several of the group's most radical members, including the novel's title character Brawly Brown. Strong encourages them to rob a payroll for funds that will allegedly be used to build a new African American school. Yet Strong means for them to be caught by the police in the act of armed robbery, making them appear like "crazykiller criminals" to the public and thus "discredit[ing] the whole organization (294, 277).

Rawlins is privy to Strong's conspiracy even before the robbery occurs, yet he chooses not to interfere: "It wasn't my job to catch murders or foil robberies" (300). Having seen First Men from the inside, Rawlins apparently concludes that it is not worth saving, despite the honorable principles of members like the "non violent"

"visionary" Xavier and the naive but good-hearted Brawly Brown, First Men proves to be an organization riddled with corruption. In fact, even before Henry Strong's double-crossing plot transpires, he is killed by another faction of corrupt revolutionaries who have formed their own plan to rob the payroll for personal profit, rather than for the benefit of the community. Thus, it is not only the actions of police and a single "Stool Pigeon" that brings down the First Men. While LAPD subterfuge helps to initiate the organization's downfall, it is ultimately the First Men themselves who ensure it.

That Rawlins is unwilling to take action for or against revolutionary movements like the communist party or First Men is indicative of his deeply independent identity. Certainly, Rawlins is not the type to join movements or organizations. Rather, he is a loner who strives to be his "own man," and he is a secret-keeper, about whom one character complains "nobody ever know what you thinkin" (*Brawly Brown* 225). As critic Roger Berger has asserted, Rawlins holds to an "individualist philosophy" and a "masculine self reliance" that seems to follow the mold of Chandler's Marlowe and thus fulfill the traditional "hardboiled moral code" that rules

traditional noir (Berger 291-292). Such an unchallenged adoption of noir's "moral code" would indeed blunt the subversive edge of Mosley's noir, as Berger has charged. But Rawlins proves to be quite distinct from this traditional noir "hero" whom Chandler famously describes as an "untainted" and "complete man" who willingly and bravely goes "down these mean streets" to make a defense of order and civilization (*Other Writings* 246). As an inhabitant of such streets, Rawlins seeks not order but survival, and autonomy is his most salient strategy. Yet Rawlins is a flawed hero, and his steadfast self-sufficiency proves perhaps his deepest personal weakness, for it prevents him from establishing meaningful personal relationships. In fact, in *White Butterfly* it proves to be the cause of his failed marriage. Before abandoning Rawlins and leaving with their daughter, Rawlins's wife Regina expresses her dismay about his hidden life and well-kept secrets: "You cain't hide in your own house," she says (180).

Rawlins's personal and political redemption finally comes when he claims his role as a storyteller and narrator of the series. It is only then that Rawlins transforms from a trickster striving for personal survival to a truth-teller intent on exposing oppression.

As narrator, Rawlins comes out of hiding. Indeed, his are tales of disclosure that testify to a lived history that has been suppressed.

It is in a crucial exchange between Rawlins and Jackson Blue that the subversive power of Rawlins's storytelling voice is most clearly articulated. The subject of the conversation, however, is not Rawlins but Isaac Newton, whom Jackson means to allegorize as a victim of history's distortions. As Jackson describes it, there is much more to Newton's life than the oft-told story of his fortuitous "discovery" of gravity whereby "an apple done fall on Isaac's head and that's it" (*Brawly Brown* 266). Jackson insists rather that Newton's life was a story of secret knowledge and radical affiliations. He was an alchemist who "believed in magic" and a religious heretic who practiced arianism and was "in his heart against the church of England" (266). Yet, as Jackson laments, such seditiousness has been elided from the annals of official history.

"This is black history we talkin' here," Jackson Blue says of his Isaac Newton analogy (266). And Rawlins is quick to comprehend the implications of Jackson's words on his own life, as he says, "Jackson Blue's rendition of Isaac Newton reminded me of me, a man living

in shadows in almost every part of his life. A man who keeps secrets and harbors passions that could get him killed if he let them out into the world" (266). As his words here imply, Rawlins's silences and repressions are tactics of survival. Indeed Rawlins yearns to reveal all that he discovers but faces too great a risk in doing so, as evident by the ending of *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* when he laments "I should have done more to bring [the LAPD's] crime to the public eye, but I couldn't think of a thing that wouldn't have put my family in danger" (309).

Rawlins knows, however, that his silence must ultimately be broken if he is to avoid erasure. As he says to Jackson Blue: "This man you talking' about kept his secrets—for a while. But then he let the world know" (266). Such is also the case for Easy Rawlins. As a self-conscious narrator and unofficial historian, Rawlins finally "lets the world know" the secrets of his own past, and in the process, he reveals a hidden history of black Los Angeles long veiled by noir's dark shadows.

CHAPTER THREE

Dahlias and Dead Women:

Postwar Los Angeles in Fiction and Fact

Throughout this dissertation, I have suggested that our sense of Los Angeles's past is the product of an interplay between fact and fiction, between history, myth, and literature, and perhaps nowhere else is this complex dynamic as evident as it is in the discourse surrounding the "black dahlia murder," the city's most famous unsolved crime. To be sure, the "black dahlia murder" refers to a real historical event—the brutal and horrific murder of a young woman named Elizabeth Short. Her remains were found on the morning of January 15, 1947 near the corner of 39th and Norton streets in downtown Los Angeles. It was a grizzly site, shocking even to hardened detectives, as many would later admit. Short's body had been grotesquely mutilated pre- and post-mortem. She had been severely beaten and stabbed. Her lips were cut open to the ears. She was bisected—cut in two at the waist and drained of blood. She was left naked and posed by the road; her upper and lower torsos separated by about a foot, her arms raised above her head, her legs spread.

Significantly, the first to arrive at the site after a citizen reported the body were not police but reporters, rushing to the scene in search of a story (Starr 218-219). And soon, the tragic reality of Elizabeth Short's death would give way to a myth fashioned in the papers and in the public's imagination. So it is as "the black dahlia" that Elizabeth Short is remembered, as the victim in what today remains, as *Los Angeles Times* writer Larry Harnisch has recently called it, Los Angeles's "premier myth noir" (A1).

In this chapter, I will explore how the meaning of this 1947 murder has been shaped and reshaped by and through noir fictions. I will first consider *The Blue Dahlia*, a Raymond Chandler-written film noir which appeared the year prior to the murder, provided the source for the victim's nickname, and, most significantly, articulated the kind of noir vision that guided interpretations of the murder—or, rather—guided the misogynistic *misinterpretations* that would shape the "myth noir" of the black dahlia. I then turn to two more recent narratives that take the black dahlia murder as their explicit or implied subject, John Gregory Dunne's *True Confessions* (1978) and James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia* (1987). While neither of these novels wrests the

murder free from myth, each seeks to deepen our sense of the time and place of the murder *and* the myth. For both Dunne and Ellroy, the black dahlia murder is a kind of artifact of a buried history of postwar Los Angeles, a history that each shows to be steeped in the male rage and misogyny reflected in and reinforced by 1940s noirs like *The Blue Dahlia*. In Ellroy's case, the significance of the black dahlia story extends far beyond serving as the subject of a single novel. As I will discuss, the black dahlia murder and the noir narratives it spawned served as something of a shaping force for Ellroy's noir imagination. And it remains at the heart of Ellroy's literary-historical Los Angeles, his "world of horror" concerned with dahlias and dead women and with the facts and the fictions of Los Angeles's past.

I. What's in a Name?

When and why Elizabeth Short came to be called "the black dahlia" remains a point of dispute. Some insist that this was her nickname in life, given to her in reference to her black hair and her propensity to wear all black. Former *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith, who believes he was the first to call her this name in

print, swears he heard the name from a pharmacist in Long Beach who knew her when she lived there. "It was a rewrite man's dream," Smith says about discovering the nickname, "I couldn't wait to get it into type" (qtd. in Hodel 381-382). Others, including some who knew Short, dispute this account, suggesting instead that the name was a fabrication, an eye-catching title in the tradition of other Los Angeles crime coverage, such as "the werewolf killer" or "the red lipstick murder." Whatever its specific origins, there is no doubt that the "black dahlia" designation fueled a fascination with the story, as Smith claims he predicted it would. In fact, many have asserted that it was because of the name that the story would achieve such an unprecedented degree of attention in its day—31 consecutive days as front-page news in Los Angeles—and that it remains today a rare remembered event in Los Angeles history. As Harry Hansen, a longtime LAPD detective who was originally assigned to the case, has reflected, "There could not have been a more intriguing title. Any other name wouldn't have been anywhere near the same" (qtd. in Hodel 51).

What was so intriguing about the title, though, was not simply that, as Hansen noted, "Black is mysterious, forbidden even," a dahlia "exotic." Such clichés surely

could not have generated the kind of fascination associated with the black dahlia murder. I argue, rather, that it was the connection the "black dahlia" tag established to the noir narrative tradition that made the event so strangely alluring to the public. With its unmistakable allusion to *The Blue Dahlia*, the popular film noir in theaters the previous summer, the black dahlia tag encouraged noir interpretations of the murder and its victim. And indeed, the discourse surrounding the black dahlia has long been ripe with the kind of misogyny and woman-blaming found so often in noir. Elizabeth Short—called almost exclusively "the black dahlia" in such accounts—has been bizarrely transformed from victim to femme fatale. From detective Hansen to "true crime expert" Hank Sterling to Jack Webb of *Dragnet* fame, commentators have speculated—without any credible evidence—about the black dahlia's "deplorable way of life," her "lurid past," and her zest for "easy money, easy living, easy loving in wartime America." They have assailed her for being "[no] blameless virgin," a "man crazy tramp," or "lazy . . . and irresponsible" (qtd. in Hodel 381-385). Such interpretations are deeply distorting and disturbing, but they are consistent with the noir vision of postwar Los Angeles suggested by the

"black dahlia" tag and its allusion. Indeed, the angry, misogynistic, victim-blaming of Hansen, Sterling, Webb and so many others echo the message of *The Blue Dahlia*.

II. Misogyny and Murder in *The Blue Dahlia*

Written and filmed in the spring of 1945, on the cusp of the postwar period, *The Blue Dahlia* is an expression of anxiety and even rage brought on, the film suggests, by the wartime advances made by women. And perhaps nowhere else were these gains as vivid as they were in Los Angeles, which had rather unexpectedly emerged during the war years as a major—if not, as some historians have argued, *the* major—war industrial center (Nash 25; Sides 252). As such, the city became the new home to hundreds of thousands of Americans seeking wartime employment, and as the war progressed, increasing numbers of these newly arrived Angelenos were women. In fact, the city's female population grew by twenty-three percent during the war years, a growth rate about six percent faster than that of the corresponding rate for men (Verge 145). As such a discrepancy implies, thousands of women were moving to Los Angeles during the war on their own, unaccompanied by a man. And most of these

women successfully improved their lot in their adopted home, as they found jobs of higher skill, higher status, and better pay than anything available to them in the past. As a result, Los Angeles during the war was home to a vast population of independent women who were achieving new levels of economic power and social status, as well as the freedoms that come with them. In fact, writing during the war, anthropologist Margaret Mead pointed to these newly arrived Los Angeles women—whom she describes as independent, mobile, and empowered—as evidence that a gender revolution was indeed underway on the home-front (Starr 127).

Chandler's script for *The Blue Dahlia* is an early expression of the reactionary response that would ultimately thwart this budding gender revolution. Indeed, it anticipates what Elaine Tyler May has called the rhetoric of "domestic containment" that would come to dominate the gender discourse throughout the postwar years and the Cold War fifties. As the name implies, "domestic containment" sought the re-stabilization of gender roles by the containment of women in the domestic realm. Such was the implication in the national call for a "return to normalcy" in the postwar years, as well as in the mass firings of women from their wartime

positions. *The Blue Dahlia* certainly advocates such a vision of the future, a future that would return to the gender roles of the past. But *The Blue Dahlia* is domestic containment at its most bitter, for it not only expresses a deep desire to return to this vision of "normalcy," it also rages against women's wartime empowerment, which it portrays as a betrayal of men and destructive of American ideals. The film's embodiment of this destructive betrayal is, of course, a femme fatale, and it is she who becomes the target of what Chandler once called the film's "great and legitimate anger" (qtd. in Bruccoli 132). Disturbingly, this femme fatale, the film's object of rage, would prove to be something of a fictional precursor to the real life victim murdered less than a year later, for in *The Blue Dahlia* the victim of the mysterious murder is also a young, attractive, dark-haired, Los Angeles woman. But more unsettling still is the fact that the film all but endorses the murder it portrays.

Although *The Blue Dahlia* ultimately reveals itself to be a noir murder mystery, it begins—like so many of the films of 1946—as a war homecoming story. In this case, the returning veteran and protagonist is Navy officer Johnny Morrison (Alan Ladd) who, in the film's

opening scene, arrives home to Los Angeles after serving in the South Pacific. This homecoming, however, is not a happy one. Johnny has been sent back from war early by the Navy because he is suffering from psychological and emotional turmoil brought on by the news that his only child—his young son Dicky—has died. But Johnny's misfortunes only increase upon his return to Los Angeles. There he finds his pre-war life—and the traditional gendered domestic ideal it represented—in ruins, having been destroyed during his absence, an apparent casualty of the changes in gender roles that have transformed the home-front. In Johnny's case, the particular agent of destruction proves to be his wife Helen, the film's femme fatale and soon-to-be murder victim.

It is through the character of Helen Morrison that *The Blue Dahlia* levels its critique at the gains made by women during the war. In Helen, *The Blue Dahlia* presents a woman who has been empowered during the war. Prior to WWII, Helen was a traditional housewife and mother, who, as she would later recall "did all the laundry and never went anywhere" (Chandler 17). So when Johnny and a million other American men went to war, Helen seized some of the new opportunities available to her. But Helen is no "Rosie the Riveter," to be sure. Her empowerment is

not, like that of so many women war workers, the product of her contribution to the war effort or her support "for the boys" abroad. Indeed, such widely praised work remains invisible in *The Blue Dahlia* despite its predominance in Los Angeles. Instead, female empowerment here is portrayed only through the negative example of Helen Morrison's decidedly selfish and destructive pursuit of money and status. Hers is an empowerment achieved through betrayal, a betrayal that destroys her pre-war family and the ideal it represents. And this betrayal is done in the name of what Jack Webb would later call in his critique of Elizabeth Short the "easy living, easy loving of wartime America."

It is such a life of "irresponsibility"—to use another word Webb later associates with "the black dahlia"—that Johnny discovers Helen to be living when he returns from war. Having decided, unwisely it turns out, to surprise Helen rather than warn her of his return, Johnny gets a surprise of his own when he arrives to find her the host of a drunken party of wealthy Hollywood types. Set in Helen's new luxury bungalow at the "Cavendish Courts," the party scene is a display of lavishness and carelessness that is not only the antithesis of the war era and war-effort but it is also

in stark contrast to the pre-war life that Johnny and Helen once shared. Theirs was a humble existence in a small "five-room home" where they struggled to get by (17). But in Johnny's absence, Helen has traded in their old life and the ideals it represented, leaving it all—and Johnny—behind to pursue her own personal wealth, luxury, and freedom. And in the booming context of Los Angeles during the war, Helen has indeed achieved these goals, for, as she explains to Johnny, "Everybody's making a lot of money now." For her part, Helen has become something of an entrepreneur, having opened a dress shop in Hollywood, the success of which has enabled her lavish lifestyle. While it is revealed that Eddie Harewood, the owner of the trendy Blue Dahlia nightclub and the man with whom she is carrying on an affair, loaned her the start-up money for her shop, it is nevertheless quite clear that, having achieved success with her shop, Helen now refuses to be beholden to the will of any man, whether husband or lover. Indeed, she touts her newfound freedom when Johnny questions her lifestyle. "Nowadays," she declares to Johnny, *women like her* do as they want, unrestricted by men: "I take all the drinks I want anytime, anyplace. I go where I want and with anybody I want. I just happen to be that kind of

girl." And it is this "kind of girl," the film suggests, that must be somehow "contained" or eliminated if the "normalcy" of old is ever to be recovered.

The Blue Dahlia leaves no doubt that this "new" Helen is a threat to society. "She's poison," one character quips (26). But it is only when we learn the fate of Johnny and Helen's only child, their son Dicky, that the extent of Helen's destructiveness is revealed. Contrary to her letters to Johnny that claimed Dicky had died of diphtheria, he in fact was killed when Helen crashes her car while drunk. Thus, it is Helen's irresponsibility and the misuse of the freedom she gained while Johnny was at war that leads to the death of Dicky. Her actions during the war have destroyed their marriage, their family, and their son. And she remains unapologetic for this destruction. Indeed, she flaunts her ill deeds, first deviously hinting to Johnny, "I could tell you something about Dicky that would hurt you—and plenty," and then, after confessing the truth, maliciously asking, "Well—how do you like it?" and laughing hysterically at his shock (20-21). Johnny, of course, does not like it, and he is driven by her words and her deeds into a rage. Indeed, he almost murders her, but stops himself. Raymond Chandler evidently also does not like what Helen

represents, as she is shortly thereafter killed in the film. Indeed, she is the target of the "legitimate" male rage that, the film suggests, her actions have provoked. In fact, outlining the story of Helen's murder, Chandler once noted that "executed would be a better word" for what happens to Helen Morrison (qtd. in Bruccoli 132).

Helen Morrison is found shot dead the morning after her confrontation with Johnny, and like all murder mysteries, *The Blue Dahlia* offers several viable suspects. In this case, all the serious suspects are men who have been in some way displaced by the shift in gender roles Helen represents. To the police, the most likely suspect is her husband, who was last seen arguing with Helen only hours before her death. However, the audience is unlikely to suspect Johnny very seriously, for not only is he the film's protagonist, but he is played by the likeable and popular Alan Ladd, an unlikely villain, especially considering the fact that Ladd was scheduled to join the military before the film would be released. Still, the film suggests that Johnny is capable of such an action. From the beginning, it is evident that Johnny is quietly struggling with his anger; "he's all tightened up," his friend George says of him (19). And when Helen confesses to killing their son, his quiet rage

is unleashed and made starkly visible on the screen. In a scene palpable with fury, Johnny threatens his wife and goes so far as to get his gun and aim it at her. He does not shoot her; he leaves after dropping the gun—which later proves to be the murder weapon. But the scene does much more than plant the murder weapon in Helen's bungalow; it also displays the intense anger felt by Johnny—the representative veteran, the likeable Ladd—who has returned from war to find that his wife has all but obliterated the home he remembers and the pre-war ideals he held and fought to preserve in WWII.

Instead, it is another returning veteran, Johnny's Navy friend Buzz, who is the film's most likely suspect, that is, until the film's twist ending reveals his innocence. Like Johnny, Buzz is portrayed as having been betrayed by a faithless home-front, and Buzz shares Johnny's sense of rage but he is less able to control it because a bullet wound to his head has affected his mental capacity. As a result of his injury, Buzz is prone to bouts of forgetfulness and confusion, as well as occasional outbursts of anger. This potentially dangerous dimension to Buzz's character is established early in the film, when the film's three Navy veterans, Johnny, George, and Buzz, share a goodbye drink upon their

arrival together in Los Angeles. In this early, tension-ridden scene, which functions to establish the sense of anxiety and displacement the veterans feel in this unwelcoming home-front, Buzz proves unable to control his rage as he erupts into near-violence. Disturbed by the music emanating only slightly loudly from a juke box being controlled by some unoffending Marine, Buzz aggressively confronts the man, and violence is only averted when Johnny and George diffuse the situation. Still, the scene effectively raises suspicion that Buzz may be too damaged and too potentially violent to function effectively in society, and thus, when Helen turns up dead, he seems to be the most likely suspect, to the audience at least, if not to the police.

As Chandler initially plotted the story, Buzz was indeed the killer. He was to be the one who would "execute" Helen on behalf of Johnny, and even more importantly for him, on behalf of Johnny's dead son Dickie, with whom Buzz seems to deeply identify. "It was the kid—Johnny's kid—what she'd done to him. She didn't even care" (118), Buzz says by way of confession in the original script (these words remain in the final script but what seems like a confession proves misleading). Buzz's outrage at Helen's failure as a mother and her

carelessness towards her child speak to Buzz's own struggles, for Buzz too is in need of something of a mother-figure. Having been seriously injured in the war, Buzz clearly yearns for a woman's care now that he has returned to the home-front. Indeed, he calls himself on occasion a "sick baby" and an "orphan," and expresses envy that Johnny has "a wife to come back to," adding "If I had a nice soft pair of arms . . ." (5, 23). But Buzz finds no female figure waiting for him on the home-front, where, in fact, he finds little care or concern for his well-being. Only his two male Navy friends show sensitivity to his many needs, especially George who seems to have taken up the role of the absent mother, sharing his apartment with Buzz and even tenderly tucking him into bed. Still, there is never any doubt in *The Blue Dahlia* that George's gender role reversal makes an inadequate substitute for the "normalcy" of tradition. Indeed, it is for betraying such roles that Buzz kills Helen in the original script.

However, Chandler was forced to change his script. What was for him the "fairly original idea" of having an angry and unstable veteran execute a woman on the home-front for betraying traditional gender roles was, for the military, bad public relations (qtd. in Brucoli 132).

Since the conduct of servicemen in Hollywood films was, during WWII, subject to the approval of the Federal Government, Chandler had no recourse when the Navy Department declared the script unacceptable for its disrespectful representation of Navy officers. Still, Chandler did not edit out the scenes displaying Buzz's rage. They remain in the film, effectively raising audience suspicion that he could be the killer. In fact, in this way, Chandler still exploits the public fears that the Navy Department was trying to calm—the widespread anxiety that returning veterans would be violent, if not vengeful, when they returned home from the war. Throughout much of the film, Buzz seems to be the very embodiment of these anxieties. In the final film version, however, he ultimately proves to be safe. His rage remains visible in the film, but in an absurd scene that Chandler added to the script, Buzz demonstrates an ability to control this rage. Encouraged by Johnny, who never loses faith in him, Buzz displays his expert marksmanship to the police, which is evidently supposed to prove that he has not lost his ability to remain calm and poised in violent situations and thus would not have killed Helen in the messy way that she died (for the killer “[jammed the gun] against her heart—and

squeeze[d] the trigger" (119), whereas, it seems, Buzz would have killed her with a clean shot).

With the Navy Department's proclamation, Chandler was faced with a difficult plot-problem. If his betraying woman was not killed by one of his returning veterans, then who else could be a viable alternative as the murderer? Who else could share in the rage these men felt toward Helen? Apparently, this question stumped Chandler for quite some time, and he was still struggling to complete the script even after shooting began. In fact, Chandler expressed great bitterness at "what the Navy Department did to the story," how it forced him to transform his plot into a "routine whodunit" (qtd. in Brucoli 132). Nevertheless, several weeks into shooting, Chandler finally found his killer, and he was indeed another displaced male who resented female power, but his displacement did not come as a result of going to war; it came from his experience on the home-front.

The killer turns out to be Dad Newell, whose appearance is that of an elderly father-like figure, as his name "Dad" implies. Played by Will Wright, Newell appears on screen as Chandler's notes describe him; "a tall, silver-haired, benevolent looking party" (9). But beneath his benevolent appearance is more male rage, for

Newell keenly feels a loss of power in society—he is the “New” Dad. A former police officer, Newell has been reduced—for what reason we never find out—to the position “house detective” at Cavendish Court. He is, thus, yet another emasculated male—the “house dick,” as he is sometimes referred, at Helen’s bungalow. He is, the film suggests, the modern father figure reduced to a domestic role and rendered pathetic. He is utterly without power, for he is “pushed around by cops—and hotel managers” and, most offensively to him, by “ritzy dames in bungalows” (125). And even his word comes cheap, for, as he admits disdainfully, he accepts “a cigar and a drink and a couple dirty bucks” to keep quiet about Helen’s affair. “That’s all it takes to buy me. . . . That’s what *she* thought” Newell bitterly exclaims.

It is ultimately through a misogynistic act—his murder of Helen—that Newell attempts to recover his lost sense of power and masculinity. Confessing to the murder, Newell proudly proclaims that Helen paid a price for scorning him so; she “found out a little different, didn’t she.” Having been displaced from a past position of power, and then treated as being worth only a couple of “dirty bucks,” Newell wreaks his vengeance upon Helen, killing her and attempting to profit from it by framing

and then blackmailing other potential suspects. "Maybe I could cost a little something just for once—even if I do end up on a slab," Newell says as he makes a move to escape and just before he is shot dead by police (125).

While Newell is certainly not a sympathetic character—for not only is he a killer but he also attempts to frame the film's hero, still his act of murdering Helen is never condemned. In fact, as Newell falls dead, he continues to insist that the murder is somehow essential for them all, and that the other men have only failed to understand it: "Just a minute, gentlemen—you-got me—all-wrong," Newell says with his last breath. In another eerie anticipation of the black dahlia murder, Newell seems to fancy himself an "avenger" whose brutal act of misogyny was "justified," just as the black dahlia killer would declare a year later in anonymous notes sent to the local newspapers. And, disturbingly, *The Blue Dahlia* does little to contradict Newell's assertions. In fact, the film's sympathies seem to extend more to the murderer Newell than to the murdered Helen Morrison, who—like Elizabeth Short—becomes a forgotten victim. Indeed, the film's final comment on the murder articulates something of this allegiance with Newell. As two police officers leave the

scene of Newell's shooting, one comments: "I must be getting droopy. I'm kind of sorry for the old devil at that" (125).

But it is in a more indirect way that the film really endorses Newell's murder of Helen Morrison. Whatever his own intentions may have been, Newell's execution of Helen clears the way for what is ultimately the film's happy ending: the uniting of Johnny with a "good" woman and, thus, the re-establishing of gender normalcy. It is Joyce Harewood (Veronica Lake) who functions as the film's ideal woman. The estranged wife of Eddie Harewood, Joyce fortuitously meets Johnny just as he walks out on Helen. Trusting, faithful, and caring, Joyce proves to be the very antithesis of the destructive Helen. Hers is a pure heart that might serve for Johnny as an antidote to Helen's poison. In fact, despite having just met Johnny, she proves to be the only character who completely believes in his innocence, for even Buzz and George suspect that Johnny killed his wife.

Throughout most of the film, however, Johnny believes it is too late for such happiness. Expressing a cynicism characteristic of Chandler heroes, Johnny believes his world has already gone wrong—in his case, it has been destroyed by Helen—and he believes it cannot

be recovered. As he says to Joyce, "Every guy's seen you before—somewhere. But the trick is to find you. . . . I didn't find you soon enough" (43-44). Chandler's script ends on a similar note, with Joyce reluctantly parting ways with Johnny, who walks off screen with Buzz and George into a hopeless future: "a tough night for the orphans," Buzz says as a final note (126). But the film version purges such pessimism. With Helen's elimination and Johnny's exoneration, as well as Harewood's death, the path is cleared for this "ideal" couple to unite, thus offering what is in the film's terms a hopeful view of a future where gender roles might be righted and returned to normal. But, in *The Blue Dahlia*, a film that earned Raymond Chandler an Academy Award nomination, that path to normalcy is cleared by way of murder and misogyny.

III. "The Imperfections of History":

John Gregory Dunne's *True Confessions*

In a scene in *Dutch Shea, Jr.*, Dunne's second novel, Dutch Shea, the protagonist, is sleeping in his run-down apartment, half-conscious of a movie playing on the television in his bedroom. He hears William Bendix's

voice. It is Buzz in *The Blue Dahlia* at the beginning of the final scene of the film. Buzz is taking aim at Johnny's cigarette, preparing to burn it out with his bullet and prove his innocence. The following is what registers in Dutch Shea's mind: "William Bendix said, 'You hear me motherfucker'" (31). The words and the voice are no longer Buzz's; they are an intruder's, but not an intruder in the movie, at least not literally. The intruder is in Dutch Shea's bedroom, and Dutch Shea wakes to find a gun pointed at his head. The violence on the screen has converged with the violence in his life.

Such moments are characteristic of Dunne. Reality and fiction are incessantly colliding, intermixing, and overlapping in his work. In *Dutch Shea, Jr.*, it is the film *The Blue Dahlia* that intersects with and confuses the protagonist's sense of reality. It is a conspicuously chosen film and a rich reference in the context of Dunne's work, for it resonates also with his fictionalized account of the black dahlia murder presented in his first novel, *True Confessions*, which I will discuss below. But here his film reference functions the same way that anecdotes, rumors, lies, and fantasies do in Dunne's work. They are each fictions that shape and are shaped by "fact" and "reality," and the resulting

amalgamations make for Dunne's conception of "history." It is a view of history as profoundly imperfect, so much so that some critics have charged that Dunne is a cynic who views history as "irrelevant" (Skenazy 260). But such a critique misrepresents Dunne's work and his use of history. While Dunne does not, it is true, set out to distinguish the facts of history from the fictions, this does not render history "irrelevant." Rather, Dunne's point is that both the facts and the fictions of the past are *relevant* if we want to understand history, which is indeed what Dunne's works strive to do. Like the screenwriter-narrator of his recent novel *Playland* (1994), Dunne "writes with a keen awareness of the imperfection of history" (170). While, on one hand, this awareness assumes the impossibility of uncovering pure "facts" of history that have remained untouched and uninfluenced by fictions, on the other hand, it prompts Dunne, like his narrator, to turn instead to deeper questions and perhaps a more productive and important historical project: "to piece together why what happened did happen" (170).

Dunne's own effort to explore such questions and "to piece together" the past began with *True Confessions* (1978) and its use of the black dahlia murder as an

historical reference point. However, here it is not Elizabeth Short or "the black dahlia" whose corpse is found mutilated on the corner of 39th and Norton streets in 1947, but rather, it is Lois Fazenda, "the Virgin Tramp." The parallels are clear enough, of course, for easy recognition by readers even vaguely familiar with the black dahlia murder. But Dunne makes no claim to factual accuracy: "This is a work of fiction," a disclaimer announces. He continues: "The author is aware of the anachronisms and ambiguities in the social and cultural punctuation of this book, as he is aware of the distortions of time and geography." And the novel holds true to Dunne's disclaimer, for it is as loose with the facts of time and place as it is with the details of the murder and its victim. As Dunne freely admits, the Los Angeles of *True Confessions* is a place that never was. Rather, it is itself an amalgamation. Focusing his story on two Irish American brothers, a police officer and a priest, *True Confessions* is set against the backdrop of an Irish dominated Los Angeles power structure that reverberates less with Los Angeles history than with that of the Hartford, Connecticut, of Dunne's youth. As one critic aptly describes it, Dunne's Los Angeles is something of a "Catholic run Hartford transferred to the

West" (Kasindorf 17). But for Dunne, who called his Irish Catholic upbringing "the one salient fact of my life," such a milieu provides a frame through which he can try to make sense of what for him are the essential questions raised by the black dahlia murder (Dunne, *Vegas* 105). These are moral as well as historical questions. Dunne seeks to find "why what happened did happen," but he does so by seeking a kind of cultural culpability—a guilt that goes beyond, but does not lessen—that of the unknown killer. Dunne's novel does not, as Paul Skenazy has suggested, "challenge traditional legal forms of reasoning which assume individual culpability" (254). Rather, *True Confessions* traces culpability as it extends outward, through the society's interweaving structures of power—judicial, political, and religious—and as it does so, it indicts the entire structure and the men who are its agents and, as such, must assume their own "individual culpability" for its sins and their own.

True Confessions explores the power structure it indicts from the vantage points of two men within it, the brothers Tom and Desmond Spellacy. They hail from a purely imaginary version of Boyle Heights, which in reality was a largely Jewish neighborhood in the 1920s, when Dunne's characters Tom and Des would have been young

(Pitt 56-57). For Dunne, however, Boyle Heights is not Jewish but Irish. It is "tough mick," a place that produces a fair share of "drunks, hod-carriers, and bookies," as well as "a few stick-up men, an occasional shooter" (8). But Tom and Des have each made it out of Boyle Heights by following one of the two divergent professional paths available, one leading to the police department, one to the priesthood.

By April 1947, the time of the Virgin Tramp murder, Des's path has taken him to considerable professional heights, and the future appears even more promising. Des is "the Right Reverend Monsignor Spellacy," chancellor to Cardinal Hugh Danaher and his likely successor, a "future prince of the Church" (17). On the other hand, Tommy is a skilled detective with a significant blemish on his record. Although never indicted, Tommy was at the center of a major departmental embarrassment involving a prostitute, a pay-off, and a questionable police-shooting of an armed robber. He was the "john," the "bagman," and the shooter, but he avoided charges, thanks, he knows, to the preeminence of his priest-brother. Thus, as Tommy tells it, by 1947 he was "soiled Tommy," his brother, "sanctimonious Des" (332). But the novel levels this easy opposition. Each brother, the novel reveals, has his own

personal failings, his own sins, and each is a player in a power structure pervaded by still much greater sin. And it is because of the roles they play—as facilitators of the system—that each proves to be, on some level, responsible for its callousness, its brutality, and its utter disregard for human life, and especially for the lives of women, who remain at the bottom of the power structure, most often victimized. The mutilated corpse of Lois Fazenda is, of course, the novel's central symbol of the system's terrible consequences for women, and while neither Tommy nor Des are in any legal sense "involved" in the crime, each ultimately comes to accept his own culpability for serving the system that enabled it.

Of the two brothers, Des wields greater influence within the power structure, and his sins are those of power and pride. Although a priest, Des's talents are not spiritual but practical. "I have no gift for loving God," Des admits. Yet his "gift" for garnering profit and good public relations for the Church has made him an up-and-comer in an Archdiocese that, as the Archbishop Danaher admits, has entered into the world of "high finance" (244). An expert businessman and financier, Des is something of "an Irish Medici" as Danaher once calls him, adding: "He could run General Motors" (117). Indeed, with

Danaher's support, Des manages the Archdiocese like a corporation, snatching the jealously guarded autonomy of the individual parishes in the name of "centralization," maneuvering for a discount on burials for nuns and priests to maximize Church profits, and staving off a threatened strike of lay teachers in parochial schools by moving to import teaching nuns from Ireland. Unrivaled as a deal-maker and fundraiser for the Archdiocese, Des uses the respectability of the Church as a bartering tool, giving what amounts to indulgences in the form of respected lay positions within the church or honorary titles in return for felicitous building contract offers or gifts that he knows to be "conscience money" (52). It is all in an effort "to improve the care and feed the souls," he tells himself unconvincingly (125).

However, the practice of ignoring—and reaping church profits from—the sins around him becomes increasingly difficult for Des on a practical and a moral level, especially after Tommy's investigation of the "Virgin Tramp" murder begins to illuminate some of the crimes and moral failings of the various "prominent Catholic laymen" whom Des helped achieve respectability (49). Lois Fazenda, it turns out, "got around the archdiocese," as Tommy describes it in what Des

acknowledges is "a nice turn of the phrase" (272). In fact, she is passed around among Des's "pals," one of whom, Jack Amsterdam, becomes her pimp of sorts. Amsterdam "employs" her in a scam operating under the guise of a Catholic charity, The Protectors of the Poor, in which attractive young women serve ostensibly as "volunteers" at the County General Hospital, handing out candy and catholic religious supplies and giving comfort to indigent accident victims of Mexican descent. In reality, their job is to seduce the injured men and encourage them to sign insurance forms, which Amsterdam sells to "ambulance chasing" lawyers for a nice profit. The injured men, of course, never receive anything from the settlement.

The Protectors of the Poor scam is one of Jack Amsterdam's many. And though he does not murder Lois Fazenda, she is one of his many victims, for it is he who directs her down the path of prostitution that ultimately leads to her murder. She was killed, Tommy ultimately learns, by a random "john" named Harold Pugh, a barber with a reputation for "cutting" prostitutes who, incidentally, died in a car accident minutes after the murder, speeding away from the scene. Yet the fact that Amsterdam and Des's other business associates are legally

innocent of her murder does not, the novel insists, erase their culpability, for it was they who used and discarded her and directed her into prostitution. Des's guilt lies in his indirect assistance to Jack and his like. He helps them maintain respectability and appear "clean" even as he knows that, with Jack especially, "You can't look around without seeing him getting his hands dirty" (218). In Lois Fazenda's case, Des was even present when she first entered into his circle of associates, when Dan Campion, the lawyer for the Archdiocese, picked her up hitchhiking. The fact that Des "cannot remember what she looked like . . . or anything about her" makes him only the more responsible, for it suggests his willful blindness to her victimization while he focused instead on raising money for the Archdiocese (273). "Doesn't give you much time to save souls," Tom sarcastically notes once to Des about his priestly fundraising (138). That is precisely the point that in the end Des comes to acknowledge, that he is guilty of a terrible cynicism, wherein the end justifies the means and the institution of the Church—and his own rise within it—is of greater value than the people it serves and their suffering: "My God, I am a terrible priest," Des realizes, later adding, "I am irrelevant" (272, 330)

Still, it is not Des, the priest, who is the catalyst for the various confessions in the novel—Tom's and Des's among them. Rather, it is that of the known sinner, "soiled Tommy." Tom's sins are of a different sort than Des's; they are sins "of the flesh" (191). Married to Mary Margaret, who resides in a state mental institution, Tom is a chronic adulterer who carries on long-term affairs first with Brenda Samuels, a prostitute and "Madam," and later with Corinne Morris, an Assistant Jury Commissioner. But Tom's sins go deeper than those strictly carnal in nature, and they characterize not just his marriage but also his relationships with and attitude toward all three women. "I always seem to fail women," Tom comes to see, but "even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. He never gave enough of himself to women to fail them" (185). Tom's sin, then, is one of selfishness. He refuses to give himself to women and, thus, to share any accountability for their fate. With Mary Margaret, this amounts to his refusal to share any responsibility for her institutionalization in a state mental hospital, where she "talk[s] to the Saints" apparently as a way of escaping reality (12). This same selfishness is what drives Tom's decision to silently let Brenda "[take] the fall" for him in the payoff scandal (214), which begins

the downward spiral of her life, ending in her apparent suicide (following threats by Jack Amsterdam). And in his troubled affair with Corinne, which unravels as the novel progresses, Tom repeats the pattern again, this time by "keeping her at arms length," even when she finds out she is pregnant and is considering an abortion, which he implicitly supports (179).

Tom initially brings this same detached, "arms length" approach that characterizes his relationships with women to his investigation of Lois Fazenda's murder. "Fuck her. She's not worth worrying about," he says of Lois Fazenda to Corinne, adding, "She fucked the world" (83). But Corinne challenges his callous dismissal here, just as she challenges him to account for his failures throughout the novel: "The only thing she did wrong was get hacked up," she says, adding "Somebody hacks me up, you going to say, 'Fuck her, she fucked the world?'" (83). Such comments by Corinne prove instructive for Tom, and he begins to see patterns and parallels that indirectly link the "Virgin Tramp" to Corinne, Brenda, and even Mary Margaret. As Tom searches for clues to the murder in the form of "the definite pattern . . . the lines that crossed," he comes to see deeper patterns of gender oppression and misogyny that are more broadly

indicting (308). They are self-indicting, to be sure, for Tom replicates and perpetuates these patterns of victimization both in his personal life, in his many failings with women, and in his professional life, as a former "bagman" who took payoffs for Jack Amsterdam's prostitution ring. But the "lines" Tom follows in his investigation also point to men of still greater sin and greater culpability. These are "the men of the world," as Tom dubs them, men who routinely exploit women and destroy lives but, through power and influence, remain legally "clean."

Jack Amsterdam is the epitome of such men in the novel, and thus, Tom comes to believe that he must be held accountable for Lois Fazenda's death. The knowledge that Amsterdam is not, in a strict legal sense, guilty of the crime does not deter Tom from arresting him, for he has come to see that Jack Amsterdam is at the center of the corrupt and misogynistic structure of power that endorses Lois Fazenda's victimization and, on some level, even her murder. When Brenda is also found dead, the result of an apparent suicide that comes immediately after Amsterdam threatens her life, it becomes clear to Tom that this brutal pattern of victimization will continue to repeat itself if he does not act to disrupt

it. So that is what he seeks to do by arresting Jack Amsterdam and exposing his hidden crimes. It is an act that he knows will destroy Des's professional reputation as well as his own, but he does it still, hoping that in some way it will "pay off the debt to Brenda. Corinne. Mary Margaret. The whole thing was mixed up with them too" (321).

It is characteristic of Dunne's view of a deeply corrupt society, and of the futility of institutionalized justice assigned to police it, that even the arrest of Jack Amsterdam has little positive impact on the culture at large. As critic Michael Adams has noted, Tom's act, while "heroic," is merely a "symbolic gesture" (157). Indeed, misogyny and corruption are far too entrenched to be effectively challenged by one man who rebels against the system. The patterns of gender victimization continue to repeat themselves, only the figures of male power change, as Jack Amsterdam is replaced by the likes of Dan Campion, who gains influence with the police during the Virgin Tramp investigation despite his connections to her. Ultimately, some "men of power" face what appears to be a kind of justice, but it is never the product of an effective judicial system. Jack Amsterdam dies of cancer before he is tried for or convicted of any crime. Dan

Campion dies two years later, a result of a sudden heart attack while in bed with a fourteen year-old girl. And, of course, Harold Pugh, the man who butchered Lois Fazenda, is killed before he even becomes a suspect in her murder. One might be tempted to find a kind of ruling, divine justice at work here, but there is no evidence for such a reading of this novel. Justice is meted out at random in the world of *True Confessions*. And a single heroic act of one guilt-ridden crusading police officer appears rather futile in the face of such a corrupt and chaotic world.

And yet, paradoxically, this act that appears to be futile as a force of cultural change ultimately represents the novel's genuine sense of salvation. To be sure, Tom's arrest of Amsterdam does not affect cultural salvation, but it is the catalyst for each of the brothers' moral and personal redemption. For Tom, it serves as an act of contrition for his failures with women and his implication in this corrupt system of justice. "It was worth it," Tom says of the arrest, despite all its professional costs to Des and himself. For Des, redemption is born from his professional ruin. Because of the embarrassing arrest of his frequent business partner, Des's rise in the Archdiocese comes to

an abrupt end, and as a punishment, he is "exiled" to the desert of Southern California to be a co-pastor for what Tom calls "a ruin of a parish" (22). Yet, it is here that Des learns again "how to be a priest" and how to be "useful" to people and to be relevant in the world (339). Looking back at the events of 1947 from years hence and in his final days, Des articulates this point, telling his brother, "You were my salvation" (340).

Ending as it does on this note of moral responsibility and personal salvation, *True Confessions* is a most unusual noir tale, one with the genre's characteristically profane subject matter but with a spiritual subtext. It is also a most unexpected reworking of the black dahlia tragedy, for it proves ultimately to be uninterested in the dimension of the crime that has most fascinated others, its unsolved status. Dunne's novel relegates the solving of the crime to only a few pages, a brief note in this broader search for the guilty. As I have asserted, guilt here is not limited to the demented killer, nor is it even limited to the misogynistic "men of power." It also extends to include those who have hardened themselves to the cruelty of victimization or who adopt a willing blindness to it. And it is perhaps on this point that the novel's use of

history most intersects with and reinforces its moral fable. American history too has been subject to a willing blindness, an eagerness to accept the illusion of an innocent past, and perhaps no recent era reflects this quite like the postwar, a time that Tom Brokaw has recently described as characterized by "common beliefs" and "common values," especially "a love of family" (Brokaw). Dunne's "imperfect" history challenges such nostalgias by highlighting a terrible crime that contradicts these visions of postwar "consensus." As to the question: "why what happened did happen?" Dunne's novel points to a deeply entrenched cultural guilt and irresponsibility that is much more disturbing and more broadly indicting than the idea of a single unknown killer, however shockingly brutal.

III. James Ellroy's "World of Horror"

James Ellroy's vision of postwar Los Angeles shares much with Dunne's. Like Dunne, Ellroy debunks nostalgic and whitewashed "consensus" histories of the postwar period and offers a more sinister version of the past, one that is far darker even than Dunne's. There is no redemption and no salvation in Ellroy's world; there is

only a path of continuous descent into the moral filth of a deeply corrupt place and, for some, a growing consciousness of their implication in it all. It is a "world of horror," as Ellroy writes, a place steeped in crime, corruption, racism, misogyny, perverse sexualities and abuse of all sorts. His characters, protagonists included, are the products and perpetrators of these social ills and moral crimes. They are typically "bad white men, doing bad things in the name of authority," as Ellroy notes, adding "They bear the brunt of my empathy and moral judgement" (qtd. in Birnbaum). Over the course of the four novels that he calls the *LA Quartet*, as well as his memoir writing, Ellroy offers a vision of postwar Los Angeles as a continuum of these bad acts and their corresponding consequences. His is L.A. history as a series of "body dumps," to quote from the title of one of Ellroy's essays (*Crime Wave* 3). And amidst all the crime and death, there are two dead bodies that are most prominent in his vision of the city's past. These are the two women whom Ellroy credits as being something of an impetus for and a shaping force of his imagination. One is Elizabeth Short, the subject of his novel *The Black Dahlia*, the opening work of his *Quartet*, and thus the starting point for what is his definitive noir vision of

LA. The other is the dedicatee of that novel. She is Geneva Hilliker Ellroy, James Ellroy's mother and the victim of an unsolved Los Angeles County murder in 1958, when her only child was age ten.

Ellroy's memoir, *My Dark Places*, which in my view is his most compelling work, is also his most direct engagement with the crime that haunts what he calls his "real and fictional" world (268). Subtitled "an L.A. Crime Memoir," *My Dark Places* is a multifaceted and genre blurring tale, part "true crime" story, part regional history, part biography and autobiography. But its central story is that of Ellroy's effort finally to try to cope with, and perhaps solve, his mother's unsolved murder, the childhood trauma from which he had long ago emotionally fled, even while he knew it "define[d] my life" (2). Ellroy tells of his literal and figurative flight from and his return to his mother and the scene of her murder, and he provides a confession—though in a distinctly detached voice—of his youthful escape from it down a path of petty crimes, alcoholism, drug abuse, public displays of racism and Nazism, and other hate-filled and self-destructive behavior. *My Dark Places* is also the tale of how this traumatic event, ineffectively suppressed, shaped his noir imagination. Indeed, the book

offers something of a portrait of a noir writer as an exceedingly disturbed young man.

My Dark Places suggests that the particular worldview of Ellroy's fiction was borne of the intersection of his own experience and the noir fictions of the city he began to consume obsessively shortly after his mother's murder. Noir, it seems, provided a framework through which his own traumatic life made some sense, for the noir world that Ellroy read about—and has extended in his fiction—is a place of "all crime" and "all sex," where "the random desecration of women" is routine (139). For the young Ellroy, whom he describes in his memoir as "devoid of interpretative powers and possess[ing] no gift for abstraction," noir was an attractive alternative narrative to the standard histories of Los Angeles and of America, histories that Ellroy continues to dismiss as "written by hacks who don't know the real secret shit" (*Dark* 138, *Crime* 180). As a writer, Ellroy would strive to correct these "hack" histories by producing, in the form of his *L.A. Quartet*, something of a definitive noir version of the city's past from the postwar years and through the 1950s. Spanning almost twenty years of the region's history in nearly two thousand pages, the *L.A. Quartet* is Ellroy's attempt to "canonize the secret L.A."

(*Dark* 252). If, as he suggests, the death of his mother is the ultimate, underlying psychological force that has spurred on this work, it is nevertheless the black dahlia whom he has positioned, he explains, at "the heart of my crime world" (143). "I didn't know that she was [my mother] transmogrified," he adds.

"She came to me in a book," Ellroy says of Elizabeth Short. The book was *The Badge* by Jack Webb, the *Dragnet* creator's "true crime" homage to the L.A.P.D. It is there that Webb provides his account of the black dahlia murder as a scathing attack on her character which I have quoted above. As a boy, Ellroy read Webb's version of the black dahlia story "a hundred times," and she became his acknowledged obsession, the source of his nightmares and fantasies (124-25). In time, he moved beyond Webb's account, researching the murder and its era and concluding that "Postwar Los Angeles coalesced around the body of a dead woman" (127). So when he sought to create his own literary-historical version of this era in *L.A. Quartet*, it is with the black dahlia that he began. Indeed, *The Black Dahlia* is the first novel in the cycle, and its centrality is underscored by Ellroy's reference to the other novels, *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A.*

Confidential (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992) as its "three sequels" (252).

Ellroy writes that, in *The Black Dahlia*, he "tried to portray the male world that sanctioned her death" (252). In doing so, Ellroy follows the literary path taken by Dunne and offers in his work an implied critique of the postwar noir narratives by Chandler, Webb, and others who, consciously or not, guided interpretations of the black dahlia murder. In particular, it is Jack Webb's decidedly conservative noir view that bears the brunt of Ellroy's critique, perhaps because it represents the particular narrative tradition—the order-obsessed police procedural—to which Ellroy's work is most indebted. But Ellroy radically departs from Webb in his portrayal of crime in Los Angeles and the role and responsibility of the police and other men of power. Webb's works—his books, radio programs, T. V. shows, and movies—all insistently mythologize Chief William Parker's L.A.P.D. as a "few good men," a virtuous force in the face of an encroaching disorder, represented mostly by minorities, communists—later "hippies"—and, in Ellroy's words, "femme fatales" who "die hard [and] are complicitous in attracting death by vivisection" (124). In *The Black Dahlia*, and elsewhere throughout his work, Ellroy debunks

Webb's L.A.P.D. mythology by presenting the police as just as steeped in perversity and pathology as the deranged citizenry of his imagined city. The police too are racists, misogynists, and homophobes—and explicitly so, always right on the surface. A deeper look also reveals a remarkable number to be schizophrenics, scopophiles, or necrophiliacs. The higher the rank of an Ellroy police officer, the more likely he is to be revealed as the hidden culprit behind major city crimes. Still, Ellroy encourages his readers to identify with policemen, although they are usually those on the lower ranks who are not yet guilty of the gravest crimes. To be sure, they are never innocent, always having come from their own private hell and escaping—though incompletely—by way of significant moral compromises. But Ellroy offers them as protagonists, men whom, he says, “readers are groomed to identify with” (Scanlon 205). Over the course of each narrative, it is revealed that such “heroes . . . do horrifying and shameful and brutal things” (205).

Bucky Bleichert, the protagonist of *The Black Dahlia*, is one of Ellroy's “perpetrator heroes,” although he is not as extreme an example of this type as Ellroy will offer elsewhere, as in the murderous Dave Klein of

White Jazz (Horsley 14). Still, Bucky does, like nearly all Ellroy characters, prove "vulnerable, prey to dark curiosities" (*Dahlia* 237). However, his more consequential flaw is his naïvete, and it is that which has the most significant consequences in the novel. Like Desmond Spellacy of *True Confessions*, Bucky is blind to the fact that crime and corruption not only surround him, they engulf him. But his blindness is not, like Des's, a conscious choice and an evasion of responsibility. Rather, Bucky is a victim of multilayered and overlapping conspiracies and deceptions that come by way of the novel's two intersecting plots. One is a personal story of Bucky's putative friendship with his partner and his partner's girlfriend. The other is public and historical; it is the story of the black dahlia murder he investigates. In both cases and in both tales, Bucky is effectively deceived, and as a consequence, he is made an unwitting accessory to crimes and cover-ups, including that which forever buries the secrets of the black dahlia murder.

Despite the many deceptions that, for most of the novel, Bucky remains "too blind" to discern, he ultimately solves the black dahlia murder, finding it to be the disturbing outcome of, as one critic describes it,

a "cryptic family melodrama," ripe with perverse sexualities and layered with incest and oedipal desires (Ellroy 255, Murphet 51). The family is a fictional one, the Spragues, friends of the Mulhollands and Sepulvedas, frequent hosts to Mayor Fletcher Bowron and Governor Earl Warren. "Daddy" is "the Emmet Sprague," a construction and real estate mogul who "built half of Hollywood and Long Beach" (136). Emmett's "story of success" began in the early days of Hollywood, when he was a "confrere" of Keystone Cops producer Mack Sennett from whom he "bought rotten lumber and abandoned movie facades . . . and built houses out of them" (151). Thus, in Ellroy's noir L.A., the flotsam and jetsam of Hollywood do not end up in a "dream dump," as they do in West's *The Day of the Locust*. Rather, they become fodder for the construction of "firetraps and dives all over LA." They are the stuff from which the material city has been flimsily built.

It is one such "bungalow," vacant and dilapidated, that proves to be the novel's "death house," the place where the black dahlia was butchered (330). Bucky discovers it even as it is being set for demolition, bulldozers already lined up for the destruction. In a rather heavy-handed irony, a ceremony celebrating the removal of the last four letters of the Hollywoodland

sign is within eyesight, and the cheers and band playing are within earshot. What Bucky finds when he enters the house is an obvious counterpoint to this celebration of Hollywood and Los Angeles. It is a vivid display of Ellroy's "secret LA," a place of dead and desecrated women that is hidden behind the myths. And, of course, it is portrayed here with Ellroy's characteristic "shock tactic" magnification of the grotesque:

The side walls were peppered with pornographic photographs of crippled and disfigured women. Mongoloid faces sucking dildos, nudie girls with withered and brace-clad legs spread wide, limbless atrocities staring at the camera. There was a mattress on the floor; it was caked with layers and layers of blood." (315)

Taking his assault on Los Angeles myths still further, Ellroy presents as his black dahlia killer not Emmett Sprague but his wife, Ramona. She is a descendant of "the California land grant Cathcarts" and was named, she says, for the Ramona pageant, that annual Southern California event celebrating the story from Helen Hunt's romance novel that offers a fictionalized and nostalgic history of Southern California in the era of annexation. Clearly, this Ramona is a perverse and pathological one

but not because she is a distortion of a purer Ramona of the past. Rather, Ellroy's point is that myths such as that of Ramona have always concealed the dark secrets of history. Along with her deranged and disfigured lover George Tilden, a necrophile who participates in the mutilation of Elizabeth Short, Ramona Cathcart is the horror of that history embodied.

If there is a central source for such horror in the world of *The Black Dahlia*, and that of the *L.A. Quartet* more generally, it is the dual powers of the dysfunctional postwar family, which Ellroy shows to be steeped in incestuous and oedipal impulses, and the lies and myths that conceal such dysfunction. Indeed, it is such an impulse that sets off the chain of events that leads to Elizabeth Short's murder. Ramona kills Elizabeth Short in a jealous rage over George's desire for Short, a desire that derives from her strikingly similar appearance to Madeleine Sprague, George and Ramona's daughter. As D.S. Neff has shown in his article on the subject, such oedipal triangles are repeated relentlessly throughout the novel, and they are further enabled by the use of surrogates, as with George's use of Betty Short who, fictionalized as a prostitute, is accessible to George whereas Madeleine is unavailable to him, although

not because she is his daughter, but instead because she has taken Emmett Sprague as her "father-lover" (319).

Bucky also becomes entangled in one of the Sprague's oedipal triangles. He is seduced by Madeleine as part of the Sprague's conspiracy to cover-up the black dahlia murder. Bucky is manipulated by Madeleine, in part because she plays on his own newly surfacing necrophilic desires by dressing as Betty Short. Thus, from the Spragues's perspective, Bucky effectively "serves his purpose," as he becomes so implicated in their cover-up that any arrest of Ramona would be his professional suicide. Bucky, however, seeks "back door justice" by killing George Tildon, whom he believes to be Short's murderer (318). But Bucky proves to be only playing the part the Spragues have plotted for him. "Emmett counted on you to take care of Georgie," Ramona later tells him (341). Indeed, Bucky is the Sprague's unwitting "underling" who eliminates Ramona's accomplice as well as all of the material evidence against her, for Bucky, along with another detective, burns down the "death house" because "That obscenity did not deserve to stand" (331). In killing George Tilden, Bucky also brings one variation on the oedipal drama to culmination. By murdering Tildon, Bucky eliminates Madeleine's real

father, one of the men with whom he has competed, albeit unknowingly, for both Madeleine and her surrogate, Betty Short.

This oedipal pattern repeats itself yet again in the novel's parallel story of Bucky's relationship with his friend and partner Lee Blanchard, and Blanchard's girlfriend, Kay Lake. Here Bucky experiences what he believes to be a "fairy tale triangle" (255). Indeed, the three become a family of sorts, and though there is an evident sexual attraction between Bucky and Kay, Bucky resists the impulse out of love for his friend. Yet, what first appears as if it may be a triangle of healthy human relationships soon proves otherwise. First Lee mysteriously flees, leaving Bucky and Kay as "two loose ends, a family sans patriarch," a structure that Bucky admits "drove me out the door" (191). Then Lee's secrets, and to a lesser extent Kay's, begin to surface, revealing to Bucky that the triangle was, from the start, a fantasy that he built upon their lies and deceptions. In fact, Lee, like the Sprague family, manipulates Bucky and puts him to use as he covers-up his own crimes, which include a major bank robbery, and later, the extortion of Emmett Sprague, after he secretly solves the black dahlia murder in his separate investigation of it. Long oblivious to

Lee's crimes, Bucky serves as Lee's alibi, even unwittingly assisting him in the murder of a witness who would expose Lee. Thus, Bucky is again, as in the Sprague-black dahlia story, turned into a "triggerman" and "the keeper of . . . secrets" (255).

In the end of the novel, Bucky achieves a belated recognition of and tries to break free from the various dysfunctional "lovers' triangles" and circles of deceit in which he has found himself so deeply entangled (352). But his efforts at truth only spawn new lies. Bucky arrests Madeleine on charges of murdering Lee Blanchard, a murder which she commits in response to his efforts to extort the Sprague family. "We took the fall together," Bucky says of his arrest of Madeleine, for her confession proves to be "a brilliant fantasy" of a purely imaginary oedipal triangle of herself, Bucky, and Lee Blanchard, and it leads ultimately to a *Confidential* magazine exposé that reveals Bucky's "moral turpitude and conduct unbecoming an officer" (352). Kay Lake, whom by now has become Bucky's estranged wife, says of the newspaper articles about him and the "trashy magazine piece" that she "must have counted a dozen lies. Lies by omission and the blatant kind" (355).

Despite the myriad deceptions, lies, and secrets that Bucky has been complicit in concealing, the novel nevertheless closes with Bucky's inexplicably hopeful, and thus perhaps delusional, assertion that he can build a new life with Kay and, as he says, "keep a new foundation of lies from destroying [us]" (357). Such a future free of lies is, at best, unlikely for Bucky and Kay, or for that matter, for any other character in Ellroy's world of horror. In Bucky's case, this pledge to honesty seems at first to be reinforced by the exigency of his narrative. He writes this "memoir," he says, in an effort to reveal all the facts of the black dahlia case, "as brutal as [they] were" (3). And yet, at the end of this "memoir," his earlier claim is undercut by another pledge: to remain "forever" silent as to the identity of the black dahlia murderer (353).

Further undercutting Bucky's hopeful view of the future, and the novel's ostensibly optimistic end, is the persistent implication that the oedipal patterns that have been so destructive throughout the novel remain inescapable and inevitable. Even as Bucky leaves Los Angeles for Boston, where he will join Kay to start their new life, he learns that she is pregnant, and thus they form another potentially perverse oedipal triangle. He

also acknowledges that Elizabeth Short remains a powerful force in his imagination and, in the novel's final line, even pledges his love to her. Thus, his coupling with Kay, especially coming as it does so near Short's hometown outside Boston, morphs into still another triangle, that of Kay-Bucky-Betty. In one sense, this triangle is a positive counterpoint to Bucky's earlier relationships, for at least he enters it more self-aware and clear-sighted, even acknowledging to himself and pledging "to explain to Kay" that he remains "prey to dark curiosities" (358). But, in this novel and throughout Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet*, there is little evidence that even self-awareness and truth can deter dysfunction or alter the dark course of private and public histories.

It is in regard to this implication of the sheer inevitability of horror that Ellroy's use of history, and of the black dahlia murder in particular, most fully departs from Dunne's. Despite the grotesque nature of the tale told, Dunne's novel affirms the value of the telling, revealing it to be a crucial first step on a path toward individual redemption, and, by extension, possibly cultural redemption as well. Ellroy, on the other hand, offers no such assurances. "Poetry makes

nothing happen," Ellroy says in one interview, quoting William Butler Yeats (qtd. in Birnbaum). Such a sentiment pervades his work even as it contradicts his stated literary-historical project. Ellroy says he writes to render the secret history, to create an alternative "social history" that catalogues the cruelties of the past and that explicitly presents the racism, misogyny, and violence that he sees as defining it. Still, his work expresses extraordinary doubt that such an act of truth-telling has any power to reform or redeem, that it makes anything happen.

Such an unresolved tension exists even at the heart of *My Dark Places*, where Ellroy, as narrator, expresses an uncertainty as to the motive of his memoir. Certainly, this narrative is part of an effort "to portray the world that sanctioned the deaths" of the likes of Geneva Hilliker and Elizabeth Short. But Ellroy seems less certain as to what good possibly could come from this portrayal. Is it just his cynical effort to, as he says, "exploit my mother's desecration" for book sales and profit, as he admits he has done before? Or is it simply a cataloging of his own obsessions that, as he says in the memoir's final line, "I will justify in the name of the obsessive life" that was borne at the moment he

learned of his mother's death and "he first glimpsed this world of horror"? (429).

Such questions of exigency are, in my view, the most disturbing and troubling element of Ellroy's work. In regard to his use of the black dahlia murder, as with his narrative of his mother's death, readers are left to wonder if his work is anything more than another re-packaging of Elizabeth Short's tragic death for consumption anew, and absent the capacity to bring change, if Ellroy's noir is not just an extension of the postwar narratives he claims to revise. Favorable critics have evaded these difficult, unresolved questions by focusing on Ellroy's "defiantly anti-PC shock-tactic" writing that critic Lee Horsley has credited with restoring to noir its "capacity to disturb" (Murphet 57; Horsley 139). But of what value is this shock element? And of what value is a noir that only shocks? As the East German critic Ernst Kaemmel wrote long ago in reference to postwar American noir, such fiction serves only "to pass the time and titillate the nerves" (57). Such narratives are then little more than a lot of sound and fury. To be sure, Ellroy's work signifies something: a real, fictional, and autobiographical "world of horror" that he "first glimpsed the day [his mother] died." And

yet, what is perhaps most disconcerting about the horror he portrays is the persistent sense that his representation of it accomplishes nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Unspeakable Past: Scenes from the Life and Fiction of Hisaye Yamamoto

I. "Stuck in History"

My discussion of Hisaye Yamamoto begins not with her as a writer but rather as a reader. In particular, I am intrigued by an exchange between Yamamoto, still a young, little-known writer at the time, and Yvor Winters, the eminent Professor of English at Stanford. It was Winters who struck up a correspondence with Yamamoto in January 1951, after he and his wife, writer Janet Lewis, read and enjoyed Yamamoto's short story "Yoneko's Earthquake," her fifth story to appear in a major journal. Winters wrote to compliment Yamamoto on her story and to encourage her to apply for a Stanford Fellowship in writing, but the correspondence would soon develop into an informal mentorship with Winters offering advice and instruction to Yamamoto as both a writer and a reader. Yet Yamamoto would prove a resistant pupil, especially when the conversation turned to topics that touched on the relationship between writing and histories of the marginalized.

Melville's *Benito Cereno* is one such topic, and it would become a point of some contention between Yamamoto and Winters. The story is one about which Winters considered himself quite an expert, and not without justification, for Winters had studied and taught the book for years, and he had written extensively on Melville in his classic formalist study *Maule's Curse* (1938). So when Yamamoto read the text on Winters's recommendation—as a good place to start for a short story writer—and offered an unconventional response to the novel, Winters swiftly renounced her apparent misreading and set out to correct what he saw as her "childish" misunderstanding of literature and history (Winters *Letters* 9). The problem for Winters was that Yamamoto expressed sympathy for the character of Babo, the slave who leads the rebellion of a Spanish slave ship and who then fools Delano, an American captain who comes aboard, into believing that no uprising has taken place and that the Spanish Captain Benito Cereno remains in control, when in fact Cereno and his men have been enslaved by the rebels. To Winters, such a sympathetic reading of Babo—to "root" for Babo, as Yamamoto admits she does—utterly misses the point of the story, since Babo, he argues, is the very epitome of evil, and

Melville's development of his character is among "the most curious and profound studies of evil" in all of literature (10).

For Winters, Babo's evil is significant because it is, he believes, an unconscious evil. Babo reacts violently to his conditions of oppression, but Winters is quite sure that he does not understand that oppression. "Babo is a man of ability in whom evil becomes dominant as a result, if you like, of injustice, but of injustice neither he nor anyone else in the story understands," Winters notes (10). And such an apparent lack of understanding of the injustice of his own enslavement makes him a mere object of history; that is, Babo simply reacts to conditions without a greater, historical sense of its meaning. "To root for Babo is silly" Winters adds, because he is "stuck in history." "And you too," he warns Yamamoto, "will be stuck in history if you do not learn to understand it" (10). What Winters did not comprehend was that Yamamoto already had a deep awareness of history, but her understanding of how history is shaped and what stories get passed along was quite different from his own.

Although Winters's harsh critique of Yamamoto's response to *Benito Cereno* did not bring an immediate end

to their correspondence, it did reveal to Yamamoto the gaping difference in their perspectives, and by implication, it revealed to her something of her distance from the literary mainstream. As a reader and as a writer, Yamamoto was especially sensitive and attuned to the unexpressed experiences of oppressed figures like Babo. She was deeply dismayed, she would admit later, to find that an eminent authority on the text like Yvor Winters could dismiss her interest in Babo as misguided, while boldly insisting that "race was not an issue" in the novella ("Fire" 155). In Yamamoto's reading, race was undeniably central to the story, and Babo was the crucial character. That he was voiceless did not mean to her, as it did to Winters, that he was unconscious and unaware of his presence within history. He was simply silenced by the conditions of his existence. He was voiceless but his actions spoke volumes about his historical consciousness.

As dramatically as Winters's critical perspective and interests diverged from her own, Yamamoto would have found a view of the text remarkably akin to hers had she encountered the critical work of C.L.R. James, the Trinidadian born critic who was lecturing and writing on Melville contemporaneously to her correspondence with Winters. For James, Babo is "the most heroic character in

Melville's fiction"; he is "a man of unbending will, a natural leader, an organizer of large schemes but a master of detail, ruthless against his enemies but without personal weakness [He is] a man of internal power with a brain that is a 'hive of subtlety'" (James 112). It is surely no coincidence that these similarly positive responses to Babo emerge from two writers who share certain experiences of oppression and alienation within the U.S. In James's case, he studied and wrote about Melville while in a state of alienation that was both figurative and literal. His study of Melville was largely produced during his internment on Ellis Island in 1952 while he awaited deportation because his literary and cultural criticism had led to his labeling as "an alien subversive" (Pease xxv-xxx). Thus, he wrote about Babo while being denied due process and habeas corpus in his battle with the I.N.S.; his Melville study was completed even as, in Donald Pease's words, James was bereft of "the power to speak in his own name" (xxv).

Yamamoto also knew the American cultural and political margins intimately by the time Winters introduced her to *Benito Cereno*. Born in 1921 to Japanese immigrant, or "issei," parents, Yamamoto's youth was

spent in Southern California's migrant farming communities in and around Redondo Beach. Subject to the Alien Land Laws that prevented anyone of Japanese descent from owning land, Yamamoto lived as part of a "floating community" of Japanese Americans who would lease acreage (which too later became illegal) for a few years at a time before being uprooted and having to move on to cultivate new land ("Interview with Cheung" 77). But it was in February of 1942, with the internment of all Japanese nationals and U.S. citizens of Japanese descent, that Yamamoto and the entire Japanese American population of the west coast experienced their most dramatic uprooting. For the now twenty-one year-old Yamamoto, internment would mean taking the "loyalty oath" and spending three years behind barb-wired fences in Poston, Arizona, even as her brother Johnny was killed fighting as a U.S. soldier in Italy. It would also be a time during which Yamamoto was developing her skills as a reader and a writer, for she worked during her internment as an editor and writer for the camp periodical, *The Poston Chronicle*, where she even published some of her earliest works of fiction. Indeed, it was within this context—this place of confinement where censorship was a routine part of daily life—that Yamamoto's literary

vision was taking shape. It is perhaps here then that Yamamoto learned to understand what Winters apparently did not—that, as in the case of the character Babo, knowledge is not always expressible and that silences, historical and otherwise, can be rich with meaning.

When in 1952 Yamamoto ultimately was offered a Stanford fellowship, she chose to reject it. For Yamamoto, who once printed on her Compton Jr. College notebook "STANFORD OR BUST," this decision was clearly a weighty and significant one. "I guess it was like the cliché about coming to a crossroads and choosing one road over the other," she later reflected ("MELUS Interview" 77). The road Yamamoto did not take is one that surely would have led her to a more direct engagement with the literary establishment, and it likely also would have led her to a fuller career as a professional writer, something that she would never quite consider herself because of her sparse production over the course of her fifty years of writing ("Writing" 59). But it seems Yamamoto knew that a path guided by the teachings of the likes of Winters—so unconscious in his allegiance with the dominant culture—was not for her. Instead, she would take a far different road, leaving Southern California later that year for a Staten Island commune to join

Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement where she would live, for the next several years, a life dedicated to, in her words, "voluntary poverty, non-violence, and love of the land" ("Writing" 67). She would continue to write, however, and her body of work, though small, would remain staunchly independent from mainstream American literary culture. And too, she would remain dedicated to exploring in her work the kind of silences she experienced in her own life and that informed her writing and her understanding of history even before her introduction to Yvor Winters or to the deceptively taciturn Babo.

In the same essay where Yamamoto recalls her disillusionment with Winter's reading of *Benito Cereno*, she also remembers another important event of her early days as a writer that helps to illuminate her sense of the complex role of silence in histories of the marginalized. The essay, "A Fire in Fontana," explores Yamamoto's memory of and her personal intersection with the history of black Los Angeles. Written in 1985, the memoir is prompted by her recollection of the Watts Riots twenty years prior, but, for Yamamoto, the memory of Watts burning evokes the memory of still another fire of

twenty years earlier. This "fire in Fontana" was a 1945 blaze that left an African American family of four dead in fulfillment of threats made against them for moving into nearly all-white Fontana. Labeled by police a "fire of unknown origin," despite the evidence of coal oil doused on the house, and neglected by the major media, this fire soon faded from public memory. By 1965, Yamamoto too had long forgotten the fire, despite her brief meeting only days before the fire with the soon-to-be-murdered father. But in the raging fires of Watts, Yamamoto saw the legacy of this forgotten moment made visible. Writing about it in her brief memoir, Yamamoto reclaims this event of Los Angeles's lost history and chides herself and her city for what she calls "something forgotten that should have been remembered" ("Fire" 154).

The tale of the fire in Fontana is one Yamamoto encountered soon after her release from internment in Poston. Upon her return to Los Angeles in 1945, Yamamoto's first job, which she would hold for three years, was as a writer for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, one of the city's three black weeklies. She was hired, she notes, as part of *Tribune* Editor Almena Lomax's efforts to broaden their audience with the return of a Japanese American community following World War II. Although

Yamamoto spent much of her time doing re-writes of stories published in more established papers, and Lomax's hopes of an intercultural readership and community never quite developed, her experience there was nevertheless a transformative one. "I felt something happening to me," she writes about her time at the paper (154). What exactly it was that was happening, what it was that "was unsettling [her] innards" she was not yet fully aware, but her later recollection of the time suggests that the fire in Fontana had a lasting affect upon the young writer's vision of history (154).

It was a day in late 1945 when a "nice looking man with a mustache" entered *The Tribune's* offices in the Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue where he was greeted by Yamamoto and proceeded "urgently [to tell] a disturbing story" (154). The man was O'Day Short and his urgent story was of the threats made against his family for attempting to integrate all-white Randall Street in the San Bernadino County town of Fontana (Bass 135). Short was desperate to get his story publicized in the hope that it might forestall the threatened violence, and so he was "making the rounds of the three Negro newspapers in town to enlist their assistance" ("Fire" 153). Much to Yamamoto's later regret, the assistance Short received

from her and the *Tribune* was minimal. When the novice journalist was forced to write the story herself because Lomax—who otherwise would have handled it—was unavailable, she composed it, she later lamented, as a “calm, impartial story, using ‘alleged’ and ‘claimed’ and other cautious journalese” (154). She chose to write in the conventional journalistic language of objectivity, but she knew it was really a way of distancing herself from the story and even casting doubt upon it. “Anyone noticing the story about the unwanted family in Fontana would have taken it with a grain of salt,” she admits (154). And she would soon regret her careful choice of words and her reluctance to speak more freely in print for within days of her meeting with Short the tragic news arrived: the house had been doused with coal oil and torched, and O’Day Short, along with his wife Helen and children Carol Ann and Barry, were all killed.

As much as Yamamoto’s “Fire in Fontana” is intended to remember the forgotten fire that killed the Short family, it also serves as an indictment of her own failure to speak more forcefully at the time on their behalf. “I should have been an evangelist at Seventh and Broadway, shouting out the name of the Short family and their predicament in Fontana. But I had been . . .

handicapped . . . helpless," she writes (155).

Characteristically, Yamamoto does not identify the source of this "handicap"; she does not explain what it is that caused her to submit to the silence of her "impartial" story, what force rendered her helpless to speak out more courageously. But her life prior to her time at the *Tribune* gives ample material for speculation about the origins of what here functions for her as a verbal "handicap." Certainly, one might assume—as have most Yamamoto critics—that her experience as a Nisei in Southern California during the time of the Alien Land Laws and internment as well as her life as a young woman in a patriarchal household that restricted women's voices contributes to the general pervasiveness of silence and reticence as theme and rhetorical strategy in her work. Perhaps, then, it was the weight of her history, the lessons she learned about the danger of speech as a Nisei woman in Southern California or in the Poston prison that rendered her, in this case, too reticent at a crucial moment. But whatever was the source of her failure here, it had a significant impact upon her as an individual and as a writer; as she explains of that period in her life, "some kind of transformation did take place, the effects of which are with me still" (150). Thus, I argue that it

is no coincidence that Yamamoto begins to produce her serious fiction shortly after leaving the *Tribune* in 1948, for the writer of these stories is no longer the young journalist who was paralyzed into silence. She continues to be absorbed by the complex silences of individuals and the silences of history, but she, as author, is not "handicapped" by these silences. Rather, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, when she was publishing most of her major works, she had become a master at the art of expressing repressed experiences through her use of what scholar King-Kok Cheung has called the "articulate silences" of her work. These are powerful and suggestive silences, and often, like Babo's silence that she so well understood, they veil private or public rebellions against oppression and an unjust structure of society.

II. Unseen Earthquakes and Histories in Haiku

That Yamamoto's experience at the *Tribune* informs the fiction she produced in the years to follow is most evident in her little discussed short story "Wilshire Bus." Like "A Fire in Fontana" and so much of Yamamoto's work, "Wilshire Bus" is a story located at Los Angeles's

racial crossroads. In this case, Yamamoto's 1950 tale tells of a bus ride down Wilshire Boulevard, a ride that begins "somewhere near the heart of downtown Los Angeles . . . [and] goes straight out to the edge of the Pacific" ("Wilshire" 34). It is a ride that the protagonist, Esther Kuroiwa, makes routinely during the three-month period that her husband, Buro, is recovering in a soldier's hospital from an injury received during the recently-ended war. And it is an experience that Esther generally enjoys, for it gives her an opportunity to chat with the diverse group of Angelinos who ride the bus, most of whom she finds to be amiable seat companions. On one memorable occasion, however, such surface interracial friendliness is exploded by a display of overt racism that deeply disturbs Esther and prompts her to reflect upon the racism to which she too has been subjected to in the recent past.

The perpetrator of this racist act is a drunk, white man, "handsome in a red-faced way [and] graying," who enters the bus and begins immediately to talk loudly to nobody in particular, offering unsolicited opinions about such topics as the high cost of the bus or the private life of a well-known local athlete (35). His comments, though not encouraged by the other riders, appear

harmless enough until he detects the disapproval of a woman of apparent Chinese descent who is sitting next to Esther. In response to the woman's look of displeasure, the man promptly unleashes a flood of racist insults, mimicry, and taunts "to go back to China where you can be coolies working in your bare feet in the rice fields" (36). The incident is an awkward and uncomfortable one for many on the bus, but nobody takes any action to stop the man. One man subtly displayed his disapproval by shaking his head as the drunk man speaks, and after the man finally exits the bus, "clumsily" states that all (white) Americans do not share his views, and that some, like him, believe in a "melting pot of sort" (37). As for Esther, however, she remains completely silent.

Although Esther counts herself among those "properly annoyed with the speaker" and tells herself she is sorry for the woman and her husband, she detaches herself from the incident as it occurs (36). She "pretend[ed] to look out the window" while the drunk man spoke, and then, even after he departed, she "avoided looking at them" (37). It is a rather craven response—inaction at a time that called for action—and, like Yamamoto's failure to stand up for the Short family, Esther soon regrets her inaction. Her regret, however, is not precipitated by

further tragedy. Rather, it comes simply as she contemplates the scene and realizes that, again reminiscent of Yamamoto's Fontana episode, she has committed "a grave sin of omission" (34).

Esther's "sin of omission" is rooted in her own recent history as a Japanese American during WWII. Specifically, her detached response mirrors that which she witnessed from other Southern California Asian American communities as the Japanese rapidly emerged as the object of racial scorn following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. As Esther listens unemotionally to the verbal assault leveled upon the woman sitting beside her, what "bobbled in her memory" is an image of an "elderly Oriental man" that she saw soon after returning from internment. She remembers the button he wore that said simply but boldly, "I AM KOREAN" (36). And she remembers also that "I AM CHINESE" buttons were reportedly common throughout the region. So now, as she witnessed a display of prejudice against a different Asian nationality, she bitterly "wished for an "I AM JAPANESE" button. Even as Esther acknowledges that such "fine distinctions" are likely irrelevant to the drunk racist, she momentarily gloated "over the fact that the drunken man had specified the Chinese as the unwanted." Suggestively, she notes

that his "exclusion order" was targeted only at them (36).

Esther's sense of distance from and difference to the Chinese couple lasts only the length of the bus ride. Moments after exiting and heading for her husband's hospital, she is struck by the significance of the racism she just witnessed and its relevance to her own life in the past and the present. Despite her efforts to distance herself from the scene, it nevertheless precipitates a sudden onrush of emotion, causing her to break "into sobs that she could not control" as she enters the soldier's hospital (37). Through the unjust assault upon the unoffending Chinese couple, Esther momentarily re-experiences something of the trauma of being uprooted and interned. And in the drunken white man's expressed racism, Esther too recognizes that the force that disrupted her past remains present and dangerous. The narrator explains:

Her saving detachment was gone and she was filled once again in her life with the infuriatingly helpless, insidiously sickening sensation of there being in the world nothing solid she could put her finger on, nothing solid she could come to grips

with, nothing solid she could sink her teeth into,
nothing solid. (37)

Thus, through the bus incident, Esther realizes that the life she is living in Los Angeles remains, even after the end of the war, radically unstable. In the racism that suddenly surfaces on the Wilshire bus, Esther sees also the racism that led to internment. Such irrational hatred, she realizes, can re-surface at any moment. It can appear without warning and, like an earthquake, devastate her ostensibly stable life, leaving it in ruins.

Yet, all that Esther experiences in "Wilshire Bus," all of the trauma she re-lives and all of the disturbing knowledge she gains, remains, even at the end of the story, unexpressed by her. The narrator reveals to the reader the depth of Esther's experience, but Esther is herself unable to express it. She arrives at her husband's hospital room in tears but is unable or unwilling to find the words to explain their meaning. Buro, her husband, is also complicit in her silence, for he is quick to assume that her sadness is simply a sign that she longs for his presence. "What's the matter? You've been missing me a whole lot, huh?" he asks (38). Esther, however, does not correct Buro's

misinterpretation. She allows Buro to believe that her tears are merely the product of love and loneliness—a wife missing her absent husband: “She [dried] her eyes, sniffled and nodded and bravely smiled and answered him with the question, yes, weren’t women silly” (38). Thus, Esther lets the lie stand, even as she, along with the reader, knows that his romantic interpretation of her tears fails to even begin to acknowledge the reality of her suffering.

As is often the case with Yamamoto’s use of silence, the reasons behind Esther’s unwillingness to speak here are not made explicit in the story, leaving the reader to speculate among her various possible motivations. One possibility is that Esther chooses not to express her pain as an act of self-sacrifice, seeking to spare her physically injured husband from the emotional wounds she experienced in internment, an experience he may have largely or even entirely avoided by joining the military. Another is that Esther does not believe her husband is capable of understanding her pain—perhaps again, because he has not experienced internment or, more likely still, because he does not take women’s suffering seriously, an idea that is suggested in the story’s ironic ending where the depth of Esther’s emotional experiences are

trivialized in the words "weren't women silly?" And finally, one may read Esther's silence as on some level a product of her Japanese cultural heritage. Although the story provides little information about Esther's upbringing, Yamamoto describes elsewhere the influence of the concepts "enryo" and "gaman" in Japanese traditions. These are guidelines for social behavior and etiquette; "enryo" encourages deference, reserve, and reticence, while "gaman" calls for the internalizing and repressing of emotion, especially anger (Cheung *Articulate* 32). Certainly, there is evidence of both patterns of behavior in Esther's silence and inaction, just as there is in Yamamoto's writing.

Whatever cultural or personal force precipitates Esther's silence in "Wilshire Bus," her speechlessness on the bus recalls yet another incident Yamamoto experienced while working for the *Tribune*. Like the scene described in Esther's story, this too was a racial confrontation on a bus. Here, Yamamoto is the passenger on a trolley bus with an African American driver who got into "some kind of disagreement" with a white driver of another bus, leading, in the end, to the white driver berating him as "a black bastard" (155). Unlike the fictional Esther, Yamamoto does not attempt to emotionally escape from the

scene, and she has no doubt that her allegiance is with the black bus driver in the dispute. "My stomach was queasy with anxiety," she says about witnessing the white driver's display of racism. Still, she does not speak or act on the black driver's behalf. She, like Esther, experiences an internal earthquake of emotion and rage but shows no signs of it to those around her. She represses her anger, and she too feels an "infuriating helplessness" that comes from the sense that her words, if she were to speak up, would be powerless to stop the situation: "I wanted to yell out the window at the other driver, but what could I have said? I thought of reporting him to management, but what could I have said?" (155).

By the standards of the day, what Yamamoto witnesses on the bus appears to have been a rather subdued display of racism, and indeed, the black driver responded to it by simply re-entering his bus and driving away. Certainly, this is not an event of the magnitude of the fire in Fontana. But for Yamamoto the words cut deeply, re-infecting old, unattended wounds received via Fontana and Poston. In fact, this proved to be the breaking point for Yamamoto at the *Tribune*. She could take no more of the racism and the pain she was routinely exposed to as a

Tribune reporter, whether covering an incident like the fire in Fontana or simply "[toting] up the number of lynchings across the country" for a weekly story (152). Thus, she resigned "less than two weeks later," offering as her reason "some excuse about planning to go back to school" when in fact what she was really doing was retreating from the pain she was exposed to there and her own repressed trauma it brought back to the surface (156). Yet, it would be less than two years after leaving the paper that Yamamoto would transform her pain and her failure to speak into powerful fiction. Indeed, through "Wilshire Bus" and through the expression of Esther's repressed experience, Yamamoto transforms also something of her own "infuriatingly helpless" silence into speech.

A year after writing "Wilshire Bus," Yamamoto published another story detailing an unseen emotional earthquake. The story, which caught Winters's attention for its "serious and moving situation," tells of both a literal and metaphorical earthquake (Winters, "Letters" 6-7). Set in a rural, agricultural area of Southern California, perhaps the Redondo Beach area of Yamamoto's youth, the tale describes the 1933 earthquake, the first major quake of the region's modern era, which rocked Long

Beach and the surrounding area, killed over a hundred people, and caused millions of dollars in damage. The literal earthquake, however, provides only the background to a more personal tale of an unsettling era in the life of a young Japanese American girl and her family.

One of Yamamoto's most admired and most often anthologized stories, "Yoneko's Earthquake" uses a narrative perspective that is closely connected to the young protagonist, Yoneko. The tale is related as it is perceived by Yoneko, a technique that, as critics King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi have noted, effectively "masks" or "veils" much of the domestic drama and marital strife that makes for the story's central, though "buried," plot (Cheung, *Articulate* 42-46; Yogi 150-156). Only ten years old at the time of the earthquake, Yoneko is able to see external signs of the conflict between her parents, but her understanding of it is limited. Her primary concerns are elsewhere, for she lives in a little girl's mental world, absorbed with competing against and teasing her younger brother Seigo and fascinated by the kindly and handsome Marpo, a Filipino hired hand who works for Yoneko's father, Mr. Hosoume. To be sure, Yoneko experiences her own youthful suffering in the story, but it is the "parallel plot" of her mother's much deeper

trauma that the story powerfully communicates through Yoneko's unseeing eyes (Cheung, *Articulate* 42).

It is through the character of Marpo and through the event of the earthquake that the story's parallel plots intersect. For Yoneko, Marpo is the object of her schoolgirl's crush. Yoneko adores the twenty-seven year-old with the "breathtaking smile like white gold," so she incessantly assails him with questions and, along with Seigo, becomes his "great listening audience" (47). Over time and "fragment by fragment," Yoneko learns of what to her are Marpo's many fascinating accomplishments and great versatility: "there was not only Marpo the Christian and Marpo the best hired man, but Marpo the athlete, Marpo the musician . . . Marpo the artist, and Marpo the radio technician" (48). Most influential for Yoneko, however, is Marpo the Christian. Through his presence and influence, she becomes a quick convert to Christianity, believing all that he preaches without seeking further proof or support. She becomes to him "an ideal apostle, adoring Jesus, desiring Heaven and fearing Hell" (49). The narrator adds: "To shake such faith, there would have been required a most monstrous upheaval of some sort," and of course, in the destructive 1933

quake "it might be said that this is just what happened" (50).

The earthquake deals a devastating blow to the Hosoume household and family. Their house was shaken violently, and Mrs. Hosoume, Seigo, and Yoneko were forced to flee to the fields to take shelter for several days while the area experienced aftershocks and they remained in fear that the house might collapse. For Yoneko, these were days of "constant terror" that brought a sudden doubt to her newfound faith in God. For she prayed, flattered, and entreated God to end the violence, but it was to no avail. The earth continued to shake, and Yoneko "shivered with each new quiver," deciding, ultimately, that "God was either powerless, callous, downright cruel, or nonexistent" (51). The catastrophe finally came to an end, but Yoneko could not, like the others, take solace in the view that the destruction could have been worse, that they were lucky. To Yoneko, now rejecting God, the others were mere "dreamers who refused to see things as they really were" (51).

Told from the child's point of view, "Yoneko's Earthquake" foregrounds the charmingly innocent Yoneko's loss of faith. Through her uncomprehending observations of the days and months following the earthquake, however,

we see through subtle suggestions that there are far greater aftershocks for the Hosoume family. For Mr. Hosoume, the immediate effect of the earthquake is severe physical injury. Mr. Hosoume was on the road when the earthquake struck, returning from a trip to get fertilizer, and he is struck by a falling wire. He is nearly killed and badly debilitated by electrocution, fated thereafter to live his life "weakly," tormented by "splitting headaches and sudden dizzy spells" (50). But the impact of the earthquake for Mr. Hosoume and his wife goes beyond the physical, for during the earthquake—while Mr. Hosoume is absent—and in the days to follow his debilitating return, Mrs. Hosoume begins an affair with Marpo that precipitates what ultimately proves to be the story's most dramatic cataclysm, its "most monstrous upheaval." It is an aftershock of the earthquake that, for Mrs. Hosoume especially, exceeds the trauma of the earthquake itself.

How and when Mr. Hosoume learns of the affair is not clear. In fact, the story never offers any direct statement about the affair, for Yoneko cannot draw such inferences about her parents' complicated adult world. And yet through Yoneko's innocent observations, the evidence is apparent. She witnesses her mother coming

home "breathless" from the fields and is given by her a secret ring to hide from her father. She sees also the growing tension between her parents, her father's abrasive language and his first ever act of physical violence towards her mother, a hard slap in the face. She relates the sudden and unexplained departure of Marpo who "left without saying goodbye" to her (54). And finally, she describes the family's secret trip to the hospital for what is described to Yoneko as "some necessary astringent treatment" administered to her mother but which took many hours and left Mrs. Hosoume "obviously in pain" both physically and emotionally (54).

Yoneko certainly does not understand in any rational way what is apparent to the careful reader—that her mother has been forced by her father to abort the child Marpo fathered. Yet Yoneko does appear to experience this traumatic loss on an unconscious level, for the day's emotional toil on her is conveyed through her response to another incident that occurs on the trip to the hospital. This event, Mr. Hosoume's striking of a "beautiful collie" on the road, serves for Yoneko as a surrogate tragedy, though lesser and thus more endurable than the loss of her would-be sibling with which she is not prepared to cope or comprehend (54). In fact, the death

of the collie is described in ways that resonate with the abortion, for the dog experiences a swift but violent death coming from the sudden force of the car, causing the car to "jerk with the impact" (54). Yoneko is shaken by the scene and "want[s] suddenly to vomit" when she looks to see the collie "lying very still at the side of the road," evidentially dead from the impact (54).

In contrast, however, is Mr. Hosoume's role in and reaction to the accident, and this too parallels the abortion and the events precipitating it. The dog's death is a direct result of Mr. Hosoume's aggressive and ruthless response to the difficult predicament his wife's affair has put him in. Just as Mr. Hosoume drives "very fast" to the hospital, he too rushes forward in arranging the abortion of a fetus that Mrs. Hosoume appears to want to keep. That in the process he runs over a dog is of no consequence to him; after he hits the dog, he does not even look back to see what has become of his victim. Likewise, Mrs. Hosoume—along with the fetus she carries—is a victim of Mr. Hosoume's ruthlessness. Like the literally crushed Collie, Mrs. Hosoume is figuratively trampled by Mr. Hosoume. In her case, it is her newfound agency and happiness that Mr. Hosoume obliterates. As much as Mrs. Hosoume's affair is a betrayal of her

husband, it marks for her a brief moment of pleasure and power in an otherwise unhappy and empty life. Mrs. Hosoume's affair is her attempt to "grasp for some bits of beauty in [her] desperation" (McDonald and Newman 138). Thus, the fetus she carries is the product and symbol of this "beauty" of her self-empowerment. Forced upon her by her husband, the abortion then marks the end of her temporary control over her own life.

Thus, when Yoneko views the "beautiful collie" sprawled dead on the side of the road, she sees also something of her mother's hidden story of trauma. But even this is only a glimpse; it is only briefly visible. Yoneko looks for the dog's remains on the trip home just hours later, but there is no evidence of it: "Yoneko looked up and down the stretch of road but the dog was nowhere to be seen" (54). The dog has seemingly vanished, all evidence of its existence and its tragic end mysteriously erased. Like Mrs. Hosoume's affair and the fetus it produced, the dog has become part of a silent, unacknowledged era in the Hosoume family history. It is part of a history never to be spoken of, a past that Yoneko has been instructed to deny and repress. "Tell no one," Yoneko is told by her father, "absolutely no one" (54). Never quite understanding what the secret is that

she has been asked to keep but still having felt too much of its trauma, Yoneko "readily assented" to her father's command, thus committing to repression and silence (54).

The most dramatic and explosive confrontation between silence and speech in Yamamoto's work appears in her 1949 story "Seventeen Syllables." Like "Yoneko's Earthquake," this tale is set in a Southern California farming community of the 1920s or early 1930s, and it also relates a domestic disturbance in the life of a Japanese American family as seen through a child's point of view. The two stories in fact share so much in common that filmmaker Emiko Omori combined them into one narrative in her 1991 film adaptation *Hot Summer Winds*. And yet, there is an important difference between the two victimized women of the tales. Mrs. Hosoume attempts to find some pleasure in her life through a secret affair in "Yoneko's Earthquake," while Tome Hayashi of "Seventeen Syllables" seeks her fulfillment elsewhere. An aspiring haiku writer, Mrs. Hayashi seeks the freedom of self-expression through writing. But this path too proves to be fraught with danger and destruction.

As in "Yoneko's Earthquake," "Seventeen Syllables" presents parallel stories of a mother and daughter, though they are again tales of a significantly different

gravity. Here the teenage daughter, Rosie, has her first kiss and with it the blossoming of her first feelings of romance. Her mother's story too is described initially as a "blossoming," for she has taken to writing haiku, a pursuit that renews and re-energizes a life that is otherwise consumed with mundane activities like cleaning, cooking, washing, and picking tomatoes (9). But Mrs. Hayashi's life as a poet is short-lived, "perhaps three months at most" (9). It meets with a sudden—and violent—death, the effect of which is devastating for Mrs. Hayashi and, for Rosie, ruins the thrill of her first moments of passion (9).

The death of the poet in "Seventeen Syllables" is another product of marital conflict. In fact, it is portrayed as a kind of spousal murder. The murder victim in this case is not Mrs. Hayashi exactly, but rather her second self, her identity as a writer. With even a separate name, the pseudonym Ume Hanazono, Hayashi's writerly self is indeed a distinct identity. Ume Hanazono, the narrator explains, "came to life after the dinner dishes were done," and she possesses different characteristics than the hard-working and attentive wife and mother Mrs. Hayashi (9). Ume Hanazono, rather, is a poet lost in her own thoughts "scribbling with pencil on

scratch paper" (9). To Rosie in fact she seemed a "muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to" (9).

For a while, the narrator explains, "Rosie and her father lived . . . with two women, her mother and Ume Hanazono," but such a co-existence cannot be sustained (9). The signs of a coming catastrophe are evident from the poet's first appearances. Even when Ume Hanazono emerges only within the tightly constrained time after "the dishes were done" and all of Mrs. Hayashi's daily duties were complete, her presence still had "some repercussion on the household routine" (9). Mr Hayashi, for example, was left to "resort to solitaire" in place of their former nightly game of "flower cards," and when company came over, the group would inevitably "split in two," with the poets, Ume Hanazono of course among them, detaching themselves for an intimate discussion of haiku.

The situation becomes explosive when the poet makes a sudden and unexpected appearance during the work day (9). Although Mrs. Hayashi does not set out to discount household convention here, the incident is nevertheless a consequence of the ever-increasing presence and power of her poetic self. Having become an "extravagant contributor" to the weekly haiku section of the *Mainichi*

Shimbun, a Japanese language newspaper, she is surprisingly visited one Wednesday afternoon by the paper's haiku editor who has come to deliver a prize she won for taking first place in a contest. Thrilled with the prize and flattered by the editor's visit, Mrs. Hayashi abruptly leaves the field where she was picking tomatoes alongside her husband and daughter to entertain the kindly editor. For Mr. Hayashi, however, the editor's visit and Mrs. Hayashi's departure is an unacceptable disruption of his wife's duties. It is an invasion of Ume Hanazono into the work life of the Hayashi family, a territory where she is not welcome. First reacting only with an angry silence, when his wife fails to return to the fields at his prompting, Mr. Hayashi explodes, letting out "an incredible noise, exactly like the cork of a bottle popping" and then seizing from the house her newly received prize—a *Hiroshige* painting—for an elaborate destruction (17). With an axe, he obliterates the picture "glass and all," only to then char the remains in a kerosene fire to ensure, the narrator explains, that his "act of cremation was irrevocable" (17).

Upon witnessing her father's destruction from a distance, Rosie fearfully wonders "What had become of her

mother?" (18) What she finds in the house is Mrs. Hayashi physically unharmed and "very calm," but her appearance belies the reality of her injury (18). Ume Hanazono, the public representation of Mrs. Hayashi's inner self, has been slaughtered with the *Hiroshige*, her demise equally "irrevocable." Yet, something of the inner voice that her poetry had cultivated still remains. For when Rosie approaches her mother, Mrs. Hayashi tells her a story in the polished voice of a poet. "The story was told perfectly," the narrator notes, "with neither groping for words nor untoward passion" (19). And the tale she tells is the revelation of her mostly deeply held secret, a story that she has previously kept from both husband and daughter. Speaking to her daughter who does not want to hear, Mrs. Hayashi tells of her life in Japan, her pregnancy when unmarried at eighteen, her family's shame, and her desperate act of coming to America for an arranged marriage with Rosie's father that she commits to only as "an alternative to suicide" (18). It is a powerful tale, and for the just-blossoming "Rosie," it is a troubling legacy that momentarily "levels her life, her world to the very ground" (18). But for Mrs. Hayashi, it is a story that must be told, and through her brief life as a haiku writer, she has managed to break her silence.

The significance of haiku as the vehicle for Mrs. Hayashi's brief artistic flowering and ultimate self-expression is underscored by the story's title "Seventeen Syllables." As Mrs. Hayashi explains to her daughter in the story's opening, haiku is defined by the challenge of its structural restrictions and limitations. A haiku, she explains, is "a poem in which she must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables only" (8). As such, the form functions as an effective metaphor for the conflict between silence and speech that Mrs. Hayashi's tale embodies. Indeed, her chosen form of expression mirrors the severe limits and restrictions of her life as a repressed wife and as a budding writer trying to find a voice within that context. Additionally, the Japanese origins of the form further link Mrs. Hayashi's tragic tale to the particular history with which it most resonates: that of Issei "picture brides" who came, often with little or no choice, to the U.S. for arranged marriages. Although Yamamoto has not acknowledged as much, it is perhaps in this sense that she calls this fictional tale "her mother's story" (Cheung, "Introduction ix).

As scholar Zenobia Baxter Mistri has noted, "Seventeen Syllables" itself may be seen as a "symbolic haiku" (195-202). Indeed, it is a story that packs in great depth and complex meanings while practicing an extreme economy with words. In a similar sense, such a haiku aesthetic can be applied also to Yamamoto's complete body of work, her literary canon, for it also is marked by her lack of words. Yet, as in haiku, Yamamoto's few powerful works resonate with much more that is left unsaid or indirectly implied. Within the silences of her work, we find something of the trauma of internment that she acknowledges "she still carries around," of the horror of a racism that "burnt [her] black in a certain fire," and of the oppression and repression of Issei women who, like her mother, "didn't fulfill [their] potential" because of the conditions of their lives and their pasts ("Carry" 69; "Fire" 150; "Cheung Interview" 86). Yamamoto communicates these hidden histories through her subtle and layered haiku-like narratives. And she displays throughout her work an extraordinary skill for expressing repressed histories, for breaking silences even as she incorporates silences into her work and portrays some of the forces that produce them. It is a skill that she mastered as a writer in the years

following her confinement at Poston and following too her return to Los Angeles and her exposure at the *Tribune* to the city's and to the nation's persisting racisms. And, as I have shown here, it is a skill that she mastered before Yvor Winters misguidedly declared her "childishly" unaware of the past and "stuck in history."

CONCLUSION

In his Vietnam War memoir *Dispatches* (1968), a work that is as much about the difficulties of writing about the war as it is an account of the war, Michael Herr points to the limitations of conventional histories. Herr asserts that the official, scholarly, and popular accounts of the war, with "all of [their] books and articles and white papers, all [their] talk and . . . miles of film," failed to provide a useful history. Theirs was the "straight history" of the war, he explains, a history that provides a profusion of information and an abundance of background but wherein "something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked" (49). So, Herr continues, "when that background started sliding forward not a single life was saved by the information" (49). What the straight history failed to account for Herr dubs the "secret history." These were the stories "hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire," and these were stories that "not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring . . . out" (50).

This study has explored the works of writers who, like Herr, strive to illuminate what they perceive and

present as secret histories, in this case, of course, not of Vietnam but of Los Angeles. I have analyzed them here as a way to offer my own version of a secret history of Los Angeles, one concerned with the complex dynamics of identity during a crucial era of cultural change in the city. Absent or erased from the "straight history" of the city, this secret history is given shape through works of literature, and it is in that sense that this study is a literary and cultural history of Los Angeles.

Choosing the texts, the voices, and the "sites of memory" that I use here to construct my own version of Los Angeles's cultural past was a challenging process, and it was one that evolved over time. In fact, this project first emerged from a Master's thesis I wrote that ended with a discussion F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, an important Los Angeles novel, and yet it is one that does not figure centrally in my project as it now stands. Still, it was this novel that directed me to look more closely into the cultural and racial dynamics of Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s. Even as it is set in Hollywood, *The Last Tycoon* also looks beyond that world to glimpse another Los Angeles, one not often portrayed in Hollywood novels, nor pictured in films of the time.

Fitzgerald's novel offers an intriguing hint of the multiculturalism taking shape nearby but outside of Hollywood, though the novel is concerned with those changes only insofar as they impact a white, Hollywood filmmaker. In *The Last Tycoon*, it is protagonist Monroe Stahr whose worldview is challenged and changed when he briefly steps outside the isolated Hollywood context that dominates the novel. Stahr is fascinated and disturbed when, on a Malibu beach, he meets an African American fisherman who expresses his disinterest in Hollywood films. Despite the brevity of the meeting, the man's few words precipitate a dramatic change in Stahr's conception of Hollywood aesthetics and audience. Having lived a sheltered Hollywood existence that has left him out of touch with American multiculturalism, Stahr is introduced through this brief encounter to the broader cultural context of not only Los Angeles but of the U.S. in general. Soon after this scene, he begins to reconsider the kinds of stories his films should tell, and he is even prompted to contemplate something of a new aesthetic, or, rather, an aesthetic that is new to him. Much later in the novel, Stahr still thinks back to the "Negro in the sand," as he imagines he hears within

himself a "new music" that is "powerful and strange and strong," which he "liked but did not understand" (95).

As much as I was fascinated by Fitzgerald's protagonist's sudden awareness—gained when he ventures outside of Hollywood—of different audiences and of different stories that need to be told, Fitzgerald's novel, while it points toward these possibilities, does not itself do that work. Thus, my project began as a search for literature that directly engages in the kind of project that Stahr only begins to imagine. Although I first turned to the other famous Hollywood novels, such as Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* (1935), and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), I soon found that there was another rich set of lesser-known Los Angeles narratives that were not obsessed with the exclusive territory of Hollywood, nor were they absorbed with the idea of Los Angeles's "unreality" that dominates so many Hollywood fictions. In works by the Los Angeles writers that I have studied here, another Los Angeles is represented and imagined, one that is rooted in the material city and its history, one that makes visible such sites as Bunker Hill, Terminal Island, Watts, San Pedro, and the still-at-the-time rural Redondo Beach, and

one that is seen from the vantage points of the individuals who populated these often-invisible places.

From the collective perspective of the writers I study here, a very different history of the city emerges than the one constructed through the Hollywood fictions that have long dominated literary histories of Los Angeles. And it remains my contention that the works of Fante, Himes, Mosley, Dunne, Ellroy, and Yamamoto provide powerful insight into the crucial issues of American identity formation that make Los Angeles itself a key site for studies of American culture. That I am not alone in viewing Los Angeles as crucial site for understanding contemporary American culture and identity is suggested by the recent relocation of the offices of *American Quarterly* to Los Angeles, and the journal's decision to dedicate its most recent volume (September, 2004) to studies that situate Los Angeles at the center of their discussions of, as the introduction proclaims, "the key issues that define contemporary American studies" (Villa and Sánchez 499). The title of this volume of *American Quarterly* touts Los Angeles as representative of "the future of urban cultures."

If Los Angeles does represent the future, we would be wise to look deeply into its past to try to understand

the forces that have shaped it. That is what I have strived to do here by examining works of literature that illuminate the complexities of identity amidst the shifting cultural landscape of 1930s and 1940s Los Angeles. My hope is that such a literary history is a useful history, not one that, like the worst of what Herr calls "straight history," attempts futilely to provide definitive answers about the past, but rather, one that asks important questions about the ways that past has been shaped and interpreted, and about what has been left out and what has been recovered. Perhaps such questions can be of use when, in this city that has been the site of three major race riots in just over half a century, that background again starts "sliding forward" (Herr 49).

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