

Memory, History and the Representation of Urban Space in Post-war American Literature

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Abstract

This thesis investigates urban development and locational memory in New York and Los Angeles during the mid to late twentieth century, as represented both materially in the landscape of the city and textually in fiction and memoir. I begin my study in Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles, where paved gardens and concretised river beds lie beneath the gridded urban landscape which hides the past and dislocates memory from what is visible in urban space.

Next, through my analysis of Marshall Berman's reflections on his childhood in the Bronx, I paint a picture of New York during the 1950s, during which the proposals of urban planner and master builder Robert Moses were put to work, dismantling many of the city's pre-existing urban structures and its institutional memory. Subsequently I move to Los Angeles in the late 1960s, analysing two works of fiction by Joan Didion and Alison Lurie. In this chapter I explore California's spatial and temporal indeterminacy. From imagined to remembered space, I next examine Didion's family memoirs and personal essays in addition to D. J. Waldie's reminiscences. I find that despite attempts to cultivate one's personal history in textual form, a sense of loss is what is long remembered and hard to control. My thesis comes to a close with L. J. Davis and Paula Fox in the early 1970s when there was a new form of change afoot in the built environment in the form of gentrification.

In the fragmented, automobile-dominated Los Angeles; in the dislocated Bronx; in California where the past seems to melt into air; and in brownstone Brooklyn, I show that the experience of what Sigmund Freud deems "the uncanny" is rife, appearing in the cracks between the absent and the present, the invisible and the visible, memory and history. The fissures and gaps in the narratives of each author reflect the various processes and consequences of the imposition of twentieth-century modernism in particular urban spaces during this period.

CONTENTS

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Contents	3
List of Archives and Repositories Consulted	4
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	8
Chapter 1. “A Spectacular Form of Amnesia”: <i>The Big Sleep, Farewell, My Lovely</i> and <i>The High Window</i>	29
Chapter 2. Marshall Berman’s Memory Palace: Home and Absence in the Modern City	69
Chapter 3. Imagining California: <i>The Nowhere City</i> and <i>Play It As It Lays</i>	113
Chapter 4. Remembering California: <i>Where I Was From, Slouching Towards</i> <i>Bethlehem</i> and <i>Holy Land</i>	144
Chapter 5. Pentimenti and Palimpsests: <i>A Meaningful Life</i> and 1970s Brooklyn Brownstoners	185
Conclusion	223
Works Cited	246

List of Archives and Repositories Consulted

1. Robert Moses Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
2. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
3. Morris Dickstein Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
4. Alfred Kazin Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
5. Marshall Berman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.
6. Dan Carpenter Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.
7. James Felt Papers, Dept. of Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.
8. Harlem Neighborhoods Association Records, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.
9. Christiane C. Collins collection, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.
10. Bronx County Historical Society, New York, NY.
11. Hofstra University Library, Special Collections Department, Oral History Collections, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.
12. Municipal Arts Society, Greenacre Reference Library and MAS Archives, New York, NY.
13. Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library, New York, NY.
14. Back to the City Collection, Brooklyn Historical Society, New York, NY.
15. H. Dickson McKenna Collection, Brooklyn Historical Society, New York, NY.
16. Brooklyn Neighborhood Renewal and Development Collection, Brooklyn Historical Society, New York, NY.

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A significant amount of archival reading for this thesis was conducted in the New York Public Library, where I read through the myriad (to say the least) papers in the Robert Moses collection, which proved invaluable, in addition to several other collections. At Columbia University I made use of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in particular, and I am indebted to Thai Jones for dexterously guiding me through the Marshall Berman papers, to Ben Serby for his painstaking work on their itemisation and collation, and to Shellie Sclan for giving me her blessing to look through the collection at a very early stage. I also spent a lot of time gathering material in both the Brooklyn Collection at the Brooklyn Public Library and at the Brooklyn Historical Society, and I am grateful to both institutions for their help. On this side of the pond I have to acknowledge the British Library, which has provided a second academic home for me for the past six and a half years. Without this reflective space in which to study, think, research, write, dream, I don't know how I could possibly have either started or finished this thesis.

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Introduction

When I began my PhD research in 2011 I was 28 years old. Since then I have moved out of one house and into another, moved my grandmother out of her flat and into my family's house, packed up and sold the house my grandparents lived in after they had passed away within a few months of one another, lived in New York for three months during which I moved from student halls in Midtown to a friend's studio apartment in Chelsea to my then-boyfriend's flat in Elmhurst, Queens, moved back home, then a year later moved in with said boyfriend elsewhere in Elmhurst, Queens on a temporary (90-day) basis before moving back home again. Every move, whether I was moving myself or other people, deepened my sense of anxiety about home. What did it mean to me, that word? After my family and I had moved out of the house we had lived in for more than twenty years, I wrote in my diary that I had a feeling of discombobulation: "as though you have come home and someone has rearranged all the furniture in your absence. Someone, some interloper, has been in your house. Which is funny because right now we are in someone else's house, and someone else is in our house. We are the interlopers." I don't think I ever really stopped seeing that house as "our house," fancying myself a Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, saying goodbye to her dear Norland: "when shall I cease to regret you, when learn to feel at home elsewhere?" (I did in fact scrawl her farewell on the inside door of the boiler cupboard before we left the house) (21). I felt an echo of this anxiety each time I had to separate myself from familiar places with which I had long-term, mostly familial, ties, and attempt to feel at home in a new a-historical location. Home became, for me, a place that was no longer tethered.

When I first put together my proposal for this PhD my working title was "Narrative representations of American urban space 1920-1960" and there was no mention of home, memory or indeed history. I determined to discuss how the American city is 'read' and

interpreted; the particular way in which narrative form and voice have shaped the representation of city narratives during this period. I asked rhetorically what role the city might play in the construction of identity and self-narrative. As part of my initial research, I read Walter Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle," in which I discovered the importance of specific houses to his plan to construct a sense of his past through the use of a series of signs on a map. Each of these signs would represent the various "houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives [...] the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night [...] the sites of prestigious cafes whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips" (5). Susan Sontag writes that Benjamin is not attempting to "recover his past, but to understand it: to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures" (13).

Benjamin's spatially-contextualised images of specific locations form an autobiographical montage of these condensed "spatial forms." Inspired by this approach, which touched on my fixation with familiar houses, throughout this thesis I look at the meaningful spaces – houses, apartments, rooms – in each of my chosen primary texts, examining their summative effect in terms of what they tell me about the representation of memory and history in the urban spaces in which they appear. In these meaningful spaces, the past is concentrated and imagined materially. As Benjamin puts it in his *Arcades* project, in such places the past is able to "become space" (393 emphasis added).

Benjamin prompted me to consider what role *my* city might have played in the construction of my own self-narrative. I reduced this complex mass of urban connections down to my more immediate neighbourhood, and, in the midst of my domestic uprooting, this question gave me pause. How could I perceive the reality of my own home, what it had meant to me, the way it enabled me to memorialise, amidst the fog of the quickly deepening nostalgia that now surrounded it? I was reminded of something the author Bernard Malamud wrote about his old home in Brooklyn, a flat above a grocery store where he had grown up.

When he married he moved away from the borough, and he writes that: “Years went by. But that was another country” (Note in Letter from HA to RG). I considered the way that my house, my street, my neighbourhood, became a place so far away it was as though it had retreated, been entirely uprooted and moved to a different land I could no longer access, and thought about how this experience might feed into my academic pursuits. I remembered that towards the end of 2011 I had read an interview with the actor Kenneth Branagh, who had talked about going home to Belfast, specifically back to the red-brick terrace on Mount Collier Road that he and his family had left when he was nine years old. But when he got there, so goes the article, Branagh discovered that his home, and indeed everything surrounding that house, no longer existed: “It was a sort of wasteland, surrounded by a fence. There was the little park opposite that I remember walking to school through, but the school I went to – nothing there” (“Kenneth Branagh: The King of Comedy”). This was, I thought at the time, my nightmare scenario, and part of the reason I myself never went back to my old neighbourhood, let alone my old house, circumnavigating entire sections of my borough just to avoid doing so. I feared that I would return and find nothing to return to, as though the locus for my formative years had been erased from both the actual physical landscape and that of my memory.

In *The Culture of Cities* (1938) Lewis Mumford writes that: “In the city, time becomes visible” (4). In this thesis, I apply Mumford’s maxim regarding the visibility of time in the city to Los Angeles, Sacramento and New York, from 1939 up to the early 1970s. I examine the ways in which they each speak to the complexities involved in visualising and retaining a tangible connection to the past. I have chosen to examine these cities in particular because they each tell a story about the evolution of the built environment during the just-about-pre but mostly-postwar period. New York is the American metropolis that most typifies ideas surrounding modernity, progress, density, and shared space, and also on the

surface seems invested in its own sense of heritage and lineage. In Greater Los Angeles and Sacramento, which provide a counterpoint to New York, I found a seemingly oppositional space against which to juxtapose its East Coast counterpart – its spatial composition, form and landscape is antithetical to that of New York, and ostensibly looks to the future rather than its place in history. My research for each of these spaces focuses on the processes by which memory unfolds within a spatial framework and asks what happens when that framework is dismantled.

Throughout my life I have grown increasingly frustrated with the failure of my total recall, keeping a diary for many years as an attempted corrective. Home has always been important to me for this reason: it became a place where I could store as many tangible remnants of my history as possible for the posterity my unconscious mind was incapable of preserving. Before leaving my old house for the last time, I itemised every part of it that had given me continued access to my past. The coloured lines drawn on the wall in my sister's bedroom to measure her increasing height and mine; the stained glass panel made by my mum in our front door, the door that I was always nervous about opening after the time we had been burgled and the chain had been left on from the inside, which I discovered first when I arrived home from school; the loose bannister in the staircase that had been broken at one of my sister's house parties; the passion fruit that grew along the fence in the back garden that I would pick every summer; the small wooden cross that marks the place in the garden where our beloved 16-year-old dog was buried.

In the midst of this outpouring of sentimentality for bricks and mortar, I read Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1983) and felt an immediate connection to him. Berman's text formed a bookend of sorts with the Branagh interview in that both clarified for me exactly where my focus should lie with regard to my thesis. It was only much later that I understood this strange magnetic pull I felt towards a book that was about (in part) growing

up in the South Bronx. When Berman wrote about memories of his childhood in terms of a kind of locational mourning (“As I saw one of the loveliest of these buildings being wrecked for the road, I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life” (295)), it struck me that I had felt much the same way, and that this feeling was not just a result of the move, but an accumulation of everything that had been lost during the months before and after it.

I started to collect authors who seemed to me to be trying to articulate the same experience – of a lost home, misplacement of memory, vulnerable spaces which did and did not remember or memorialise according to one’s expectations. In particular, after discovering *All That is Solid*, I initially sought those who had communicated an interest in these same subjects as they became manifest in New York. Later, after reading Raymond Chandler’s heartsick letters and Joan Didion’s elegiac, mournful *Where I Was From* (2003), I decided to expand both my time-frame and my map to Los Angeles and Sacramento, California. In the case of Chandler’s letters, what I found particularly interesting was his simultaneous attraction to, and repulsion from, L.A. – the place he made his home for almost five decades. This is also in evidence in the way he describes his domestic arrangements after his wife’s death in 1955: “Perhaps when I get away from this house and all its memories I can settle down to do some writing. And then again I may just be homesick and to be homesick without a home is rather poignant” (“Letter to Roger Machell” 206). The need to be home even if it is not really a home anymore, or perhaps never was, is also a characteristic of Philip Marlowe, his most famous character. Marlowe’s apartment, detailed most memorably in *The Big Sleep* (1939) when it is invaded by the toxic presence of Carmen Sternwood, is the one place where the detective can store his sense of self in the little items which he packs away. Marlowe’s constant sense of alienation from a landscape with which he is also intensely intimate says as much about him, and about the man who created him, as it does about the city.

Originally, I had started my preliminary research at the beginning of the twentieth century, wishing at first to include the intensely nostalgic *The Age of Innocence* (1920) by Edith Wharton in addition to two novels by Sinclair Lewis (one of the preeminent novelists of this period) that are concerned with the modern city. These two Lewis novels were *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). When I read both, I began to see that Zenith, the centre of urban gravity in *Babbitt* and a proxy for New York, and Gopher Prairie of *Main Street*, could both guide the direction of my thesis. Reading *Main Street* in particular made me think about space, specifically what different types of space signify to us, and how this connects to our feelings about space which is familiar, space which becomes unfamiliar, and space which represents our own sense of the past as made tangibly manifest in our surroundings.

Ultimately, I chose to start my time-frame in the years leading up to World War II, going further into the mid- to late-twentieth century rather than its opening act. I knew that after the War, thanks to Berman's descriptions of the postwar Bronx, there was a movement towards the renewal and reconfiguration of urban spaces, at least in New York, and it was that very tangible example of change in the built environment of the city that interested me. In her obituary of the Pulitzer-prize-winning architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, Suzanne Stephens, deputy editor of *Architectural Record*, notes that when Huxtable was first writing for the *New York Times* as their architecture critic during the "boom years after World War II," it was in the context of "the banality of commercial Modernism, the demolition of historic buildings, and the destruction of the urban fabric [which] dominated the formation of the man-made environment" (26). In my initial research into urban renewal, I discovered that both the construction of the modern city and anxieties regarding its preservation and renewal had pre-dated this period, but in the years afterwards the debate regarding the cycle of construction and destruction grew louder. This continued into the 1970s, by which time urban renewal was indelibly ingrained in the built environment and architectural attitudes of both

Los Angeles and New York, but had also proved increasingly controversial, with the thinking of urban planner Robert Moses for example (on whom more is to come) largely discredited.

This thesis offers an interconnected series of close readings of works of fiction coupled with my interpretations of archival, autobiographical, and theoretical texts that will cast new light on representations of the past in Los Angeles and New York. I have examined specific neighbourhoods, boroughs and regions so as to consider the larger patterns that they each reveal. I analyse the ways in which my chosen texts represent these urban spaces (and their environs) and their impact on memory. How do these spaces attempt to impose order on the chaos of memory? How do they provide access, in textual and architectural forms, to the past? How does memory and forgetting *work* in my chosen texts? I argue that both memory and forgetting are particularly visible in the compartmentalisation, sub-division and fragmentation of city spaces both internal and external; in the ambivalent binary of oppositions juxtaposed against one another; in the empty or derelict open spaces which speak silently of the past; and in the subtle seeping of one space into another.

In the chosen works of my authors, from the familiar like Chandler, Berman, Didion and Alison Lurie, to the unfamiliar, namely D. J. Waldie, L. J. Davis and Paula Fox, we can find evidence that in the just about pre- but also post-war urban spaces of New York and Los Angeles (and beyond, in the case of the latter) it is possible for history to be both displayed and displaced. I have chosen to focus on these authors because, amongst a huge number of writers contemplating urban space and memory in the postwar decades, their work best reflects and represents the rich ambiguity involved in writing about something so seemingly intangible, with each author layering their own personal histories with these cities into the texts I have selected.

I wanted to examine all of my authors from a novel perspective, as I was aware that in the past they have been read for particular reasons related to the area or genre for which they

are renowned. For example, Chandler as a crime writer, Berman as a commentator on Marxism and modernity, Didion in relation to the New Journalism, and Lurie for her “witty and astute comedies of manners” (Wroe “Young at Heart”). Waldie, Davis, and Fox are not quite so well-known, so they did not carry with them the same weight of expectation. With regard to Chandler, Berman, Didion and Lurie, I did not wish to simply reiterate the expected approach, but rather to consider them in the context of what they have to say about the experiences I mention above. Namely, history, memory, and how both are and are not expressed in the urban and peri-urban spaces about which they write with so much personal authority. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, these are spaces in which each of them have, or have had, a personal stake. Even in cases where I am working on familiar authors or texts (such as Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* or Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”), it has been my intent to read them in a new way in relation to this unusual context, in conversation with sometimes unexpected sources. I draw out parallels between, for example, Didion and Berman (concerning their shared feelings about associating childhood spaces with grief and fragmentation), Chandler and Berman (with regard to the uncanny), and Waldie and Davis (in their ambivalent attitude towards their respective memory palaces).

In addition to this eclectic range of authors, I have studied a variety of materials in order to illuminate the significance of memory and place in their narratives. I draw on a number of different theories and perspectives (including from literary, architectural, historical and psychoanalytic studies, amongst others), and biographical resources, in an attempt to process and articulate the ways in which memory itself is characterised by a simultaneous degree of fluidity and discontinuity. Another aim for this thesis has been to engage with nonfiction in the same way as one would engage with fiction, giving them equal weight in terms of what they are able to tell me about the experience of space and its impact on

memory. In order to engage in this way, I analyse the strategies, images, techniques and conceits of nonfiction texts like *All That is Solid* and *Where I Was From*, in order to assemble a detailed picture of the authors' aspirations for the conclusions drawn by their readers.

Additionally, I draw on a variety of genres from fiction to memoir to cultural commentary, focusing on diverse and original materials, such as unpublished archival papers and personal interviews with people who grew up in New York during the postwar decades. In 2015 I took an unpaid sabbatical from my job in order to spend time in New York and fully immerse myself in the huge amount of archival material that is available there, all of which has proven immensely pertinent and invaluable to my thesis. I was able to spend time at several institutions, either conducting archival research, reading manuscripts in special collections, or speaking with particular librarians, all of which was crucial for my understanding of the city. I conducted research at Columbia University, the New York Public Library, the Municipal Arts Society, the Bronx County Historical Society, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Central Brooklyn Public Library, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Hofstra University. The writing I was able to do because of the archival material, and indeed the people I had access to, has made an indelible mark on the depth of my work.

Towards the end of my time in the city that year I discovered that a collection of papers belonging to Marshall Berman was due to be transferred to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University. I was fortunate in that I had spoken several times with the librarian in charge of itemising these papers (Thai Jones, who is both a lecturer at the university and the Herbert H. Lehman Curator for U.S. History there) during the course of my stay, and so when the papers had finally arrived at Columbia he kindly let me know and I made plans to return in order to go through them. I did so with the additional help and permission of Berman's wife Shellie Sclan, who I was extremely fortunate to have met and

interviewed. The collection had not at that time been fully sorted and classified, and thus my access to it was unique and privileged. I returned again in 2016 to complete my excavation of the content available. All of this additional material supplements the traditional written narratives, and it is this confluence of different types of source which has fostered I believe a large degree of originality in the research that I present here.

In the title of this thesis, I refer to ‘urban space’. The urban space that I refer to here is that which is occupied by two quintessential modern American cities, Los Angeles and New York, in the mid-twentieth-century. I argue that Los Angeles as a space, despite the fact that it is one of the most cultivated, contrived places on earth, can exhibit pockets of a more ancient natural history in its physical make up, while New York, though it is a most vaunted synecdoche for a historical East Coast, is nevertheless capable of expressing a more manufactured, regurgitated history in its material, architectural form than one might imagine. I also examine three other urban spaces: Lakewood, California, the classic postwar American suburb (technically now a general law city) where the aforementioned Waldie lives; San Francisco, which provides Didion with the setting for some of her greatest and most heart-breaking reporting; and Sacramento, her place of birth and centre of gravity.¹ I have selected these cities, and their offshoots, because they exhibit the modifications imposed upon urban space and illuminate key perceptions about how history is and is not displayed in these spaces as a consequence.

In these cities, the new replaces the old, the familiar is eroded, and traces of time passing seem to have been erased. In its own way, despite the proliferation of sites which speak to the past, I argue that New York can be just as affected a city as Los Angeles when it comes to its narrative of the past, and that Los Angeles can be just as demonstrative as New

¹ The official website dedicated to all things Lakewood explains why it is defined as a general law city: <http://www.lakewoodcity.org/about/default.asp>

York of a secreted sense of history. Most importantly for this thesis I contend that both cities reflect an attempt to extract, control, and suppress the past.

An important note to add here is that in the context of this thesis, ‘urban’ relates to cities (as distinct from rural areas and also, with one exception, from the suburban), but also to types or typographies of space. The types of space that characterise each city are not always defined by boundaries that delineate, for example, the borough from the city proper, and even the fictional from the autobiographical. There is a gravitational pull exerted by cities upon adjacent physical spaces both within and without their jurisdictional and geographical/legally-defined outlines. As Ben Highmore argues, “our real experiences of cities are ‘caught’ in networks of dense metaphorical meanings [...] It is the tangle of physicality and symbolism, the sedimentation of various histories [...] that constitute the urban” (*Cityscapes* 5).

The city is also in theory a tangible representation of our individual immaterial or sensory memories which are specific to place, but in practice the urban landscape does not always reflect back, to our minds, an accurate representation of these memories. The arrangement and navigation of space in the modern city affects what and how we remember. Urbanisation can and will find ways, intentionally or unwittingly, of erasing traces of the past in the city. I explain in this thesis the ways in which living in the modern city can be a fraught experience thanks to its seemingly constant cycle of construction and destruction. As the shape, scale and specifications of the city change, so does our perspective and indeed our material familiarity with it. As our familiarity is eroded, so is our connection to the past as physically located in the city. Despite this the past persists within (and without) its spaces. The repressed can return, and it presents itself spatially. This notion that what has been repressed can re-emerge in various disturbing forms is described by Sigmund Freud as the experience of “the uncanny” (“The Uncanny” 121). The discovery of absences in lieu of an

expected presence, for example, creates a feeling of discontinuity and loss; of rupture. The fissures and gaps in the narratives of both the city and our own sense of the past reflect the processes of urban renewal, slum clearance, displacement and gentrification instituted in the city during the postwar years.

From Chandler's vision of a fraudulent Los Angeles riddled with façades and fronts which attempt to sequester a wilfully-repressed history, to the dilapidated tenement buildings, empty houses and entirely hollowed out neighbourhoods of Berman's ghostly Bronx communities, and the inauthentic, co-opted history of Davis' brownstone Brooklyn dreams, I examine the texts which contend with the material landscape of the city and its relationship with the protagonists' own sense of the past. I do so in order to come to an understanding of the distinction between history and memory, how they are alternately preserved and ignored, and how this manifests itself spatially.

I begin my thesis in the Los Angeles of the late 1930s to early 1940s, examining the city through the prism of three novels by Raymond Chandler: *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and *The High Window* (1942). The standard view of Chandler seems to alternate between two perspectives. The first is the belief that he was tough yet sentimental and an Angelino by nurture if not by nature, whose intimacy with his adoptive city was as entrenched in his character as it was in that of his authorial avatar, Philip Marlowe. The second is that Chandler never took to Los Angeles, and that his novels express a yearning for the green grass of the England in which he spent his formative years.

The latter is a contention upheld by Paul Skenazy, who details the sense of ostracism and alienation in Chandler's work. Chandler's outsider perspective, Skenazy contends, stems from the fact that he was not an L.A. native, but an import, first from Chicago, and then from England. His novels deal therefore with "exile, cultural duality and dislocation" (93).

Chandler saw California as "both a new and an old territory," one rich with a history of exile.

David Wyatt argues that Chandler's England may in fact have only existed in his mind, creating the sense of home being somewhere else, somewhere displaced, that permeates his novels. For Wyatt, Chandler's longing for home manifests itself in his depiction of the perversion of nature in Southern California. For him this longing was a form of nostalgia for what W. H. Auden calls the "Great Good Place" that "Eden-like" nature should provide, which Chandler had known in England and lost in L. A. (409). I agree that nature has been subverted, but that is not to say it has entirely disappeared in the rush to urbanisation. I argue that its ubiquity and ability both to hide and reveal the past proves that nature is still a place of authenticity where the history of Los Angeles lives. The past is never entirely gone; it is always somehow both absent and present.

Chandler articulates a potent sense of both location and dislocation; of the significance of artefacts found within city spaces; and of the multiplicity and fragmentation of his interiors and the uncanny sense of absence which characterises his exteriors. Fundamental to my analysis here is the aforementioned experience of "the uncanny" and Anthony Vidler's exploration of the ways in which this is experienced architecturally. In this chapter I present Los Angeles as a city built on a repressed natural landscape, where there has evidently been a failure to connect the past to the present. In continually pushing back the frontier and re-shaping itself, the city unwittingly leaves traces of its path, written in the land itself. History is not preserved in Los Angeles so much as it is endlessly renewed and reimagined in various alternative forms. Several critical writers prove significant to this chapter and to the other California-centric chapters 3 and 4. Wyatt and his vanished river and paved garden, which determine the way in which space is experienced in Los Angeles (and by extension Southern California as a whole), is complemented by Carey McWilliams' characterisation of this environment as subsequently possessing an "impression of impermanence" (163).

I also refer to Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, which tells us that Los Angeles has no one centre, or, rather, that it is so spatially de-centred that it has many centres, which can be perceived in the form of disparate pockets and cells of activity spread throughout the city. This leads me to Fredric Jameson's notion of an atomistic society made manifest and projected into the space of the urban environment, a concept which I show is given form in Chandler's novels in the fragmentation and subdivision of internal spaces. The sense of material schism found in every building in Chandler's Los Angeles speaks to a certain incoherence in the built environment.

Leo Marx's machine in the paved garden is represented here by the machinations of modernity as built into the landscape in the form of the freeway system, the grid, and the levelling, subdivision, and selling of the land as real estate. External spaces are vast, obscure, uncertain, devouring. Nature, though repressed and built over, finds a way to make itself noticed, cannot be ignored, and pushes back against the encroachments of modernity by sporadically revealing criminal acts and dead bodies. The man-made environment is fragile, short-lived, precarious, and at the mercy of the nature it has trammelled.

Chandler, as the prototypical pre-war Los Angeles writer, takes me to a writer who performs the same role in my eyes for postwar New York: Marshall Berman. Berman examines the material form taken by the past in New York, with a specific focus on the Bronx during the late 1950s and early 1960s and the impact of master builder Robert Moses on the borough. Primarily I focus on evaluating *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1983), while making use on a secondary basis of some of his other publications, such as *On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square* (2006) and *New York Calling: From Blackout to Bloomberg* (2007), in addition to the aforementioned archived material housed at Columbia University and the New York Public Library, and the personal interviews conducted with

Bronx residents. What we remember of the *places* linked to our past, in the form of localised, geographical, at times compartmentalised memory, is the subject at hand here.

In this chapter I consider the way the theme of the uncanny wends its way from Chandler to Berman, manifesting itself both spatially and in terms of the split between memory and history, which recurs here. Through the theories of critics such as Vidler, Maurice Halbwachs and M. Christine Boyer, I further tease out the deeper meaning behind this split as experienced by Berman through his relationship with the Bronx. Chandler and Berman both make use of the familial home as a site or locus of the past. For Chandler the family pile is a place of repressed history and buried crime, whereas for Berman and for Waldie (as we will see in Chapter 4) the old neighbourhood and the childhood home, respectively, are places haunted by memory crises. For my readings of all three authors, *The Art of Memory* (1978) by Frances Yates, in which she describes how memory is strengthened by associating it in the mind with a particular place such as a familiar house (echoing Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle"), is a significant critical resource.

I begin this chapter by demonstrating that the theory of modernity as put in practice by urban planner Robert Moses represents a desire to escape and erase history. It was Moses' wish to impose a sense of control and regulation on the urban landscape. Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* (1974) was indispensable for my understanding of the postwar city presented in this chapter. I will demonstrate that Moses' plans for the Bronx specifically led to huge displacement and the tearing of the fabric of neighbourhoods in the borough that would otherwise have enabled it to maintain a continuous thread from past to present. I will explain that this rupture led to the increased appearance of "the uncanny" and the separation of memory from history. Halbwachs and Boyer prove imperative here in terms of understanding and perceiving this separation. Such distinctions are essential to understanding Berman's own

“inner city,” as he describes it (*All That* 344). For him, it is the passing of time which has become painfully visible, rather than its capacity for preservation.

It is important to note that as soon as I read Berman (and subsequently Caro’s work on Moses), I knew that this would be the foundation for everything else I was to write. This was because he perfectly crystallised in his writing the way that the postwar economic boom, and its concurrent galvanising of the trifecta of urban renewal, slum clearance and highway construction, had very visibly altered conceptions of history as made manifest in the built environment. His ideas regarding the consequences of the application of modernity as a theory to a densely built-up, highly-populated area like Tremont in the Bronx are essential to my work as a whole. Berman demonstrates the ways in which Moses and his modernity remade urban space, unpicked its cohesive tapestry, and imbued the landscape with unfamiliarity and disorientation. I apply Berman’s thoughts on this to conceptions of memory and the creation of the symbolic city. I also consider how his conceptualisation of modernity works for the other writers under discussion. In the California chapters for example, evidence of the postwar boom feeding into and enabling ideas behind modernity (such as a sense that the rationalisation of the land was a necessity, and its movement away from the agrarian towards the urban) can be found in the construction of the freeway (see Chandler’s novels and Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* (1970)) and the new suburbs (per D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land* (1996)), and the accelerated development and selling-off of farmland and the erosion of the agrarian way of life (see Didion’s aforementioned *Where I Was From*). In Brooklyn meanwhile the brownstoners, depicted by Paula Fox and L. J. Davis, in seeking the original, authentic city, instead recreate Moses’ modernist impulses to eradicate history, paving the way for the most damaging expression of urban modernity - gentrification.

In Chapter 3 I examine two novels set in mid-late 1960s Los Angeles. The first is Alison Lurie’s 1965 novel *The Nowhere City*, one of the archetypal pieces of fiction about

L.A., which is either “hate mail or ironic love letter” to the city in which she, a native Chicagoan, spent time as an interloper, furtively gathering material (Fine, *Imagining* 241). David Fine’s depiction of the city’s “spatial disarray” and “temporal confusion” is essential to my structuring of the Lurie section of this chapter, which is divided according to these two central characteristics of Los Angeles (Introduction 12).

Nothing is permanent in this city it seems because it is on a treadmill of constant change, expansion, development. What was future is past almost instantaneously, what was past is quickly ancient history, and ancient history is hard to come by unless you are adept at spotting the signs. In the pockets of what remains of Los Angeles’ pre-urban spaces, occasionally illuminated by accident like a torch light in a dark basement, a different, discarded version of the city can be found. The land, its troublesome history with water and its ability to produce a sudden resurgence of green, is proof that there is history at work in this city, however subterranean, that will outlast the fragile constructions of humans which we find stuck pathetically, and temporarily, into the earth throughout the novel.

In Chapter 3 I also explore Joan Didion’s 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*, in which Maria Wyeth, in complete contradistinction to Berman in Chapter 2, rejects her own personal history and the people associated with it. She tries to repress, curtail and edit her memories, and cannot return to where she grew up even if she wanted to. Didion sets her protagonist at odds with many of the other characters that populate this thesis. Urban historian Norman M. Klein’s concept of the “imago” (traced in his 2008 book, *The History of Forgetting*), which might be understood as the endlessly repeated replica or substitution for an original which no longer exists, is frequently in evidence here, embodied and practised by Maria herself. For her the city’s incoherence and a-temporality is a blessing – she can forget herself and erase her own memories if she tries hard enough. Instead of the intimacy and familiarity of domestic interior space, she chooses the freeway, where she can remain in the present and

blank out painful memories by looking ahead. “Never look back at all” is the California mantra that Maria personifies (Didion, *Where I* 199). But I argue that by submitting herself to the perceived freedom of the freeway (Reyner Banham’s analysis of the California freeway system being extremely helpful here), she is not entirely leaving behind history, but re-living it in terms of her continued journey West, onwards to meet the forever-deferred horizon like the so-called pioneers before her.

In Chapter 4 I examine Didion’s *Where I Was From* (2003), a genealogical work which looks back at California through the prism of the author’s family history, in addition to three texts from her collection of personal essays on things falling apart in California, titled *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). In the latter, Didion writes of generational settlement and exodus in California, and of impermanence and exhaustion in New York. For her, the memory of the “Old California,” (Kakutani 29) like that of Berman’s Bronx, is no longer something tangible, yet though she cannot find it, still she sees it. Through my examination of *Where I Was From*, in addition to “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” (1967), “Notes from a Native Daughter” (1965), and “On Going Home” (1967) (from the aforementioned *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* collection), I will demonstrate that her idea of California is based on two myths: that of the crossing story as romantic pilgrimage, and the notion of the state as America’s Holy Land, a latter-day Eden that is therefore sacrosanct. This way of seeing the land in California gives Didion continuity with herself. But I will establish that as she dismantles these myths, she begins to see that she cannot rely on this particular imago of California to keep her sense of the past safe. The land, the garden, is commodified, franchised, sold. The crossing story leaves blood on the hands of her antecedents.

This chapter closes with a discussion of Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996), the tone of which lies somewhere between nostalgia and creeping anxiety. The importance of the grid system to discussions about the Californian landscape is repeated here,

and I examine the ways in which this system came to be so embedded as an expression of modernity and control over the land. Waldie tries to manage his memories but grief creeps over the borders of his home in Lakewood like the vines that quickly cover the houses on the deserted Mar Vista street in *The Nowhere City*. Of course, because this is California, there is always a buried history at large in the form of the natural landscape on which this microcosmic city was built, replicating the same desire to level and suppress and smooth over the disorder of nature that I report on in preceding chapters. Reading Rem Koolhaas proved helpful here, particularly his distinction between the individual chaos of interiors and the façade of control and uniformity of exteriors.

My final chapter moves to Brooklyn in the early 1970s, where L.J. Davis takes up residence in *A Meaningful Life* (1971). Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* (1970) is used as a secondary resource with which to compare Davis' text. Both authors demonstrate a borough in a state of flux, as represented by the increasing fragility of the domestic lives of their characters. The external world is a dangerous place in both novels, and incrementally encroaches on interior spaces previously considered safe and unchanging. Violence and disintegration begin to make a home inside their lovely brownstone houses, try as the protagonists might to keep the world outside from their doors. One confrontation after another occurs, buildings are evacuated and demolished piecemeal, homes are infiltrated and defiled; everything that stands for history, both personal and public, does not stand upright for long. All of the authors that I discuss in this thesis have experienced family homes becoming subject to external pressures or internal anxieties. The homes in this chapter are shown to be fragile and impermanent. They are not always protective spaces; they can be invaded, break, or crumble.

In this chapter I also make use of Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and Alfred Kazin's memoir, *A Walker in the City* (1951). The area known as Bedford-

Stuyvesant as described by Marshall is, like Berman's old stomping ground, reduced to rubble and, like Kazin's, transformed into something not entirely recognisable. Her own past lies in pieces and she has no way of imprinting or tracing memory here. But in the end she finds that the street is alive with individual experience, as it is in Lake's Brooklyn neighbourhood. Here, memory has found its way out onto the street, where it can continue to be, as Boyer puts it, "plural" and "alive" (67). Suleiman Osman's *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (2011) is a crucial text for this chapter. I also refer to Sharon Zukin and her articulation of the notion of authenticity being seen as an experience that can be cultivated, and of preservation as the notion of architectural space being utilised as a glorified time capsule.

In the end, the key themes with which all of these authors grapple – home, loss, memory and urban space – represent the heart of this thesis, which, at its foundation, is an exploration of changing urban landscapes in twentieth century America, the processes of renewal and destruction in these built environments, and how this impacted on the memories of those who lived in these spaces.

Memory may be the only true conduit into the past, but the *process* of remembering (and indeed of forgetting) is fraught. This process is made more complex when it takes place in the modern city, a place which does not always value, and often undermines or sabotages, the conditions necessary to retain memory. Where can one go in the city for context and explanation; where can one *see* its past made manifest? If we lose our ability to "recollect forgotten experiences and retie them to conscious awareness," argues Boyer in *The City of Collective Memory*, how can we translate our own lived experiences into "meaningful contemporary forms" (28)? "We have only to pass along the waterfront of Manhattan," she writes, taking us from the South Street Seaport to Battery Park (places which may be "both real and imaginary"), to "experience a surprising compositional effect that pulls these diverse

scenes together yet sets one off against the other” (422). Walking through the city, Boyer suggests, enables us to understand it, to link it together and make it seem interconnected, continuous, and cohesive. She asks whether we are able, by travelling through it, navigating its spatial arrangements, and sifting through its detritus (as Walter Benjamin also sets out to do), to “recall, re-examine, and recontextualize” the images of the past which we come across, so that these images “awaken within us a new path to the future?” (29). In this thesis I ask whether, by doing the same, we might instead be able to understand and see a path to the past with greater clarity.

Chapter 1. “A Spectacular Form of Amnesia”: *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The High Window*

“Los Angeles is a city without a past” states Michael Dear, arguing that its perpetual self-effacement and reinvention has disconnected it from its own history (76). The encroachment of urbanisation often necessitates the erasure of traces of the past, with cities paving over signs of their own history in different ways, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis. As we will see in my discussion of Marshall Berman (in Chapter 2), twentieth-century modernity as made manifest in the city stands for the relentlessly new and the abandonment of the past. The urbanised spaces of Los Angeles seem to perfectly exhibit this sense of discontinuity between the past and the present. This disconnection leads to a feeling of absence in the place of an expected presence, as though one thing has surreptitiously replaced another. Sigmund Freud argues in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny” that this feeling marks the return of that which has been removed and/or repressed. In modern urban spaces wherein the past in physical form is continuously rearranged – demolished, rebuilt, reimagined – the sensation of the uncanny is ever-present.

This chapter discusses the uncanny spaces presented in three novels by Raymond Chandler, each set in Los Angeles: *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and *The High Window* (1942). I argue that cities themselves can be uncanny in that they are built upon a repressed or hidden landscape. This is evident in these three texts not only in the relationship between the Sternwood mansion and the family oil fields in *The Big Sleep*, but also in the interiors of places like Arthur Geiger’s house and store and the Fulwider building in the same novel, and the Murdock family residence and the Idle Valley Club in *The High Window*. As I will proceed to show, these spaces also reflect the repressed history of characters such as Carmen Sternwood (in *The Big Sleep*), Philip Marlowe (in all three novels)

and Miss Davis (in *The High Window*), and their “spectacular form[s] of amnesia” (Baudrillard 10).

Despite Chandler’s many depictions of a city apparently set on excising traces of its history, his novels demonstrate that the past can be physically located in those wild or pre-urban spaces of Southern California which have not quite been completely paved over, for example in the oil fields of *The Big Sleep*, and the intermittent glimpses of the ocean in *Farewell, My Lovely*. Such spaces are capable of preserving or signifying remnants of the city’s history. I discuss the encroachment of urbanisation on the natural landscape, looking at how the repression of the city’s past, itself a symptom of its evolution into an urban space, ties in with Freud’s concept of “the uncanny.” To build over the wilderness and deny its existence is to repress the past of the city, which has strange and dangerous consequences.

Paving the Garden

Unlike other great American cities, such as New York with its adjacent harbour, Los Angeles at first possessed no natural or locational advantages, and was merely an isolated tract of land “in the middle of the empty, semi-arid coastal plain” (Fogelson xv). It was not until the late 1800s that Los Angeles became known as “the capital city of an agricultural empire” and it was through its difficult relationship with water and the land that the city and the state of California invented itself (Starr, *Inventing* 13). The seemingly uninhabitable landscape of the whole of Los Angeles and its environs was eventually pummelled into submission, and the garden of America was cultivated and contrived: “super-imposed on this semi-arid land; it is not native” (McWilliams, “Water!” 163).

Before the agricultural village that was Los Angeles could become the biggest city in the West, the problem of properly irrigating the land had to be solved. As Kevin Starr explains, Southern California is “not naturally blessed with water” (*Inventing* 4). Providing

sustainable power through water was eventually introduced through such feats of engineering as the Los Angeles Aqueduct (completed in 1913 by William Mulholland), before which “nearly 65 percent of [California’s] yearly precipitation was either immediately evaporated by the sun or ran uselessly to the sea” (Starr, *Material Dreams* 3). During the early 1900s, the chasm between the available supply of water and the growing population grew ever wider, leading to concerns over a possible water famine in the near future. These fears led to the formation in 1905 of a syndicate of powerful men, who slowly began to buy up land in the San Fernando Valley (the entirety of which touched the watershed of the Los Angeles River), eventually acquiring control of over 108,000 acres of land in the valley. Thanks to some infamously corrupt political dealings, water from the Owens Valley was funnelled straight to Los Angeles, bypassing the Valley itself, destroying the farming community of the Owens Valley and devastating the communities of Gabrielino Indians and Spanish settlers who relied on the river for food, water and transport. Carey McWilliams devotes much of *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* to a discussion of irrigation, providing an excellent report on the whole sordid affair. As D. J. Waldie, to whom I return in Chapter 4, puts it, “Los Angeles is the paradise we’ve ruined and, as a consequence, is now our home” (*Where We Are Now* 15).

The grid system, another method by which this wilderness was controlled, trammelled over the erratic topography of the natural landscape in order to impose a sense of rationality, as James Howard Kunstler contends: “relentlessly straight section lines followed the compass, marching through swamps, across rivers, and over hilltops” (30).² In “L.A.’s Crooked Heart,” Waldie explains that it was Thomas Jefferson who first envisioned the “rational geometry penetrating forests, fording rivers and passing across prairies” which

²The same idea was imposed on New York, as Max Page demonstrates in *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan*, further detailed in [Chapter 2](#).

would leave in its wake a uniform series of townships all the way to the Pacific Ocean. But there are in fact two conflicting grid-systems at work in Los Angeles, the denied co-existence of which adds to the city's spatial duplicity, incongruity and de-centredness. Waldie further clarifies that the "north-south grid" is the manifestation of Jefferson's vision of "filling in the empty places on the blank page of the continent." But in downtown Los Angeles the system is different. These streets do not conform to the American system of 1847; "do not lead to the cardinal points of the compass but to the uncertain spaces in between," because they follow the grid *within* the American grid. This is "another, four Spanish leagues square, that conforms as best it can to the 16th century Laws of the Indies," which required "that the streets and house lots in the cities of New Spain have a 45-degree disorientation from true north and south." Maps and real estate surveys of the 1870s continued to show the grid within the grid, and "House lots and streets continue to replicate its off-kilter orientation," which persisted into the nineteenth century. A ghostly parallel city haunted the new one, and as this new version of the city expanded, the original grid began to look more and more like an aberration. Contemporary maps were re-drawn to show a "corrected" version of the downtown streetscape that aligns it with the national grid, straightening out the skew and manoeuvring Figueroa Street so that it "appears to point due north or sometimes even east." In simultaneously looking at the map and following the streets as they appear before us, Waldie remarks, we feel two separate imagined schemes crossing over each other, and it is this kind of "cartographic lie" that makes it so much harder in Los Angeles "to know where you are." History may wish for us to forget this clash, "but the streets themselves remember."

In *The History of Forgetting*, which traces the use of erasure in conceptions and (re)presentations of history in the culture of Los Angeles, Norman M. Klein notes the many ways in which L.A. has been transformed from a city of open farmland to one of inaccessible, introverted spaces. Instead of being used to build more verdant public spaces like parks, land

was divided into an endless series of backyards, shopping malls and theme parks. Mike Davis explains how during the late 1880s Harrison Gray Otis, the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, allied himself with the largest landowners of the region, the transcontinental railroads, plus a coterie of various “developers, bankers and transport magnates,” all of whom collectively set out to, as he puts it, “sell Los Angeles – as no city had ever been sold” (25). Over the subsequent 25 years there was a huge mass migration of people seeking the panacea of California sunshine and its “open shop,” yet this long boom period, during which the savings of the middle-class were funnelled into “real-estate and oil speculations,” culminated in “crisis and bankruptcy” (36).

In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe’s open office windows let in a breeze which sends “the soot from the oil burners of the hotel next door” across his desk “like tumbleweed drifting across an open lot” (90). Oil is everywhere in the city, keeping it running and alive and making the Sternwoods and their heritage an indelible presence. As we discover, the Sternwood family made their name and their wealth from the land over which the family pile looms. This detail speaks to the reality of the largesse of Los Angeles’ natural resources during the early twentieth century. It was in the 1920s, writes Klein, that the city was “the Saudi Arabia for American oil” (78). The oil strikes of the 1920s opened up the whole of Southern California for business, and it was during this decade that “Los Angeles pumped one-fifth of the world’s oil” (Clark 277). By 1946, 90% of the energy consumed on the Pacific Coast came from oil and natural gas. The city’s relationship with oil, as well as water (the latter further explored in Chapter 3), is a significant component of its history and identity.³

³ This continues even now, as William L. Fox observes when he reports that the “oil basin beneath Los Angeles [...] has produced the La Brea Tar Pits, mere blocks from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where visitors can view prehistoric fossils of animals trapped in asphalt deposits” (172).

As Mike Davis points out: “Los Angeles was first and above all the creature of real-estate capitalism: the culminating speculation, in fact, of the generations of boosters and promoters who had subdivided and sold the West from the Cumberland Gap to the Pacific” (24-25).⁴ The speculation, expansion, annexation, and selling-off of the land goes to the heart of the Los Angeles identity. The subdivision of the land, which had characterised over a hundred years of Southern Californian urban development, is also mimicked architecturally throughout Chandler’s novels. Every dank office in *The Big Sleep*, for example, is “separated from the next; each room in the rooming house from the one next to it; each dwelling from the pavement beyond it” (Jameson, “On Raymond Chandler” 131). Not only are the internal spaces that are depicted in these novels notable for the insalubrious activities which take place privately within, but also for the aura of duplicity that is galvanised by their relentless expansion, demarcation and segmentation of space. In *The High Window*, Idle Valley provides an example of the subdivision of the land into geometrical pieces. As Marlowe drives through the moonlit hills he rounds a curve, beyond which “the whole valley spread out before me. A thousand white houses built up and down the hills, ten thousand lighted windows and the stars hanging down over them politely, not getting too close” (102). This vast open space has been carved up into a sea of right angles. Here even the firmament seems within reach, toeing the rapidly diminishing line between what can and what cannot be developed.

Writing in *The Fall into Eden* in 1986, David Wyatt recalls wistfully that the California in which he grew up “was a beautiful, now vanished garden [...] a place no sooner had than lost” (xv). He contends that the way in which Californians “live in time has everything to do with the history of their experience of space” (xv-xvi). According to Wyatt,

⁴ See Kevin Starr’s *Inventing the Dream* for more on what became known as the Booster Era (1885-1925).

it is not just Californians who are nostalgic for their formerly verdant environment. He describes Chandler, who had lived in England for ten years from the age of seven to seventeen and who subsequently came to Los Angeles in 1912, as a “failed pastoralist, and his work can be read as an elegy for the ‘Good Green Place’ he had known and lost” (161). Chandler lends Marlowe his anxieties about the natural world, which the latter does not always express simply because it obstructs his investigations. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, he describes the now polluted ocean adjacent to Bay City (i.e. Santa Monica), which can now only be perceived very faintly, “as if they had kept this much just to remind people this had once been a clean open beach where the waves came in and the wind blew and you could smell something besides hot fat and cold sweat” (330). Paul Skenazy writes that Chandler’s attitude towards nature often reflects an inherently “proagrarian” mythology (94).

This conception of space is tied up with the idea of the garden – unable to return to this mythological lost idyll, Californians live in a perpetual present where the rise of the city marks an attempt to prove the influence and control of humankind over its environment. For example, during the 1930s city planners decided to cement over the Los Angeles River in order to put an end to a series of disastrous floods, turning the source of the city’s lifeblood into a drainage ditch. Huge concrete troughs running through the city, built to control and direct the Los Angeles River, were built at the expense of the greenbelts and parks imagined by early urban planners. The “longing for a garden,” argues Wyatt, is set against the “determination to confront the world of the machine” (163). The interruption of the industrial world in the utopian ideal of pastoral life is described by Leo Marx as the *Machine in the Garden*. Whereas Marx wrote of the “counterforce” (25) represented by the locomotive, which was “associated with fire, smoke, speed, iron, and noise” (27) appearing suddenly in the woods and “shattering the harmony of the green hollow,” the machine, or the counterforce, in early twentieth-century Los Angeles was the automobile. During the early

decades of the twentieth century, the Southern California freeway system was incrementally superimposed over the increasingly urbanised wilderness.

Where the erosion of nature was deemed necessary in order to assume control over the water supply and irrigation, it was further facilitated by the construction of the freeway system. In 1924 the Mulholland Highway (now Mulholland Drive) opened on the ridgeline of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Hollywood Hills; the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Parker Dam followed in 1936; and the Arroyo Seco Parkway after that in 1940 (the nation's first controlled limited access highway, i.e. freeway). David L. Clark explains that Los Angeles became the first city to fully adopt the car; by the 1930s "80 percent of all local trips were made in automobiles" (272). From the mid-1940s onwards, over the course of more than two decades, freeway construction flourished at the expense not just of the local flora and fauna but also of long-standing local communities.⁵ In East Los Angeles for example, freeway "encroachments," as Gilbert Estrada puts it, "account for 19 percent" of land use (290). In an essay titled "How I Found Los Angeles," Waldie criticises what he refers to as a "regime of speed" and its effects, which can be perceived, he argues, in the city's topographical erasures caused by "the rush to build a more perfect paradise." Such

⁵ As with the location of the various expressways built in New York City, there was a racial component to the construction of the freeway system that should be noted. In *Black and Brown in Los Angeles*, Gaye Theresa Johnson reports that by 1957 "the construction of five freeways [...] had cut through and effectively destroyed the primarily Mexican neighbourhood of Boyle Heights" (320). The disintegration of Boyle Heights ran parallel to the displacement of another Mexican community, that of Chavez Ravine, which was notoriously demolished to make way for Dodger Stadium. Elizabeth Wheeler writes that this was "another chapter in Los Angeles' history of bulldozing as a form of social policy" (43). In the vein of Marshall Berman, Gil Cuadros in "My Aztlan: White Place" recalls his childhood home in City Terrace, another East Los Angeles neighbourhood, which was razed to make way for the expansion of the freeway: "I imagine the house still intact, buried under dirt and asphalt, dust and neglect. Hidden under a modern city, this is my Aztlan, a glimpse of my ancient home, my family" (55). For more on the history of minority displacement in Los Angeles, see also: *Shameful Victory* by John Laslett, "Ghosts in the Growth Machine" by Raúl Homero Villa, "If You Build It, They Will Move" by Gilbert Estrada, and *Making a Better World* by Don Parson.

erases include the “levelling of the multi-ethnic neighborhood of Bunker Hill” and the “channeling of the beds of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers” which made both “nearly invisible.”

Wyatt recounts that if one drives south from Pasadena to Long Beach, “the freeway follows the bed of the Los Angeles River. The river is paved” (xv). In Morrow Mayo’s potted history of the city from the days of its conquest up to the early 1930s, he contends that this kind of excision is entirely in character: “the trees are pulled out by the roots and burned, and the ashes are scattered. In a few more years – as already in many places – the sagebrush and tumbleweed will conceal the scars from the eyes of tourists. The Angel City is covering her trail” (244). If it is true that, in California, “every family has its paved garden,” Chandler’s novels indicate that the denial or removal of such gardens has created its own enduring ghosts (Wyatt xv-xvi). The green has melted into the grey of smog and high rise, the private orchards which littered the landscape making way for a graveyard of roots and stumps. Throughout the three novels presented here, Chandler articulates the many ways in which Los Angeles is symbolic of a kind of subverted Eden.

The Tyranny of Nature

David Wyatt writes that despite the apparent imposition of order in the form of the grid-system and the development and subdivision of the land (subjects I return to later in this thesis in my discussion of Waldie), nature is able to mitigate this domination. Logic and rationality, grafted onto the landscape, are frequently overpowered by such tricks as “the lack of water, the Santa Ana winds” (158). David L. Ulin writes that California “has always been an elemental landscape, where we don’t so much master nature as coexist uneasily with it, waiting for the next fire, flood or earthquake to destabilize our lives” (“Unshakeable Memories”). Joan Didion frequently describes the physical reality of Southern California in

terms of its propensity towards natural disaster. In “Los Angeles Notebook” for example she describes the “malevolent” winds, the “torrential subtropical rain,” the sandstorms, the brush fires (171, 172). There is the perception of a distinct lack of control when it comes to nature and the wilderness in Southern California. Its inhabitants seem not to know how to encourage or restrict its power and are “haunted by a vague and nameless fear of future disaster” which could strike their arid environs at any moment (McWilliams, “Water!” 159). Los Angeles ultimately became a success due to its concentration of control over water, but the knowledge that the garden is built on a flimsy foundation is hard to shake and contributes to the city’s sense of superficiality. All of this could so easily be destroyed. Nothing about Southern California has come about naturally; the entire place seems to have been imported wholesale, giving it an “impression of impermanence” (163).

Nathan Silver contends that the “fundamental task of architecture” is to “protect man from the tyranny of nature” (1). I argue that this task is, in Chandler’s novels, applied to the man-made spaces of Los Angeles and its environs, which have been built to impose order and mitigate the potentially devouring force of the external environment. Yet Chandler frequently draws the reader’s attention to the fragility of these man-made spaces. In *Farewell, My Lovely* the private residence of Lindsay Marriott on Cabrillo Street in Montemar Vista is a liminal space right on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. The name Montemar Vista anticipates the Mar Vista neighbourhood where Katherine and Paul Cattleman reside in Alison Lurie’s *The Nowhere City*, discussed in Chapter 3. Both are places which “Spoil-the-View” (Lurie, *Nowhere* 38). The houses along the street are strung along a cliff edge like precarious jewels on a sparsely populated bracelet, “hanging by their teeth and eyebrows [...] and looking as if a good sneeze would drop them down among the box lunches along the way” (Chandler, *Farewell* 196). David Fine describes luxury homes like this, “perched on (or over) the edge of sheer cliffs” as an example of the inherent “spatial incongruity” that characterises Los

Angeles (Introduction 11). The thin collection of houses presented in *Farewell, My Lovely* is only very tenuously part of its natural environment, clinging with white knuckles to its very edge.

Throughout Chandler's novels it frequently appears as though the natural world is rejecting that which is built over it, like a sick body attempting to expel something undesirable from within. This is an example of the continued defilement of the pre-urban landscape, but also of the way in which this defilement can trigger an equal and opposite reaction from these natural spaces. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, the body of Marriott is found beyond the urban, in a remote canyon in Malibu. In *The Big Sleep* we find the natural world is depicted frequently as a burial site where dead bodies are discarded and then expunged from the earth, the wilderness a space which can both expose and hide certain repressed incidents. For example, the body of Owen Taylor, Carmen Sternwood's old flame, is dragged out of the ocean; the body of Rusty Regan, Vivian Sternwood's husband, is buried out in the Sternwood family oil fields; and the hideaway house outside Realito, situated in the middle of nowhere beyond the orange groves of Pasadena, is where Mona Mars, who was presumed dead or missing, is finally found.

Nature is often presented as Philip Marlowe's foe, impeding his progress in an investigation. The external world, which borders on something primal, is a murky prospect and makes a stark contrast to the rigid geometry of the internal urban spaces of the built world that Marlowe frequents. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, when Marriott and Marlowe take to the car, they leave behind for a short time the streamlined geometric patterns of the grid system in favour of the nonsensical loops and arcs of the vast external landscape sprawl: "For two minutes we figure-eighted back and forth across the face of the mountain" (205). Driving further into the darkness they traverse the foothills which lead to the Purissima Canyon, meeting first a broad paved avenue which soon dwindles into nothing more than a narrow dirt

road the parameters of which are almost obscured by walls of brush. What was once a “realtor’s dream” has turned into “a hangover” (206). They reach at last the seeming limit of the interference of the developers in the form of a white barrier beyond which lies only “darkness and a vague far off sea-sound” (207). Their surroundings are only tangible thanks to the smell of sage and the repeated throb of the crickets. This landscape, from which Marlowe feels so alienated, has made him into “an amputated leg” (210). Hsuan L. Hsy reports that in the work of nineteenth-century novelists such as Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe the wary ambivalence towards the growth of the metropolitan city and its accumulating scale is replicated in the same sense of spatial indeterminacy as expressed here by Chandler. In the built environments of such authors, writes Hsy, we find the obliteration of borders and the proliferation instead of “the modern, open floor plan” (83).

David Farrell Krell in *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing* sees memory as a threshold, or in his case, a “verge,” describing this further as “the very edge, rim, or margin of that bounded space, its utmost limit” (1). To be “on a verge,” he writes, “is to be on the extreme edge of a bluff, cliff, or abrupt descent of any sort.” The verge is therefore “the vertical measure and the horizontal measure, the boundary marker and the greensward within, both spindle of time and stretch of space” (2). To be on this verge is to be on the border between one entity and another, pressing against the limits of the external – to be in a liminal space. In this way, memory can be seen in similar terms as a kind of threshold, a fence surrounding and demarcating the internal self, which begs the question of what it means to travel beyond this threshold, going outside the spaces which have been settled? In Marlowe’s case, travelling beyond any kind of “bounded space” as Krell puts it, causes considerable anxiety.

In *The Big Sleep* Marlowe demonstrates a certain suspicion of the outer-reaches of the borderless external landscape, exhibiting a degree of doubtfulness towards the spatial sprawl

of Los Angeles' non-urban landscape and a preference for the regimented space of the gridded city he prefers to frequent. When he drives into the foothills beyond Realito to find the missing wife of Eddie Mars, the ultimate destination lies "beyond," (129) a word repeated in *The Big Sleep* throughout Chapter 27 and also interestingly in Chapter 1 to describe the seemingly endless interiors of the Sternwood house. Space can be an infinite prospect both inside the built spaces of the city, and outside its perimeters in the primordial landscape of Southern California. It appears to be capable of expanding and contracting according to some will or impetus of its own. The engulfing quality of space is reflected in the enormity of the outside world against which Marlowe attempts to build a defence. Away from the straight lines, drivable blocks and quantifiable distances, he is completely lost, as though his self were somewhere detached from his body out in the amorphous blackness of the brush.

In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe's trips to the hideaway house, the oil fields at the novel's conclusion, and his strange experience outside the Cypress Club, all exhibit a sense of amorphous uncertainty. The Cypress Club is a liminal place "at the far end of the town" where even the moon seems to have misplaced its exact location, losing itself "in the top layers of a beach fog" (93). The Dickensian fog depicted in *The Big Sleep* often renders his surroundings inscrutable and indefinite. The Club appears through the mist like a murky Valhalla, its history of possessing multiple-incarnations (formerly a private summer residence, then a hotel, the club now provides speculative distractions for rich Angelenos), its obscure location behind "a thick grove of wind-twisted Monterey cypresses," its gothic architecture and its sense of "nostalgic decay," all adding to its mystique. The inclement weather further emphasises its obscurity:

The fog dripped from the Monterey cypresses that shadowed off into nothing towards the cliff above the ocean. You could see a scant dozen feet in any direction. I went down the porch steps and drifted off through the trees,

following an indistinct path until I could hear the wash of the surf licking at the fog, low down at the bottom of the cliff. There wasn't a gleam of light anywhere. I could see a dozen trees clearly at one time, another dozen dimly, then nothing at all but the fog. (100)

In an apt reflection of the case itself, Marlowe's attempts to follow a straight line (the linear path which replicates the contemporary urban spatial form, as John R. Stilgoe writes in *Borderland* (152)), build a case, collect the breadcrumbs and assemble evidence, all lead him further and further into darkness and misdirection.

When Marlowe wends his way from the Cypress Club with Vivian Sternwood, the daughter of his client General Sternwood, he passes through the town of Las Olindas in his car in a kind of somnolent state, reaching finally another liminal place, this time on the waterfront of the Del Ray beach club. Here everything seems distant, as though they are retreating even further away from the reality of the city:

I turned the car and slid down a slope with a high bluff on one side, interurban tracks to the right, a low straggle of lights far off beyond the tracks, and then very far off a glitter of pier lights and a haze in the sky over a city. That way the fog was almost gone. (*Big Sleep* 107)

The nebulous lights form a remote constellation, with the fog seeming to lift at an indistinct point. Vivian and Marlowe kiss as the surf curls over itself languorously "like a thought trying to form itself on the edge of consciousness," much like Vivian's omissions which remain unspoken. This description of a thought in a distant inaccessible cave of the mind which cannot quite be reached and disappears as soon as one approaches it, is also rather like memory. The descriptions of the Club's external surroundings, with its fog, its inscrutable visitors with no identifiable features to mark them out, and its detachment from reality, could be applied with equal accuracy to memory itself, which is just as vague, amorphous, and

potentially disturbing. In contrast to this sense of unquantifiable, infinite space, upon returning to the city an abundance of boundaries and borders such as doors, gates and driveways appear. They appear to have returned to the land of compartmentalised space. Or have they in fact exchanged one liminal space for another?

There are many attempts to evade and impose distance from nature's tyranny in the homes of Marlowe's clients. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe visits another Oceanside residence, that of Mr and Mrs Grayle on Astor Drive, where the Pacific can be felt but not seen. The Grayle residence is a fortress which Marlowe has difficulty entering and exiting, losing himself amidst the tall trimmed hedges. Here we find barricades which bar the entrances to the great estates (see also the Sternwood mansion). The "twelve foot walls and wrought iron gates and ornamental hedges" insulate the Grayles from the outside world (247). Such places seem built to maintain a sense of alienation from their surroundings, through the insistence upon separation from nature. Throughout the novel, the distance between various houses and the ocean diminishes its reality to an unidentifiable sound heard across a great divide, which could be anything at all from speeding cars to a breeze coursing through trees.

Later in the novel, upon re-entering the Grayle residence, Marlowe immediately forgets where he is, and after wandering down a thickly carpeted hallway for a while catches sight of the outside world briefly as though suddenly recalling a long-suppressed memory: "We turned a corner and there was more hall. A french window showed a gleam of blue water far off and I remembered almost with a shock that we were near the Pacific Ocean and that this house was on the edge of one of the canyons" (249). When Marlowe visits Montemar Vista to seek out Lindsay Marriott, he is separated from the Vista itself by a flight of concrete steps clambering up the mountain, emphasising his alienation from this unfamiliar world which signifies to him something ironically *unnatural* (he is forced into

being a pedestrian and finds himself almost overwhelmed by the effort). More steps to the Marriott residence increase the sense of detachment from the surrounding environment of the built space, which rather perversely is full of counterfeit signs of the natural, from the “knocker in the shape of a tiger’s head” to the single yellow rose neutralised in a vase, and the cornflower pinned to the lapel of Marriott himself (197). Mr Grayle also sports a signifier of nature on his person, this time in the form of a red carnation. This dead flower, detached from its original environment and purpose, is now merely decorative.⁶

In the next section I further explain the distinction between interiors and exteriors in the three novels, extrapolating what their presentation signifies in terms of how Chandler represents the past.

Interiors and Imagos

The Big Sleep presents a place where much of the natural world has been wrangled into a highly cultivated form. The “paved garden” belonging to the Sternwood family is an example of this overlaying of the urban atop the wilderness (Wyatt xv-xvi). The formerly wild spaces of the pre-urban landscape have been rendered a mere ornament with which to accessorise their home, making it into a kind of synthetic wonderland. Upon visiting the Sternwood compound, Marlowe takes in the immaculate lawn, the spotless garage, and the “decorative” trees trimmed to within an inch of their lives (*Big Sleep* 3). The insistent aura of artificiality about the place is compounded by the fact that the “whole estate looked as though it had been made about ten minutes before I rang the bell,” as though the place is packed and unpacked when needed like a movie set (48). In *The High Window* the residences along Sunset Boulevard have “the air of being brand new,” with this effect undermined by the fact that the

⁶ A situation that finds an echo in *Play It As It Lays*: “‘Actually, Nelson,’ he said then, ‘that lemon is not artificial. That lemon is reconstituted’” (47).

surrounding gardens are “well advanced” (34). Robert E. Park writes that the “geometrical form” that most American cities take is a sign of their inherent artificiality; the whole of Los Angeles for example, “might conceivably be taken apart and put together again, like a house of blocks” (4).

Inside the Sternwood mansion an equally unsettling atmosphere awaits. As Marlowe further investigates the interior it becomes clear that the domestic spaces are as strangely lacking as the exteriors. Its internal spaces are either dilapidated or unused and items of furniture are ornamental rather than functional, making this a rather unhomely or uncanny house. The uncanny was deemed by Freud in his 1919 essay to be a “particular species of the frightening” (“Uncanny” 125). In this essay Freud embarks on an extended etymological journey through the various definitions of the word, one which is replete with several meanings. Beginning with heimlich as “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, dear and intimate, homely,” he traces the word until it transforms into “something removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret” which eventually is exposed (126, 133). From its use to create a sense of warm, enclosed domesticity and the sanctity of private space, heimlich “becomes increasingly ambivalent” (134) until the domestic and familiar becomes the private and withdrawn, a space that conceals more than it reveals – a place from which hidden, unknown horrors may suddenly reveal themselves (unheimlich). Freud asserts that the “uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148). The eerie stillness and stagnancy of the Sternwood mansion, its manicured garden and uninhabited rooms, signify that there is something rotten at its heart – something to hide. Marlowe weaves in and out of the house as though the inside and outside spaces are interchangeable before being introduced to General Sternwood in the greenhouse – a piece of the natural world which is maintained like a domestic space. Many places in Chandler’s

novels possess a certain in-between-ness: interiors can exhibit a sense of the outside, while external spaces can take on the appearance of living rooms. In Marlowe's world, "the human has absorbed the natural and now tries to create the illusion of it" (Wyatt 163).

In the Sternwood greenhouse we find a synthetic indoor wilderness, full of nauseating heat and bad omens. The stalks of the plants, for example, are compared to "the newly washed fingers of dead men" (*Big Sleep* 7). The General, subsisting on brandy and heat, is kept like an exotic flower amidst the orchids which emit a crudely human scent. Not only are the plants which fill this sweltering space as sweetly repugnant as a prostitute's perfume, they are also "abominable," (6) as though brought in from the pages of *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Much like Sternwood in his greenhouse, Marlowe's client in *The High Window*, Mrs Murdock, sits imperiously amidst the dense foliage when he first meets her at her residence. She too has created a space in which the outside and inside worlds have merged: the light is obscured by the "thick bushes" (13) which have been allowed to infiltrate the house and the space is populated by reed patio furniture which would be better placed in the garden. Indeed, Marlowe's exit from the house illustrates how thin the line between the external and internal world of Los Angeles can be: "I went out of her office, shut the door firmly, and walked back along the empty halls through the big sunken funereal living-room and out of the front door. The sun danced on the warm lawn outside" (23). Nature it seems cannot be entirely suppressed; it can be found both within the confines of these internal spaces, and beyond only the thinnest of veneers on the other side of the Murdock walls. It is permitted to thrive in this limited and concentrated form, but it provides a far from pleasant atmosphere.

Just as the exorbitant lushness of the greenhouse serves to emphasise the extremity of the General's decrepitude, so does the surreal inversion of normality with regard to the both the Sternwood and the Murdock houses and gardens serve to highlight their essential

strangeness. The feeling that a once familiar place now seems unfamiliar, that something intangible has been removed and hidden from view, is, again, a sign of the uncanny.

“Crime in the southern California [novel] is ordinarily an act carried out in the *past* and hidden behind a respectable façade in the *present*,” argues Fine (“Nathanael West” 200 emphases added). Much like the way that Los Angeles was carved out of a wild, seemingly uninhabitable place, its urbanisation necessitating the suppression of its agricultural past, behind every door in *The Big Sleep* lies something secret or unsavoury which is repressed. The Sternwood mansion is comprised of a series of partitions, rooms within rooms and suddenly revealed entrances and exits; the Geiger bookstore is a front for a more unsavoury business; Geiger’s house hides a disappearing dead body and some incriminating photographs; the Fulwider Building sets the scene for the murder of Harry Crane at the hand of the obscured Camino; and the Cypress Club finds Vivian Regan frittering away her inheritance at the roulette table. It turns out to be Vivian’s job to keep her family’s secrets behind another such façade, as we later discover, burying the past out in the oil fields where she hopes it cannot be found. In “Raymond Chandler’s City of Lies” Liahna K. Babener contends that the adulteration of the natural landscape on which Los Angeles was built is reflected in the inherent fraudulence of its urban spaces. The “buildings, roadways, and grid patterns have been perversely grafted onto an unreceptive landscape,” she argues, suggesting that the city’s “preoccupation with façade” is an inevitable repercussion of this imposition (110). Every building in *The Big Sleep* is a front full of false walls, hidden doors and secret compartments.

The façades which are so ubiquitous in Chandler’s interiors are comparable to that which Klein refers to as the “*imago*” (13). Klein contends that forgetting is made possible when “one *imago*” – an idealised or inaccurate image – “covers over another.” These *imagos* are “the rumour that seems haunted with memory, so satisfying that it keeps us from looking

beyond it” (4). He compares such imagos to “phantom limbs” – deceptive substitutions for a tangible reality. History is frequently appropriated and cannibalised by the imago.⁷ The internal spaces of *The Big Sleep* are full of such imagos in various guises, all of which replicate their duality and inauthenticity, such as the locked room in the Geiger store, the hidden door through which Eddie Mars emerges surreptitiously at the Cypress Club, and the offices in the Fulwider building which advertise the livelihoods of shysters and crooks masquerading as dentists and detectives.

The “respectable façade” which Fine identifies is made literal throughout *The Big Sleep* in its internal spaces (“Nathanael West” 200). An illustration of this is provided with particular clarity by Mr A.G. Geiger’s store and his home. Geiger’s store, full as it is of novel smut wearing the mask of antiquity, is a space which houses the artificial. It is packed with books which are visible but cannot be touched, while the real merchandise lies hidden behind a false wall. This is a room within a room, reminiscent of the greenhouse within the Sternwood house, with the outside functioning as a screen for the real business which is conducted in the inner sanctum. The advertised purpose of Geiger’s store (the selling of antique books) is displayed on its external front, while its true purpose (the selling of pornographic photography) can be found within the store behind a locked door in a separate room. The view through the windows is obscured by Chinese screens, just as the “oriental junk” and dim lighting curtail the penetration of Marlowe’s gaze (*Big Sleep* 17). Once inside the store itself, Marlowe finds another space comprised of partitions and compartments, just like the Sternwood residence: “At the back there was a grained wood partition with a door in

⁷ This is evident not just here in Chandler’s misleading architectural façades, but also throughout the thesis in, for example, Joan Didion’s fabricated family tales (such as the cracked crab which both did and did not exist depending on who is asked, like a kind of Schrödinger’s crab); the edited memories of Maria Wyeth and D. J. Waldie contained behind false textual walls; and the reconstituted history of Lowell Lake’s brownstone home, his adoption of a history that does not belong to him curdling benign nostalgia into toxic obsession.

the middle of it, shut.” The lone figure in the store, a long-limbed ash blonde with a tentative smile across an easily dismantled façade, is another front, along with the mask she calls a face which slips incrementally with each line of questioning: “Her smile was tentative [...] She smiled bleakly [...] Her smile was now hanging by its teeth and eyebrows and wondering what it would hit when it dropped.” The books in the store are kept in glassed-in shelves, untouchable and unidentifiable, compounding the atmosphere of secrecy and fraudulence. The store front, the glass book cases, the woman installed at the desk, are all false signifiers which speak to another function and identity, while the smut emporium behind the wall provides the real business. In this case, reality sits behind a more palatable screen. The truth is obscured, and fiction is taken for granted as fact. Though Geiger purports to sell *Rare Books and De Luxe Editions*, his products are rather more sordid than his store might wish to advertise. Geiger turns out to be a purveyor of “indescribable filth” masquerading as a bibliophile; his books are wrapped and concealed like illicit cargo (22).

The Randall Place apartment blocks, the Cypress Club and the Fulwider building are further examples of highly compartmentalised internal spaces in *The Big Sleep*. The first of these, which is home to Joe Brody, is punctured by holes, blanks, doorframes and porches. A woman appears from behind a curtain which hangs over a doorway as though emerging from a portal, while Joe is killed in the open space of his front door. This is a liminal, transitional space which is neither quite domestic nor completely public and provides an exit as well as an entrance. These are architectural representations of what Ben Highmore refers to as the “perspective of spatial liminality,” frequently utilised in Chandler’s novels (*Cityscapes* 98). For Fredric Jameson, Chandler paints a fragmentary picture of the American urban experience, one which is characterised by things falling apart. Like Joan Didion in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” Chandler’s focus is the “atomistic nature of the society” which Marlowe moves through (Jameson, “On Raymond” 131). Jameson writes that this

sense of the fragmentary is “projected out onto space itself.” As we see in Chandler’s *High Window*, even a dentist’s office has an “inner door in a wall that cut across the room” through which can be found another office with two “uncurtained” windows (143). Back in *The Big Sleep*, inside the Fulwider Building, an unsavoury residence full of the insidious grime of the city, Marlowe finds a directory within which are listed “[n]umbers with names and numbers without names” (121). This is a place where the anonymous dwell in separate cells, identifiable only by arbitrary numbers, and where “private lives [...] stand side by side like closed monads” (Jameson, “On Raymond” 124). The Belfont Building in *The High Window* is described similarly. It comprises “eight storeys of nothing in particular,” filled with mostly “vacant space” (*High Window* 143). The Fulwider is full of compartments, one leading into the next and the next, with locked doors and unlocked doors and glass frames dividing them up. In *The Big Sleep*, the interiors of the Cypress Club, a club which makes a gesture at grandiosity but plays host to grubby activities and is named rather ironically after a something verdant, natural and pure, are replete with passageways and partitions, inflicting an aura of segregation and detachment: “I checked my hat and coat and waited, listening to music and confused voices behind heavy double doors. They seemed a long way off, and not quite of the same world as the building itself” (93). Two heavies appear from the other side of a door under the staircase to show Marlowe to the office of Eddie Mars. This inner-sanctum possesses an extra “door in the corner that had a time lock on it.” After his interview here with Marlowe, Eddie makes another appearance inside the gambling room through a hidden door in the panelling. Likewise, the Idle Valley Club in *The High Window* is full of signs of dualism and deceptive surfaces, with more locked doors leading into private spaces to be found at the end of more endless corridors lined with possible exits and entries.

Every internal space, every room, serves more than one purpose. They all house both the façade and the reality on the other side. This creates a double, another harbinger of the

uncanny, one which is brought to life when “a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged” (Freud, “Uncanny” 142). This doubling and repetition which manifests itself architecturally throughout Chandler’s novels is symptomatic of a city that is endlessly reinventing and rearranging itself.

The Centre Cannot Hold

Each crime in *The Big Sleep* covers up and necessitates another; every mystery is solved by the discovery of a new mystery. It soon becomes apparent that the Sternwood family’s past crimes are in fact constantly present. When one body is buried in *The Big Sleep*, another is found dead and yet another disappears. Rusty Regan, an absent man, is replaced in the esteem of both the General and Carmen by Marlowe, one who is present. In turn Rusty had been preceded in Carmen’s affections by Arthur Geiger, and before him by Owen Taylor. Before Geiger came along to blackmail the General, Joe Brody was at it too. Invented memories take the place of those wilfully forgotten; a once fertile terrain becomes a wasteland to be turned later into a park, further paving over signifiers of the city’s past. These instances of a city that seems to be permanently dematerialising are symptomatic of its essential intangibility. The past melts into the present so quickly it is as though it never happened. Geiger’s body which appears and disappears and then, later in the narrative, reappears, and the items of furniture which are taken, leaving empty spaces which point to where they were once situated, all speak to a sense of absent presence. Geiger himself even disappears from public consciousness. His death is not mentioned in any of the papers Marlowe reads. During or after every visit Marlowe pays throughout *The Big Sleep*, further bizarre coincidences occur. More blank envelopes are passed around, keys are lost and found, furniture is rearranged, and the body count stacks up: first Rusty and then Geiger, Owen Taylor, Joe Brody, Mona Mars,

Harry Jones, and finally Lash Canino. Bodies arrive and depart, creating gaps in the narrative. Even when the location of Rusty's body is given, the body itself remains unseen, leaving a ghostly blight on any sense of narrative resolution and making the oil fields where he is buried another place of absent presence.

Writing about Fredric Jameson and his analysis of Chandler, Casey Shoop contends that for Jameson the many empty spaces of Chandler's Los Angeles represent an essential absence at the very heart of the city: "What has gone missing for Jameson is history itself [...] History is the missing body around which the investigation centers" (9-10). Fine expands on this when he writes that Los Angeles in particular "embodied the contradiction of being a metropolitan center without itself having a geographically distinguishable center" (Introduction 10). This rather ironic notion that at the centre of Los Angeles is nothing at all, that there is no centre to speak of, is reflected in Edward Soja's declaration that Los Angeles "is everywhere" (*Postmodern Geographies* 222). I further demonstrate this in particular in Chapter 4 which looks in part at Joan Didion's nonfiction. Here we see more evidence of the idea that the centre of a city, its presence, or in this case its absence, defines it. What is missing at the heart of Los Angeles for Didion is the historical context and institutional memory that used to provide a centre of gravity, a thread of continuity. For example, three decades after the publication of *The Big Sleep*, Didion articulates in her essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" the same fears that Jameson writes of regarding the "atomistic nature" of Los Angeles society which manifests spatially in the city's external sprawl and internal fragmentation (Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler" 131). Indeed, Didion, who thinks of history in terms of its manifestation in particular places, uses the same language as Jameson, referring to the "atomization" of the world she sees around her in Southern California ("Slouching" 98). For her, the transience of the young people she interviews, the incompleteness and banality of their language, the absence of temporal structure, and the

general sense of drift and emptiness, all speak to the similar sense of fracture Chandler articulates in spatial and architectural terms throughout the three novels I examine in this chapter. As I have previously demonstrated, throughout Chandler's fiction the polycentric nature of his city is reflected in its internal spaces, which contain multiple cells and points of entry and exit. The partitioned and secret internal spaces serve to further sequester already secluded people inside separate pockets, fragmenting the experience of the urban interior.

Similarly, in the two Los Angeles-based novels I examine in Chapter 3 – Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and Lurie's *The Nowhere City* – this same vision of things falling apart can be found in, respectively, protagonist Maria Wyeth's kaleidoscope narrative rendered incomplete and discontinuous, and the temporal and spatial confusion on display in the alien world around new arrivals Paul and Katherine Cattleman. In Didion's *Where I Was From* it is the selling-off and subdivision of the land coupled with a mythomania that seeks to re-write the past which represents the gradual erosion of an authentic heritage, while in Waldie's *Holy Land* and Didion's "Notes from a Native Daughter" it is the compartmentalisation of interior space which is reflective of the control taken by an unreliable narrator intent upon managing and mitigating the past. All of these texts demonstrate the complexities involved in building a real understanding of the past in Los Angeles and Sacramento in particular, and Southern California more generally. Signs of the past are rendered obscure, hidden, scattered, scrubbed clean or torn down, abandoned to the rear-view mirror of a city intent on moving forward. Likewise in Chandler's work, the way in which Los Angeles both seeks and fails to control the narrative of its past by curtailing and containing it spatially can be seen in his articulation of both its wild external landscape and its built environment. Where the former is frighteningly amorphous if it is not curtailed and cultivated into artificiality, the latter is represented as porous, fragile, unsound, and often duplicitous. As Elana Gomel explains in *Narrative Space and Time* (2014), the memory of the city reflects the memory of the

individual. Both are “riddled by omissions, evasions, and lies” and these narrative gaps create “topographical counterparts: dark spaces, forgotten and forbidden nooks and crannies, underground lairs of the repressed” (180).

Past Tense

In *The Big Sleep*, not only do the interiors reflect the spatial arrangement of the California landscape, but also the mentality of Carmen Sternwood and the way in which she compartmentalises memory. Depravity lurks behind both Carmen’s blank stare and the Geiger store’s fraudulent signage, both guarded by a thin veneer of plausible deniability and suppression. Carmen likewise superimposes false memory over authentic memory, internalising the idea of the fake wall or duplicitous shop front (see also my discussion of Klein’s “imago” (13)), cutting off and segregating certain memories from her conscious mind. Inherently she is mimicking the compartmentalisation of buildings like the Fulwider and Randall Place apartment blocks – these are examples of her “topographical counterparts,” as Gomel articulates (180). Carmen is present in almost every internal space in the novel, appearing in the Sternwood mansion and grounds, the Geiger house, Marlowe’s apartment, and Randall Place where the ringing doorbell announces her chaotic presence like a latter-day Dionysus. This further aligns her psychological partitioning with the city’s polymorphous interiors.

If Carmen represents forgetting, Marlowe always has the facts; he has a mind that usually retains detail and history. Carmen’s insistent inability to retain memory is her most constant feature. When she is found at the Geiger house, semi-conscious next to Geiger’s dead body, she is written as the embodiment of Freud’s proposition that the uncanny can also be galvanised into existence when there is “intellectual uncertainty [...] as to whether something is animate or inanimate, and whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the

living” (“Uncanny” 140-141). Objects such as dolls, waxwork figures, and other automata can inspire a sense of the uncanny, as they possess the signs and semblance of reality without the actuality of it. Carmen, whose blankness and negligible lucidity paint her as more automaton than human, embodies these characteristics and is thus a walking conduit for the uncanny.

It seems to Marlowe that she is “not there in that room at all” as he observes her, upon awakening, sitting like a string-less puppet, immobile and expressionless (*Big Sleep* 25). She is like an uncanny doll, emitting strange disembodied noises and staring blankly: “The hissing noise came tearing out of her mouth as if she had nothing to do with it [...] her lips moved very slowly and carefully, as if they were artificial lips and had to be manipulated with springs” (112). Like the novel’s uncanny spaces, Carmen has suppressed something inside herself. In her case that something is expressed by her forgetful emptiness. When they meet again later in Marlowe’s apartment, she claims to have no memory of the night Marlowe found her at Geiger’s, “persuading herself that she didn’t know” what has happened and creating her own narrative (47). “Remember what? I was sick last night. I was home,” she says (46). Her memory drifts in and out, prompted by Marlowe’s own reminiscences, and is as dilapidated as the Sternwood oil fields, as empty as the family pile. Carmen’s mind is a place of absence in which one false memory or imago endlessly replaces another. The past is forgotten as soon as it occurs, leaving her adrift in the present. The presence of Carmen in Marlowe’s apartment in Chapter 24 is thus a seminal moment.

Marlowe’s apartment is perhaps the most revelatory of all the interiors in *The Big Sleep*. In a discussion of Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality*, in which he presents an analysis of Superman’s “museum of memories” (Eco 5), Ian Buchanan points out that it is “Superman’s mountainous hideaway, the Fortress of Solitude, where the man-of-steel goes when he needs to be alone with his memories and ‘work through’ his Kryptonian otherness”

(Buchanan 24). This fortress is “the one place where Superman can be himself, an alien whose past has been obliterated.” Similarly, Marlowe is often depicted as a man with no discernible past, and very few defining characteristics other than his sardonic turn of phrase and predilection for particular brands of liquor and automobile. Equally, despite possessing an intimate knowledge of the city in which he lives, Marlowe’s ostracism from his surroundings is frequently referred to. When he drives past “lighted windows in big houses in ghostly enormous grounds,” which now seem “remote and inaccessible,” it is clear that he is a true outsider here, always looking across a distance at a light on the horizon like Jay Gatsby (*Big Sleep* 29). He is more comfortable invading spaces under false pretences than being invited into them. Upon discovering Carmen in his bed, it becomes clear that he feels she has somehow defiled something sacred; his privacy, his own fortress of solitude, has been violated.

Carmen’s presence in his room leaves a “stale sweetness” in the air (112), carrying with it the imprint of the city, just as the outline of Carmen’s body can be found impressed upon his bed. He throws her out of the room, and at her departure, opens the windows, allowing the noises of the nocturnal city in and the remains of Carmen’s brief stay, out. Marlowe tears the bed to pieces “savagely” in a burst of violent need to destroy her latent presence (113). His uncharacteristically emotional outburst at her infiltration of his private space suggests that his sense of self is kept aside and maintained in this separate sphere. His very being is predicated on the existence of the threadbare artefacts contained therein:

I didn’t mind what she called me, what anybody called me. But this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old

letters, stuff like that. Nothing. Such as they were they had all my memories. I couldn't stand her in that room any longer. (112)

The books, pictures, and letters are less important than what they represent, and the way in which they define the space in which they exist. Marlowe's apartment becomes a mausoleum for his past thanks to the presence of these few artefacts of memory which have the power to "reconfigure the spaces they inhabit" (West-Pavlov 24). The room in which Marlowe stores each "object of memory" is maintained as though it is an antique itself (Vidler 64).

In *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates explains the history of mnemotechnics, a technique mastered by the ancient Greeks to train their memory. "The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type" (18). A memory is strengthened by associating it in the mind with a particular place, or locus. This has to be "easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like" (22). One must essentially choose a familiar place which can be easily visualised, such as your own home, and then walk around this place in your imagination, making note of various features and items that make each room specific. The memory locus is important because it houses the images, or signifiers, which represent a particular memory, or the things which need to be remembered. Edward S. Casey agrees that memory is undeniably tied to place, which provides a "stabilizing persistence [...] as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability" (186).

Yates continues that the technique works best when one forms one's so-called memory palace "in a deserted and solitary place, for crowds of passing people tend to weaken the impressions. Therefore, the student intent on acquiring a sharp and well-defined set of loci will choose an unfrequented building in which to memorize places" (23). These "deserted and solitary" places and "unfrequented buildings" sound rather similar to Klein's

description of the Los Angeles landscape more generally, that is, an “empty lot where a building once stood” (4). Klein argues that such places are “haunted [...] but empty.” For Yates these empty lots function as repositories for memory in which we may store signifiers of the past (rather like the unoccupied bedroom of Waldie’s father in *Holy Land*), but Klein tells us that these buildings no longer exist for us to use them as repositories for memory. These now-empty lots are nothing more than spaces colonised and consumed by absence. The memory palace is a place-holder for something which is both there and not there. It marks an absent presence.

Yates’ memory storehouse is also similar to Gaston Bachelard’s conception in *The Poetics of Space* of the house, or our first specifically localised notion of home, as a place where one sustains one’s sense of the past. It is in this place that “a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated” (8). As Yates considers in *The Art of Memory*, in Augustine’s *Confessions* the theologian presents memory as a sequence of buildings in which memories are stored inside vast chambers. Memories appear here both in the form of tangible entities that he can recall at will, but also as objects *standing in* for memories – images, sense impressions, affections – place holders which aid him in his quest for the *original* memory. These are his “palaces of memory” where the “treasures [of] innumerable images” are housed which “forgetfulness hath not yet swallowed up and buried” (Yates 60). Casey posits that “memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported” (186). Removal from a place which is most familiar, often what one considers to be one’s home-place, can therefore mean that one is not able to access the mnemonic experience as outlined by Yates. In *Hollow City* Rebecca Solnit writes that, in a changing city (for her it is San Francisco which is most emblematic of transforming urban space), a home long-occupied becomes precious: “For those who spend years in a place, their

own autobiography becomes embedded in it so that the place becomes a text they can read to remember themselves” (138). If home is where the memories are stored, Marlowe’s apartment is where he has chosen to preserve his few associations with the past – seemingly arbitrary talismans like letters, books and chess pieces which must not be disturbed. This is his memory palace.

The items chosen as signifiers of particular memories are both inanimate objects and pieces of iconography. Their function is to reproduce the authentic thing, sentiment or event that they represent, thus helping to jolt and preserve memory. But what happens when it becomes impossible to tell the difference between the signifier and the original memory itself; when the signifier in fact *replaces* the memory completely, rendering the one indistinguishable from the other? The many fronts and partitions of the interiors of *The Big Sleep* are manifestations of such images (or imagos) or signifiers taking the place of real memory; mirages in the urban desert. In *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, Krell also charts the linguistic evolution of the word memory: “The sense of memory was so broad as to encompass both death and love: *he mneme* is remembrance in general but also a record, memorial, or tomb” (2). Is memory a tomb inside which we may bury ourselves in order to *memento mori*? Marlowe it seems is more at home in a tomb than any kind of open, borderless “stretch of space” which Krell posits is its opposite. In *The Big Sleep*, the memory palace performs two roles – that of a vault in which Marlowe can enclose himself with his memorabilia, and a house of possibly counterfeit records.

Marlowe’s job of course is to know the difference between the counterfeit and the authentic. But he has form when it comes to complicity in maintaining the hushing up of past crimes. It seems inevitable therefore that he too is capable of dissembling and redaction. In *The Big Sleep* he asks for the names of the parties involved in the blackmail plot to be suppressed (namely the Sternwoods, who, as his clients, are apparently entitled to their

privacy). In *The High Window*, Miss Merle Davis, Mrs Murdock's assistant, reveals to Marlowe under duress that the late (and original) Mr Murdock died by falling out of a window. The death of this man is something she is, rather understandably, unable to forget, although both Marlowe and Mrs Murdock press her to do so. Marlowe seems to think discussing the event keeps it in the present, as though memory can be erased by the wilful act of silence, while Mrs Murdock has the opposite approach, ironically insisting that memory can be controlled only if we are constantly *reminded* to forget. The advice given to her by Marlowe is: "Forget it. Don't think about it" (169). "People are always telling you to forget unpleasant things," she replies, "But you never do." Telling Miss Davis to forget only serves to provide a constant reminder of a particularly ambivalent memory.

As she begins to recount the events which led to the death of Mr Murdock, she seems to detach herself from her surroundings and from the presence of Marlowe: "There was nothing much in her expression now except that I didn't really think she realized that I was there" (129). Before Merle can fully recall what happened she dashes from the room, hiding herself and her memories behind one of many locked doors through which Marlowe cannot pass. Later she arrives at his home, her manner still suggesting the fixed lethargy of trauma. Like Carmen Sternwood's sporadic fugue states, Merle seems to have been physically struck down by her recollection of the titular high window and exactly what occurred within its frame. In her state of shock she makes a confession but chooses to substitute a new revelation for an old one, confessing to Marlowe that she killed a man who had been blackmailing Mrs Murdock. The doctor who tends to her at Marlowe's behest contends that her current state is in fact a delayed reaction to an old wound, newly opened. It seems that before Mr Murdock 'fell' out of the window, he either attempted to, or succeeded in, molesting her. The doctor believes she is seeking punishment in the present for what she perceives as a fatal transgression in the past; she wants to "expiate some real or imaginary crime" (155).

In “The Uncanny” Freud recounts the occasion he returned (unintentionally, or so he says) so many times to the same insalubrious streets of Genoa’s red-light district that this unfamiliar place became familiar. In repeatedly returning to the ‘scene of the crime’ so to speak, he in fact rendered it an undesirably overfamiliar place. Marlowe’s own repetition compulsion – he returns four times to Geiger’s house, for example, and perpetually re-visits the domestic spaces of the Sternwood mansion – is reminiscent of this experience. Miss Davis seems likewise doomed to repeat the same crime, or think she has, until she has exorcised her unconscious mind and confessed to the original transgression. However, it turns out this memory is as fake as the counterfeit gold coin created by one of the novel’s many villains, Mr Vannier. It is as fake as the narrative spun by Marlowe for the benefit of Miss Davis regarding Vannier’s fake suicide, and as fake as the tale told by Mrs Murdock’s son Leslie regarding his wife’s involvement in the original theft of the rare coin named the Brasher Doubloon – the reason Marlowe was hired by Mrs Murdock in the first place and the lost point of origin of the entire case. It turns out Mrs Murdock is in fact the guilty party with regard to her late husband’s death. Just as the Doubloon is doubled by a fraudulent version of itself, and the photograph which immortalises Mrs Murdock’s act of defenestration has been duplicated for safe-keeping, so is a slightly altered carbon copy of the memory of Miss Davis produced to counter the original.

Marlowe’s cases are full of ambiguities and vagaries, and the attempted assemblage of narrative is often more chaotic than rational. Seemingly arbitrary details are incrementally collated until they form a montage of sorts, or a continuum, expressing the whole case, which is the sum of these seemingly disparate parts. When Marlowe recounts his theory of detection to General Sternwood, he describes the evidence which is most useful but most often ignored as “something looser and vaguer” than what one might expect (151). Along similar lines, Krell posits that recovering a memory can be problematic, as we possess a “constellation of

memories” which we cannot necessarily access through straightforward chronological thoughts in a rational order (20). The movement of recollection is “not a linear movement from starting-point to end-point but a kind of back-and-forth movement from ruling centers to adjacent, contiguous memories.” The constant manoeuvring back and forth and around in circles in time can cause confusion, “scattering fragments of experience in all directions, or uniting them in bizarre concatenations” (21). Such a description of memory recovery can be equated to Marlowe’s detective work and to the fragmented nature of Chandler’s urban spaces. As Barbara Tversky writes in “Remembering Spaces” (2000): “Because of the partial, incomplete, inconsistent, and multimodal nature of spatial memory, cognitive collage may be a more apt metaphor than cognitive map” (370). The collection of evidence can be equated to the assemblage and establishment of past events, retroactively, through the identification and recollection of memory. But in Chandler’s Los Angeles, the assemblage of memory proves difficult due to the many substitutions and false signifiers which seek to take the place of the original and authentic.

By the end of *The Big Sleep*, it seems that Marlowe has fallen prey to the “false memory,” as he describes it, which pervades the novel (147). He articulates his memory as though in a trance, telling a story in a distracted, abstract way. One event leads inexorably to the next and the next like a series of slides projected onto a blank wall:

My mind drifted through waves of false memory, in which I seemed to do the same thing over and over again, go to the same places, meet the same people, say the same words to them, over and over again, and yet each time it seemed real, like something actually happening, and for the first time. (147)

“It was like that, over and over again” he says (148), as though speaking by rote. These endless recurring “waves” of memory wear away all sense of meaning associated with their recollection. By the end of the novel, Marlowe’s memories have been emptied of any kind of

inherent value, their significance drained of meaning until they are nothing but dead synapses which no longer connect to or connote anything at all. When Marlowe recounts the events which occur after his discovery of Mona Mars, he articulates his memory as though it is occurring in the present, and “for the first time.” Like Carmen, he is left living in the present tense (something they both share with Maria Wyeth, as detailed in Chapter 3); the past is nothing more than a ransacked room. Perhaps after all the big sleep is not so much a literal death as it is the death of one’s unadulterated memory, the lack of which keeps one locked in the present, with no access to the past.

Memory Dislocated

Anthony Vidler argues that memory in the modern city experiences “dislocation” (181). This is made literal in the case of the relationship that the Sternwoods have with their oil fields, which provide an example of the suppression of the past made manifest in the external landscape. They live in a house which keeps them at a distance from these fields and thus have physically removed themselves from their own past. Yet the windows of the house look out on this past, providing a constant, but distant, reminder of the place which gave them everything they have. As Fine writes, the Sternwoods are one of several antagonists in Chandler’s fiction who inhabit “respectable facades that insulate and isolate them from the acts they have committed in the flatlands. To live above the city is to live away from past crimes” (“Running Out of Space” 216). When Marlowe gazes beyond the surrounding gardens of the Sternwood mansion to the oil fields which established them, he is looking at the place where the past dwells:

The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and

see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I don't suppose they would want to. (15-16)

At the end of *The Big Sleep* Marlowe finds the preternaturally youthful Carmen outside the Sternwood mansion. She is placed halfway between the railings which surround her home and the wilderness beyond in an in-between, liminal space in which she equivocates between civilization and chaos. Marlowe accompanies her down to the field, which has become a neglected place where the land is littered with debris and the noise of the city recedes into memory. Here, Carmen returns to a somewhat primordial state: "Aged, deteriorated, become animal, and not a nice animal" (156). No longer a fatuous figure, her broken façade reveals a woman near disintegration, her memory as spoiled as the Sternwood oil field. He accompanies her further, down to the old oil wells, driving through the deserted gardens and out of the gates until they reach a "narrow dirt track," (154) an unassuming path to a very dirty history:

The wells were no longer pumping. There was a pile of rusted pipe, a loading platform that sagged at one end, half a dozen empty oil drums lying in a ragged pile. There was the stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight. (155)

Here is where their money was made, bled out of the earth, the remnants of industry strewn about like bloody handprints at a crime scene: "The source of the crime is in the soil, on the land" (Fine, "Running" 217). Having first contaminated the environment, plans are now afoot to turn it into some sort of verdant playground, further paving over signifiers of the city's real history. Aptly, Rusty's body lies buried somewhere in this urban graveyard, murdered at the hands of Carmen in another example of the suppression of a family secret. As Wyatt observes: "Carmen's love lies buried in the sump; the site of the family's success is also the grave of its crimes" (166). The site of the murder is, of course, its most imperative

component, for the family's fortunes were made in the same place which has cemented their corruption. Similarly, in *The High Window*, Leslie Murdock is responsible for the missing doubloon after all, just as he is responsible for the death of Vannier, and just as his mother is the perpetrator of the eight-year-old crime which is the original sin that lies beneath the surface of the novel. As with the Sternwoods, all of the crimes committed within these domestic interiors can be laid at the feet of the Murdock family itself. The "aristocratic 'degeneracy,'" as William Marling puts it, of families like the Sternwoods and the Murdocks, incriminates everyone (115). Fine contends that General Sternwood, while "not himself a criminal, has nonetheless made his fortune by exploiting the oil reserves beneath the city" ("Nathanael West" 200). The oil fields are the city's ultimate confidence trick, a "family secret" writ large. "Family," in this case, takes the form and temperature of an entire state. These reserves from which the family so purposefully distance themselves may be depleted but are still functioning, serving as "reminders of the primeval power bubbling beneath the city's surface" (Bryson 172).

The natural landscape of the oil fields represents the past in *The Big Sleep* – a place which has been plundered, abandoned, and turned into a dumping ground for crimes which must be denied and purposefully forgotten, thus expressing the machinations of history. The Sternwood mansion and its vacant interiors represents a space which has been emptied of memory. As I will also argue later in this thesis, external spaces frequently come to represent the devouring propensities of history in the modern city, while interiors seem better able to reflect the confusion and multiplicity of memory's labyrinthine properties. The distinction between history and memory will be further clarified in my next chapter on Marshall Berman and the Bronx, but it should be noted that in the present chapter the binary relationship has been distinct from its presentation elsewhere. In this chapter the natural world found in the external spaces of the three novels discussed is nebulous and obscure in its uncontrived form,

making such spaces more representative of memory. Internal spaces in the novels meanwhile are rigid, controlled, and manipulative in their attempts to distort their spatial reality, thus are more representative of the historical process as made manifest in the modern city. It is significant therefore that Marlowe does not thrive outdoors, preferring the relative legibility, however misleading, of the interiors which set the scene for his investigations. This level of comfort in a fraudulent world, and his relative vulnerability when placed beyond the frontier of the urban, aligns Marlowe with the modern and thus with what Maurice Halbwachs (to whom I return in my next chapter) would describe as “historical memory” which represents the past “only in a condensed [...] way,” as opposed to “autobiographical memory” which provides “a richer portrait” of the past (52). This is a rather ironic position for a man whose function in life is to force others to remember and acknowledge their past crimes correctly and completely.

With the Sternwoods’ past a place removed from sight, a faraway land that they have turned their backs on, their present becomes a constantly uncanny experience. Vidler writes that the expectation of a presence “which turns out to be haunted by absence instead” seems to operate “as a parable of the dislocation of memory in the modern city” (181). If the past is forcibly detached and removed from the present, this creates a kind of black hole in the present where memory used to be. In this way an absence takes the place of a presence. Vivian repeatedly relies upon her sister’s capacity to empty herself of memory in order to maintain the wall of silence that surrounds her family: “I thought she might even forget it herself, I’ve heard they do forget what happens in those fits. Maybe she has forgotten it” (*Big Sleep* 163). She believes that Carmen has forgotten her crime completely. Carmen’s memory of the past is instead dislocated – excised and discarded in the oil fields, leaving a gap in her mind where it used to reside. Marlowe proposes a solution which both protects the family and solves Carmen’s problem. She must be taken away and sequestered inside a place where she

can continue to forget, as though this forcible detachment from the past, a continuation of her present detachment, will resolve her psychological ailments.

The behaviour of the Sternwoods replicates on a small scale the effect of urbanisation on the natural landscape of Southern California. What I mean by this is that the desertion of the oil fields in *The Big Sleep*, and at the opposite end of the scale the extreme cultivation of the land surrounding the Sternwood mansion, speaks to the incremental degradation of, and withdrawal from, the natural landscape on which Southern California has been built.⁸ Bodies are disposed of in the oil fields just as the detritus of the city is dumped into the concrete river bed, the oil fields providing a waste disposal site for unwanted bodies just as the Los Angeles river has been repurposed as a concretised water conveyance system. Jenny Price writes in “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.” that because Los Angeles County, through its demonstrable environmental ignorance, designed the river’s storm drains to empty *into* the channel, the river was “promptly turned [...] into L.A.’s Grand Sewer.”⁹

In Chandler’s novels we find evidence that to build over or repress the natural landscape is to pave over the past. The failure to acknowledge the processes of modernity detaches the city from its most essential, primordial self, and makes it a place where the uncanny sets up permanent residence. Carmen personifies the dangers involved in repressing personal memory and living in a perpetual present where the past is erased as soon as it occurs. Her psychological damage is writ large on the uncanny urban landscape of Chandler’s

⁸ This is repeated in other Los Angeles-set novels in this thesis, for example in *Play It As It Lays* on one of the few occasions where Maria finds herself close to nature she observes the “oil scum on the sand and a red tide in the flaccid surf and mounds of kelp at the waterline. The kelp hummed with flies” (65). The natural world outside the hotel rooms and beyond the confines of her car is a foul, corrupted wasteland, from the fly-riddled kelp to the yellow haze from an oil fire that hangs in the air.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the Los Angeles water wars and the paving of the river bed, see in particular: “Los Angeles, Improbable Los Angeles” by David L. Clark, and “Surf, Sagebrush, and Cement Rivers: Reimagining Nature in Los Angeles” by J. Scott Bryson.

Los Angeles, which has become a machine in the garden of Southern California. The uncanny is a constant reminder that the city's shadow self, buried somewhere in the wilderness, endures.

Chapter 2. Marshall Berman's Memory Palace: Home and Absence in the Modern City

This chapter examines several articles and essays by the late academic, philosopher, and author Marshall Berman, with a particular focus on the final section, "In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York," from his autobiographical and polemical opus *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). I explore the relationship between memory and history, and the ways in which both manifest themselves in New York City, particularly in the Bronx, the borough in which Berman was born in 1940. Throughout his work, Berman analyses the issues inherent in living in the city in the second half of the twentieth century, in particular explaining the impact of city planner *par excellence* Robert Moses both on urban development in the Bronx and on the possibility of maintaining a connection to the past as embedded in the physical landscape. I first look at how Berman sees modernity, before turning to an examination of the ramifications of Moses' work on the Bronx as evoked in Berman's writing. Finally, I seek to understand the connection between the fear that things will fall apart and the experience of things literally falling apart. I suggest that this fragmentation in New York exposes the ghostly presence of the uncanny – a phenomenon that pertains to a very personal sense of grief and homesickness. Throughout, I present my reading of Robert Moses and Marshall Berman as antagonists whose contradictory views help to frame the story I tell throughout this chapter of place, loss, memory, and restoration.

As an archetypal modern city, New York is simultaneously a site of progression, renewal and destruction. To quote Michel de Certeau from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this is a city which "invents itself, from hour to hour" (383). In its apparently endless capacity for reconstruction, New York is defined by, as Anthony Vidler puts it, "a haunting absence, not a haunting presence" (183). The landscape of a city like New York is remade many times over, and that remaking leads to the disorientation of locational, material history. Those who

live within this cycle must somehow reconcile themselves to the requirements of the modern city for forward movement and evolution, whilst concurrently attempting to root themselves in what Berman describes as: “a stable and coherent personal and social past” (*All That is* 35). This onward momentum, he argues, “destroys both the physical and social landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds.”

Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable writes of the way in which the city paves over itself in its quest for newness, stating that, in New York, neighbourhoods tend to “fall like dominoes” (*Unreal* 14). The very nature of the city is, she argues, “to destroy, build and change” (“Where Did We” 224). In “Apology for Breathing” the journalist A.J. Liebling agrees that New York keeps “renewing itself until the past is perennially forgotten” (630). James Merrill provides perhaps the quintessential articulation of New York’s impressive capacity for reinvention when he ruefully remarks in his poem “An Urban Convalescence”: “As usual in New York, everything is torn down/Before you have had time to care for it” (21).

The cycle of renewal is usually met by a counter impulse to preserve. Randall Mason reports in *The Once and Future New York* that the desire to protect certain monuments, buildings, and even neighbourhoods from New York’s propensity for re-development began to emerge in earnest during the late 1890s, when the idea of preservation was “asserted as a key urbanistic strategy – creating places that represented stability and continuity with a noble past, providing a cultural counterweight to the often chaotic growth of the metropolis” (x). Henry James (for whom the discovery that the house in which he was born had been replaced by a shirt factory was a trauma from which he could not quite recover) wrote in *The American Scene*: “the effect for me, in Washington Place, was of having been amputated of half my history” (71). James provides an example of what Bryan Waterman describes as the “nostalgic strain in New York writing,” (233) which he argues is “rooted not just in the fear

that the old city will pass away unnoticed, but that it already passed away before one arrived.” During the mid-nineteenth-century building boom, to which James was responding when he gasped at the sight of the altered city, the *New-York Mirror* likewise reported with great sorrow in 1853 that Manhattan is a “modern city of ruins” (quoted in Burrows and Wallace 695). Sharon Zukin writes that such responses to the changing city as those of James and the *Mirror* “drew an aura of regret around the landscape of memory” (*Naked City* 10).¹⁰ Mason describes the years between 1890 to 1940 as the city’s most important period of growth and development, the result of which was an increased impetus to strengthen ties to the past as made manifest in the urban landscape: “The faster the pace of modernization, the more intensely were connections to the past sought” (xxiii). Waldie writes in a 2016 essay that in 1905 Henry Adams wondered about the possibility for preserving history in writing “at a time when [he] felt the past slipping away with ever greater velocity and the imaginations he observed had become weary of remembering except as an excuse for nostalgia.” Waldie continues that Adams regarded with melancholy “what he called ‘the acceleration of history’ at the turn of the 20th century” (“How I Found”).

An acute awareness of the rapid disappearance of the city’s historic buildings, which provided examples of the city’s past in physical form, again came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century, during which the large-scale construction that could be found everywhere in New York was “of necessity, accompanied by large-scale destruction – often of architecturally significant buildings” (Stern, Mellins and Fishman 8). During this period, particularly post-1963 and the destruction of Pennsylvania Station (with Jane Jacobs, introduced properly later in this chapter, one of the picketers), “many New Yorkers began to fully recognize the architectural richness of their own city as well as the need to preserve it.”

¹⁰ Rather ironically Stephen Spender writes that post-James, writers became more “conscious of the present as chaotic [...] and of the past as an altogether more solid ground” (12).

David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney state in *Our Past Before Us: Why Do We Save It?* that “preservation stems from a three-fold awareness of the past: that it was unlike the present, that it is crucial to our sense of identity, and that its tangible remnants are rapidly disappearing” (17).

In 1963 Huxtable wrote in the *New York Times* that “we will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by the ones we have destroyed” (“Farewell”). Six years later, John S. Pyke Jr articulates this awareness when he reports that “there is not a single building which dates back to the seventeenth century and only nine that date back to the eighteenth century. The relentless destruction and construction of buildings in New York City has been sporadically interrupted by attempts to preserve the visible evidence of the City’s heritage” (15). I argue that the need to preserve is a sign of an intensifying separation between what can be identified as “memory” (see my definition below) and what can be defined as “history” (also below).

In *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs argues that “memory unfolds within a spatial framework” (140). What are the consequences of discovering a conflict within this spatial framework between the individual’s conception of the past (which I define as “memory”) and what the city concretises and externalises with regard to the past (which I define as “history”)? This potential schism is what Dolores Hayden refers to as the experience of “spatial conflict,” (9) which can be applied to the capacity for urban renewal and redevelopment to obliterate the collective memory that formerly rendered a particular urban space familiar. With reference to its particular relevance for the Bronx during the 1950s-60s, I explore the workings of this kind of conflict within the spatial framework and how this relates to the way in which Berman himself conceives of history and collective memory in spatial terms. Spatial conflict, and its rooting in how history and memory are alternately presented and hidden in the physical urban landscape, is rife in New York. I

examine the relationship between history and memory further when I return to the work of Halbwachs and Boyer later in this chapter.

Throughout this chapter I draw on a range of resources, including archival research (such as Marshall Berman's collected papers, housed at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and the Robert Moses Papers, which can be found at the New York Public Library) and first-person interviews with people who grew up in the Bronx during the 1950s and 60s. In the first half of the chapter I discuss Robert Moses and the ways in which, through urban renewal, slum clearance and highway construction, his vision of the modern city was made manifest. In the first section I explore the notion of the modern and modernity, and what this means in the context of mid-twentieth-century New York. The periodic urge to preserve evidence of the city's past was galvanised by, as described by Anne Friedberg, "the threat of the 'modern' and the shock of the new" (188). One way of looking at what Berman writes therefore is to put it in this context, and to ask how New York's cycle of construction and deconstruction impacts the way in which the past in this city is conceptualised and remembered by those who must live amidst its ever-accumulating rubble.

In the second half of this chapter, I examine the consequences of Moses' plans for the Bronx as experienced and articulated by Berman (in addition to other Bronx-born residents and authors such as Vivian Gornick). What happens to memory when particularly significant city structures are no longer visible, and when we can no longer visit physical sites of the past? Is our sense of memory dependent upon a connection to a particular place? I also ask how Freud's concept of "the uncanny" (particularly as developed by Anthony Vidler) is intertwined with Berman's sense of the modern and internalised by the Bronx.

The Modern and Robert Moses

As I outlined above, Robert Moses forms an integral part of Marshall Berman's life and work. It is therefore necessary to provide a summation of his own life's work and the ways in which this interacts and intersects with Berman's world. As Robert Caro details in *The Power Broker*, his Pulitzer-prize-winning biography of both Robert Moses and the evolution of New York City's urban landscape, Moses held numerous positions of public office in the city from 1924 to 1968, but his influence and reach extended far beyond the traditional remit of his duties. Moses began his career in New York at the Municipal Research Bureau in 1913, and by 1922 had expanded into an astonishing number of departments, ultimately encompassing parks, construction, highways and public housing. He looms large over many of the most colossal constructions and public spaces in the city, such as the Triborough and Verrazano-Narrows Bridges, the West Side Highway, Riverside Park, Jones Beach, Co-op City, and most of the parkways out on Long Island. In his obituary the *New York Times* recorded that by the time he had departed his post as head of the state park system, "the state had 2,567,256 acres. He built 658 playgrounds in New York City, 416 miles of parkways and 13 bridges" (Goldberger "Obituary").

In Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens, which Moses created out of the literal ashes that constituted the Corona Ash Dumps in order to provide a home for the 1939-40 World's Fair, the Unisphere – a 140-foot-tall stainless-steel facsimile of Earth built for the subsequent World's Fair in 1964-65 – dominates the landscape. Standing on the site of the now-destroyed Perisphere, another Moses construction built twenty-five years earlier (in 1939), it is an enormous testament to the cycle of creation and erasure that characterised Moses' tenure. Writing of Moses and his impact on New York City, Caro refers the reader to the epitaph on the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren: *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* ("if you would seek his monument, look around") (*Power* 508). "We live in his city,"

architectural historian and writer Francis Morrone told me in an interview, “and if people would be honest with themselves, how much of it would they be willing to live without?”

In *All That is Solid*, Berman writes that to oppose the work of Moses was to “oppose history, progress, modernity itself” (294).¹¹ What does he mean here when he refers to modernity in this context? “To be modern”, he contends, is to “live a life of paradox and contradiction.” In essence, it is “a mode of vital experience” (15); one which is characterised by the simultaneous promise of adventure, growth and transformation, and the threat of annihilation. The “paradox and contradiction” which Berman writes of lies in the simultaneous fear and pursuit of the new that defines modernity (13). Modernity, particularly in the American tradition, concerns itself with both a fascination for the future and simultaneously with a sense of lineage; with referent points from which one travels, suggesting a point of origin. One travels onward from this line with an acute awareness of what is lost the further from the point of origin one moves. This gives its expression a sense of impending loss, and an anxiety about potential fragmentation. Berman himself takes his cues about modernity from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe the shock of the new inherent during the period of nineteenth century modernisation characterised, in their words, by the constant “revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation” (38).¹² Throughout this chapter I in turn take my cues about modernity from Berman, and am guided by what he writes on this – what it does and does not mean to him. In *Imagining the Modern City* (1999), James Donald argues that modernist urban planners saw

¹¹ Caro quotes an anonymous official who worked for one borough president who got in the way of Moses’ progress by daring to raise objections to his plans. Moses would send voluminous amounts of telegrams contesting such interventions, repeating the claim that they were ““holding up work, [they] were holding up progress”” (*Power* 749).

¹² A recommended counterweight to Berman here is Perry Anderson’s 1984 paper “Modernity and Revolution,” which provides a critique of Berman’s take on modernism.

modernity as “a state of mind to do with accommodating newness” (54). This accommodation of a “new social order” apparently made the “absolute repression of all traces of history, memory and desire from the city” a necessity (84). As Spiro Kostof writes in *The City Shaped* (1991), after World War II, this kind of modernist attitude towards the city “brought an end, for a while, to the appreciation of the historic picturesque of European cities and the planned picturesque of Garden Cities and their offshoots [...] The policies of slum clearance and ‘urban renewal’ seemed determined to finish the work of the bombs” (90).

In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler contends that it is not just the *regulation* of a sense of history in the urban environment that has been a key modernist aim, but *escaping* it completely. If only houses, for example, were not “haunted by the weight of tradition and the imbrications of generations of family drama, if no cranny was left for the storage of the bric-a-brac once deposited in damp cellars and musty attics,” then people would be liberated from the anchor of memory, which was deemed an “unhealthy preoccupation” (64). He writes that these attitudes stem from “the conventional wisdom of modern urbanism” (168); this wisdom dictated that one must “flood dark space with light” and open it up to “vision and occupation.” Modernity, like Enlightenment thinking, aims to “eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny and, above all, the irrational” (Donald 73). The desire to remove the irrational became a “mechanism of governmental power,” one which feared “darkened spaces, the illegibility of men and things.” This move towards greater transparency and order symbolised a rejection of the built environment of the late-eighteenth-century city, which Michel Foucault argues was defined by its “stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons” (154).

Ben Highmore writes in *Cityscapes* that, in the nineteenth century, there was a perception amongst “social explorers” that the “rapidly expanding and modernizing city was an unreadable environment,” continuing that to “make urban culture intelligible and legible

meant policing it” (6). It therefore became necessary to plan “a regulated form of modernization.” The resultant need to ensure material order as a bulwark against social chaos can be seen in, for example, the “rational grids and spatial orders” imposed upon the urban spaces of a city like New York (Vidler 172). This was to be a defence against its otherwise uncertain, unquantifiable landscape. Max Page reports in *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan* (1999) that it is now “almost impossible, except in a few places in the larger parks of the city, to be visually reminded that the island of Manhattan was one of the richest natural environments in North America” (179). Hills were levelled, ponds were drained, streams were funnelled into pipes, trees were felled and forests were razed, and by the end of the nineteenth century, New York’s original natural landscape had been suppressed “beneath the straight streets of the city’s 1811 grid plan” and segregated into park land, removing it from the “lives of citizens in order to make way for the accelerating spin of destruction and rebuilding” (177-179).

Vidler continues that modernising figures, of which I argue Robert Moses is an example, wish to “forget the old city, its old monuments, its traditional significance” (179). For Moses, a highly-functional type of urban moderniser in the architectural sense, forgetting the old city translated as an attempt at its erasure, one haunted house at a time.¹³ In his eyes the mental and physical health of the city was contingent upon the excision of particular components of its historical legacy. While in his position as Chairman of the Committee on Slum Clearance (a title he assumed from 1949 to 1960), Moses described the remaining neighbourhood blocks yet to be cleared as “cancerous growths” which were “just as bad as those which have been removed.” The entirety of this “malignancy” as he called it, “must be surgically cut out” (Statement by Robert Moses 2). Moses’ metaphorical surgery left behind a

¹³ Sharon Zukin writes that the “architecture of modernism found its way into the city “on a massive scale” in the form of the “stark designs” which became “the dominant postwar architecture” (*Naked City* 14-15).

great number of suture wounds. One memo written by Moses to one of his closest colleagues, George Spargo, perfectly summarises his attitude to the material presence of history in the city he was re-shaping. Moses writes of a neighbourhood church in the ‘Park Row project,’ soon to be demolished: “I don’t see how this church can possibly be saved.” Perhaps, he concedes, “some plaque or memorial in or on one of the new buildings or in a small park giving briefly the history of the church and indicating that it stood there, might solve the problem” (Memo to Mr Spargo). These are the traces Moses left behind – *here is where the city used to be*.

In a 1954 address before the National Education Association in Madison Square Garden, Moses said of his plans for the city: “our objective is honest. We aim to rebuild New York, saving what is still durable, what is salvageable and what is genuinely historical, and substituting progress for obsolescence. We don’t believe big cities are dated. At any rate New York is not” (“The City of New York”). Berman describes Moses as coming from a long line of public figures with similar concerns about the urban environment, all of whom were “moved at once by a will to change – to transform both themselves and their world – and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart” (*All That is* 13). In order to prevent this annihilation, this “falling apart,” Moses felt it necessary to break open the city’s “darkened spaces” and let in the light of modern planning (Donald 73). In this respect he was very much in the tradition of other renowned arbiters of modernity in the city who made a permanent mark on their respective urban landscapes.

For example, during the 1850s Baron Haussmann, as obsessed with slum clearance and urban renewal in nineteenth-century Paris as Robert Moses was in twentieth-century New York, sought to re-create his city as one of great open spaces, filtering out any undesirable

elements.¹⁴ In so doing, he displaced vast numbers of people and built expansive boulevards.¹⁵ Ironically in the case of the Bronx, it was *the* boulevard itself – in the form of the Grand Boulevard and Concourse – which was replaced. The Grand Concourse, which runs for four-and-a-half miles through the West Bronx to Manhattan, was completed in its original form in 1909. Berman, who grew up a few blocks east of the Concourse, describes it as “our borough’s closest thing to a Parisian boulevard” (*All That is* 295). In its heyday it symbolised, in the words of Constance Rosenblum, “a true street of dreams” (6). But ultimately it became, over time, “one of the most potent symbols of urban disintegration” (11). Its demolition served to heighten its symbolic significance. This transformation provides a symbol of the architectural sleight of hand demonstrated by Moses and made acutely manifest in the Bronx. It seemed as though one day the Grand Concourse and its neighbourhood “were intact,” and the next they were both “shattered like fragile crystal” (7).

Robert Moses sought to create order out of chaos, rendering the amorphous irrationality of New York’s urban spaces into what he saw as something of a cleaner logic. In the pursuit of this aim, he oversaw the creation of what is today one of the world’s greatest examples of the modern metropolis. In order to do so, he first had to destroy what had preceded it. Did he succeed? Of course, not everything in New York has disappeared, and furthermore it is difficult to argue that everything that stood in Moses’ path to progress was destroyed, particularly when he was as responsible for building as he was for bulldozing, and indeed when several of his projects did not come to fruition. Two examples of projects which did not come to pass are the proposal to extend Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue through

¹⁴ Moses was an admirer of Haussmann, writing in 1942 that “he grasped the problem of step-by-step large-scale city modernization” (“What Happened”).

¹⁵ As Roger Starr (Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development under Mayor Beame in the 1970s) put it, “Mr Moses sliced up the rich and powerful with his tongue, knocked down the poor and weak with his bulldozer” (“Thoughts on Eggshells”).

Washington Square Park in 1955, and another to extend all ten lanes of Interstate 78 from the Holland Tunnel to the Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges in the form of the Lower Manhattan Expressway during the early 1960s – a plan which would have destroyed the neighbourhood of SoHo, now designated a Historic District by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.¹⁶

In 2007, after over thirty years of Robert Caro's portrait of Moses having defined the man, a new (some would argue revisionist) vision of Moses was put forward via Kenneth T. Jackson and Hilary Ballon's *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, and three simultaneous exhibitions at the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University.¹⁷ The book and exhibitions attempted to restore Moses to his former lustre. Caro himself posits that the exact impact of Moses on the city is hard to quantify with any real certainty: "It is impossible to say that New York would have been a better city if Robert Moses had never lived. It is possible to say only that it would have been a different city" (*Power* 21).¹⁸ For the purposes of this chapter, and this thesis, the point is not the relative success or failure of Moses' plans, or the ability to measure the dimensions of his destruction. The point is to attempt to gather and quantify the psychological fallout from what he *did* manage to excise from the physical landscape and the collective memory of its inhabitants.

¹⁶ For further information on these plans, see Anthony Paletta's 2016 essay for *The Guardian*, "Story of cities #32: Jane Jacobs v Robert Moses, battle of New York's urban titans."

¹⁷ A similarly reinterpretative guide to Moses and his works comes in the form of a collection of papers originally presented at the Conference on Long Island Studies: "Robert Moses and the Planned Environment," June 10-11, 1988, which took place at Hofstra University. This collection was also published in 1989 under the title *Robert Moses: Single-Minded Genius*, edited by Joann P. Krieg.

¹⁸ Architectural critic Paul Goldberger also provides an alternative reading of Moses' work and Caro's analysis of that work in a 2007 article for the *New Yorker* titled "Eminent Dominion."

Urban Renewal and the Bronx

The economic boom that followed the end of World War II in the United States saw a surge in new construction that transformed cities like New York and Los Angeles. Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman explain in *New York 1960* that during this period, “the city’s role within the surrounding region, and its relationship to the nation as a whole, underwent redefinition, entire precincts of the city itself were virtually rebuilt [...] the waning Classicism of the nineteenth century gave way almost completely to the Modernism that had been making significant in-roads in America since the 1930s” (8-9). New York’s cycle of renewal was given a push by the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the increased authorisation given to the Federal Housing Administration (first created in 1934 as part of the New Deal), and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which brought to life the Interstate Highway System. All of these factors paved the way for slum clearance and highway construction, two operations which often went hand in hand. Both the Housing Act and Interstate Highway System represented the forward thrust demanded by modernity, but also the incoherence and destruction which seem its permanent partner. Berman states that the “whole fabric of America” was reconstructed after World War II and sees the Federal Aid Highway Act and Federal Housing Administration, both grasped with two hands and put to work by Moses, as the “motive forces in this reconstruction” (*New York: A Documentary Film*).

During this postwar period the New York City Housing Association was put in charge of constructing public housing on a huge scale for those who could not afford the costs of private accommodation. This was in order to both stem the exodus to the suburbs and combat the decaying state of the American city. Sharon Zukin writes in *Naked City* (2009) that during this postwar period of acute urban crisis which began in earnest during the 1960s, “American cities were routinely described as hopeless victims of a fatal disease” (5). Title I of the Housing Act, which permitted the Federal Government to give grants to the appropriate local

public bodies for the purpose of urban regeneration, was one of the programmes which served as a driving force for many of Moses' plans for the city. By 1960, under his leadership, "New York had been allocated more Title I money than any other American city - \$65.8 million, which was twice as much as the second-place city, Chicago" (*Affordable New York*). But the construction of new housing necessitated the demolishing of old housing stock, otherwise known as 'slum clearance.' Caro reports that in order to "clear the land for these improvements," Moses "evicted the city's people, not thousands of them or tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands, from their homes and tore the homes down" (*Power* 7). During the same period, the city saw the rise of iconic and monumental structures such as the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the Cross-Bronx Expressway (CBE). In each case, something had to be torn down and communities had to be dispersed in order for the new constructions to rise.

For example, between 1962-1966 the new Lincoln Center was built over what Moses called "the worst slum in New York" (Interview with Robert Sam Anson) but what Berman defined as "formerly the largely black and Hispanic neighbourhood of San Juan Hill" (Message to Brian Berger). In 1964, the reporter Gay Talese would write in *The Bridge* about the former inhabitants of Bay Ridge, a neighbourhood in the south-west corner of Brooklyn, whose homes were torn down to make way for the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1959: "One day in the early spring of 1964, Eugene and Roy took a nostalgic journey back to their old neighborhood [...] and revisited the land upon which their old home had stood. Now all was flattened and smoothed by concrete – it was buried by the highway leading to the bridge" (122). Talese describes the feelings of the locals who saw their neighbourhood of 800 buildings and 7000 people, levelled: "They saw the coming bridge not as a sign of progress, but as a symbol of destruction" (21).

In *Manhattan Projects* (2010), Samuel Zipp posits that the “spatial transformation” (7) that occurred as a result of eminent domain (the government’s power to claim private property and adapt it for public use), slum clearance, and other planning/clearance projects was a signifier of the “embrace of modernity” (9) which Moses himself clearly exhibited:

Slum clearance scoured away the old cityscape and its traditional, sedimented urban patterns. Then, the clean, progressive rationality of the towers and plazas rose over the ruins. City blocks were literally uprooted, broken down, and reconstructed in geometric arrangements that produced a new, unfamiliar sense of order and a remade experience of urban space. (9)

The unintended (or otherwise) consequences of mid-twentieth-century development was the dispersal and disintegration of local neighbourhood communities, as outlined above, which in turn exacerbated the sense of uncanny abandonment in the spaces left behind. This was made acutely, violently evident in the Bronx.

The Bronx, particularly the South Bronx, produced in the postwar decades the very worst ramifications of programmes like the Federal Aid Highway Act and the Federal Housing Act when put to work together in densely-built-up, highly-populated urban areas. It became, as Berman puts it, “an international code word for our epoch’s accumulated urban nightmares” (*All That is* 290).¹⁹ Berman, who grew up in the South Bronx neighbourhood of Tremont during the 1940s and 1950s, found himself immersed in a period of great change in

¹⁹ The “South Bronx” has come into particular disrepute as a symbol of the very worst aspects of the borough, becoming more a synecdoche than a locatable place. Robert Jensen states that from the late 1960s the term was used “in the context of fires, destruction and rubble” (13). Gilbert Tauber said to me that: “After the Cross-Bronx Expressway was built, everything south of the Cross-Bronx was the South Bronx. When I was younger the South Bronx was everything south of 149th. It seemed that the South Bronx began some blocks south of wherever you were.” In May 2018 however, a *CNBC* article revealed that the South Bronx is “in the midst of a revival” and is known in some real estate circles as “SoBro” (Bukszpan and David).

the borough, thanks to the myriad ways in which these postwar Federal programmes were utilised by Robert Moses.

Alongside Title I of the Housing Act, the multi-billion-dollar Interstate Highway System of the 1950s was also championed by Moses in order to push through his vision of the modern city. Via these acts, Moses and his team created a system which brought to life such paeans to “Automonumentality” as the Bruckner Expressway, the Major Deegan Expressway, and the Cross-Bronx Expressway (Koolhaas 100). Nicknamed “Heartbreak Highway” before it was even built (Tierney “The Winner”), the Cross-Bronx was one of the most controversial of Moses’ projects, and is the subject, indeed, the organising principle, of the final chapter of *All That is Solid*. This project combined the dual purposes of the Interstate Highway System and the Housing Act, i.e. to both clear out and rebuild over ‘slum housing’ and to be part of a great “tapestry of expressways” which would connect the New York metropolitan area and beyond (Rosenblum 208). Lee Zimmerman argues that in this postwar period there was a “massive reshaping of the environment around the needs of the automobile” to the detriment of the cities, like New York, which were denied essential financial resources as a consequence and thereby “drained of what might have kept them vital” (567).

Construction for the Cross-Bronx, a “six-lane-wide, seven-mile-long concrete and steel monster,” began in 1948 (Rosenblum 208). As its name suggests, it cuts directly through and bisects the borough it is named after. It would ultimately cross “113 streets and avenues,” writes *New York Post* journalist George J. Marlin, and necessitate the dispersal of “40,000 middle-class households.” John J. Egan reports in a 1958 article titled “Trojan Horse in our Cities”: “When the superhighway is rammed through such a neighborhood, it takes with it more than the buildings it demolishes for its right of way.” It was rammed through residential neighbourhoods along what had been the Grand Concourse, and though the apartment houses

which sat directly on the Concourse were not immediately impacted (the Cross-Bronx passed beneath the Boulevard itself), “deeply rooted communities on either side of the Grand Concourse were literally ground underfoot” (Rosenblum 8).

In the constantly fraught state in which Moses worked, residents could not plan for the future, nor could they attach themselves to the past; upon their removal, their place of origin became lost in memory. “This used to be,” write journalists Gene Gleason and Fred J. Cook, in one of several investigative pieces about the impact of Moses and the slum clearance program, “a city composed of a wide variety of solid, established neighborhoods [...] One after another, they’ve been torn up, destroyed, scattered to the winds” (Gleason and Cook “The Shame of New York”). Of his own family’s relocation Berman writes with quiet desolation, noting that the buildings which were demolished were “barely as old as I was,” but regardless, when he returned from camp that autumn, “they were gone, even the rubble was gone. Soon our family, too, would go” (“Expressway and Me”).²⁰ To paraphrase Jeanette Winterson, this is the wound that he works from (223). Ultimately, the burned-out apartment buildings and devastated neighbourhood blocks became Berman’s memory palaces, to return to a concept discussed in Chapter 1. A sense of loss and absence is what is long remembered by those who grew up in the Bronx during the period in which many of its neighbourhoods were excised from the landscape of the city’s memory.²¹ Berman writes frequently of the material unity and architectural cohesion of the mid-twentieth-century Bronx neighbourhoods with which he was most familiar, as though already fearful that this completeness would soon

²⁰ Where did everyone who left the Bronx go? Many went to the newly-constructed Co-op City, a housing project built under the auspices of the Mitchell-Lama program, which Moses was responsible for developing. A year after its opening in 1970, it had “sucked out what remained of the South Bronx’s middle class, leaving those who remained in a virtual ghost town” (Worth 3).

²¹ Caro writes in an article for *The New Yorker* published after *The Power Broker*: “I asked these couples – or widows or widowers – to compare their present lives with the lives they had had in East Tremont, and the general picture that emerged from their answers was a sense of profound, irremediable loss” (“The City-Shaper” 51).

be broken: “A few smaller houses, probably occupied by their owners, were, as ever, shabby but intact” (“Roots, Ruins” 20). “When I was a girl,” author Vivian Gornick, who grew up in the Bronx on 181st Street between Vyse and Bryant, told me in an interview, “the whole world was the same. It was a completely coherent neighbourhood.”

In 1959 Samuel A. Spiegel, Assemblyman from the Fourth Assembly District of New York County, wrote that so-called slum clearance was creating “a wandering society of transient tenancies with no chance for the children to take roots” (36). The construction of affordable housing developments caused widespread tenant dislocation and disruption in many communities throughout the city. A sense of rootless wandering, impermanence, and separation from the familiar and the historical, fills the correspondence Moses received during his time as Chairman of the City Slum Clearance Committee. Unhappy New Yorkers who had been forced to move, sometimes more than once, from their buildings, blocks, neighbourhoods and boroughs, provided frequent epistolary critique. Alice Saul, in 1957, signs off her letter of complaint with “I don’t know how you can face yourself if you realise the harm you have done to the people of this city. [...] I wish you bad luck.” Caro dedicates two chapters in *The Power Broker* to the story of East Tremont, one of the neighbourhoods that the Cross-Bronx was to cut through (and a mile away from the neighbourhood in which Berman grew up). Caro speaks with several former Tremont inhabitants, who stress the familial intimacy of the old neighbourhood: “In its bricks were generations” (853). The Cross-Bronx, argues Caro, had by 1965 completely decimated that shared history.

In exploring the circumstances and impact of this upheaval, I interviewed a number of local people who had lived in the neighbourhood during this period. Throughout the time I spent with them, the Cross-Bronx remained constant, both literally in the landscape of the borough that I could see, and in the conversations we had, disappearing and reappearing periodically, seamlessly, in every location as we walked and drove around. For Berman, it

represents everything that went wrong with his borough. In 2003 he writes that the eventual urban catastrophe that befell the Bronx began when “Robert Moses drilled his Cross-Bronx Expressway right through its center, destroying some of the most crowded (but intact) neighborhoods in the city, displacing thousands of people from their homes. The CBE was (and still is) a wound in the Bronx’s heart” (“New York: Seeing” 126-7). In *All That is Solid* he vividly recalls “standing above the construction site from the Cross-Bronx Expressway, weeping for my neighbourhood [...] vowing remembrance and revenge” (295). For Berman, it was not just buildings that were decimated, but his sense of a geographically-locatable childhood: “Robert Moses came into my life just after my bar mitzvah, and helped bring my childhood to an end, when he rammed a highway through the heart of my neighborhood in the heart of the Bronx” (“Expressway and Me”).²² Where before the Bronx of Berman’s childhood looked out on the Grand Concourse, now it is defined by the Cross-Bronx. We watch the transformation unfold as he takes us within the space of a few sentences through his memory of the Cross-Bronx as it replaces his receding recollection of the Grand Concourse, which used to stand in its place: “The Grand Concourse, from whose heights I watched and thought, was our borough’s closest thing to a Parisian boulevard. Among its most striking features were rows of large, splendid 1930s apartment houses [...] I saw one of the loveliest buildings being wrecked for the road” (*All That is* 295).

The effect on the Bronx was tangible. As Jill Jonnes writes in *South Bronx Rising*, the “sheer scale of these public endeavours was altering the physical appearance of the borough, scarring and obliterating whole neighborhoods” (117). Berman writes that the urban rot which had begun in the late 1950s had set in not only along the route of the Expressway, but

²² In an essay titled “Never at Home: Jewish Writers and the Sense of Place,” Berman’s friend, the academic and cultural historian Morris Dickstein, remarks fittingly that novels that reach back into the significant locational histories of their authors are often “less about location than about dislocation” (5).

throughout the landscape of the entire Bronx.²³ This rot proliferated “at a spectacular pace, devouring house after house and block after block, displacing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes like some inexorable plague” (“Roots, Ruins”). Here Berman uses similar rhetoric about sickness and surgery to Moses (see Moses’ Statement as Chairman of the Committee on Slum Clearance, above), but from a different point of view. Where Moses believes he is purging the wounds of the city, Berman sees the same wounds as festering; the sickness is taking hold. Caro echoes Berman’s words when he writes of post-Cross-Bronx East Tremont that the buildings that remained were nothing more than “ravaged hulks,” resembling “blitzkrieged London” (*Power* 893). As though to exemplify Caro’s point, Howard Kaminsky, a local historian who grew up just south of East Tremont and moved out in 1964, told me in an interview that the Expressway “eviscerated the Bronx” such that it “looked like London after the Blitz.” Similarly, Gilbert Tauber, a 79-year-old retired urban planner who grew up in the borough on Gerard Avenue between 165th and McClellan, informed me that he would walk past the construction site of the Cross-Bronx Expressway on his way to school every day along 176th Street. He described how he would come across a “huge gash in the ground and it was really kind of scary [...] it reminded you of pictures of bombed out cities in Europe.”²⁴

The landscape of the Bronx was, by the late 1950s, morphing into “gigantic, twisted, grotesque ruins,” thanks to a hellish combination of New York’s deepening fiscal crisis, the slashing of its social services, and de-industrialisation, all of which hit the poorest parts of the

²³ For an alternative reading of Moses’ impact on the Bronx, see Ray Bromley’s 1998 paper “Not So Simple! Caro, Moses, and the Impact of the Cross-Bronx Expressway,” published in *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*.

²⁴ Berman explains this fixation with comparisons between London during the early 1940s and New York after World War II in “Roots, Ruins and Renewals”: “For many of the people who grew up in World War II, the vision of the ruins of that war, which reduced so many cities to ruins, became an ineradicable obsession long after the last of the rubble had been carted away” (23). See also Sharon Zukin’s *Naked City* (particularly pages 14-15).

city the hardest and created more problems for New York City housing (Berman, Introduction 15).²⁵ Negligence and disinvestment in the city was galvanised by the proliferation of ideas such as benign neglect, redlining, and planned shrinkage.²⁶ The Bronx itself began to burn.

In *All That is Solid* Berman argues that “Thousands of urban neighborhoods were obliterated by this new order; what happened to my Bronx was only the largest and most dramatic instance of something that was happening all over” (307). Berman’s telling of the story of Moses’s impact on the Bronx is a cautionary tale of the capacity of modernising sensibilities to decimate. Ironically, the fear that things may fall apart led in this case to real disintegration. Moses’ plan to unblock the darkened corners of the city’s historical spaces caused the displacement and dispersal of great swathes of people, leading inexorably to a permanently altered cityscape and leaving the psycho-geographical scars which are so deeply-felt and articulated by Berman. Moses the moderniser, who “hack[ed] his expressway world through the cities, obliterating every trace of the life that was there before,” had cracked wide open what had been intact (331).²⁷ This falling apart left in its wake traces and signs of a past which used to exist in the spaces now occupied by ruins and rubble.

²⁵ This enforced urban austerity was imposed first by President Nixon and then President Ford, who declared that he would veto any bill that sought a federal bailout of New York City, inspiring the famous *New York Daily News* headline of October 30 1975: “Ford to City: ‘Drop Dead.’” For more on the fiscal crisis and its impact on US cities during this period, see Jonathan Mahler’s *Ladies and Gentleman, the Bronx is Burning*, and *Fear City* by Kim Phillips-Fein.

²⁶ Planned shrinkage, originally proposed by Roger Starr (see n.15) in 1976, was the deliberate withdrawal of city services to devastated neighbourhoods based on the idea that parts of the city’s real estate would never improve so it was pointless trying. The concept of benign neglect, first floated by New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a 1970 memo to Nixon which subsequently went public, became “a rallying cry to justify reductions in social services to the inner cities” (Chang 14). Redlining is the practice whereby the “investment community withdraws funds and ‘redlines’ the neighborhood” (Jensen 70).

²⁷ I can’t help but think of Moses when I come across the Book of Job’s assertion that Kings and rulers of the earth “built for themselves places now lying in ruins” (*New International Bible*, Job 3.14).

The Suture in the City

The denial or removal of history, Vidler contends, creates its own ghosts and forms its own history: “the traces of erasure form a kind of negative path, a route of obliteration into a past that is [...] always a present” (180). Memory is not physically anchored to space, but it is symbolically anchored to space *as we remember it*, and often there is a gap between the two. In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), Marco Polo says of his elusive ideal city that it is: “discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed,” and yet “you must not believe the search for it can stop” (164). Polo’s city becomes more myth than matter in its re-telling, but its reality or unreality is ultimately of no consequence. Like Berman’s Bronx, Polo’s city transcends itself when it becomes a symbol – it can only really “begin to exist” through the repeated “signs” of itself generated by memory (19). This is a notion the author Vivian Gornick articulated when she told me that her memories of the Bronx are both “attached to the concrete,” and simultaneously would endure whether the material entity it was attached to survived or not: “What would it matter to me if it’s actually there now? I think that’s an illusion” (Personal interview).

In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud compares the unconscious mind to the buried life of the modern city. Each stage or era of city life, he writes, is preserved, ready to be excavated, and thus exists simultaneously (see also my discussion of palimpsests in Chapter 5 on Brooklyn). Remnants of the ancient city still appear in the present-day, scattered in fragments across the city that has “grown up in recent centuries” (17). He continues that “much of the old is still there, but buried under modern buildings. This is how the past survives in historic places.” Dolores Hayden argues that the “traces of time embedded in the urban landscape of every city offer opportunities for reconnecting fragments of the [...] urban story” (13). This echoes Halbwachs when he states that we can only “recapture the past” by understand the ways in which it is “preserved by our physical

surroundings” (140). Freud contends that when we see physical evidence of different stages of the past juxtaposed next to one another, we can finally experience spatially and tangibly these other permutations of history. For example, the remaining original Grand Concourse buildings running in disrepair along the Cross-Bronx Expressway, or Berman returning to his old neighbourhood to find his house still standing but the neighbourhood around it in a state of sustained collapse. Freud names these stages of history in the city, “different contents” (*Civilization* 18).

Berman points out that for Freud, all of the layers of the city’s archaeology are manifestations of “the successive stages in its life” which are “superimposed on one another” (Application 1). Though these layers are “fragmented, they are still intact, if only we know how to dig deeply and delicately enough.” Freud himself states that, in short, with regard to our interior lives, “the retention of the past is the rule, rather than the surprising exception” (*Civilization* 19). For Berman, Freud’s point is that “every individual is continually living as much in the past as in the present. Even though our past may be buried, it’s still there; indeed, this buried life serves as the foundation of our present and our future” (Application 1). He continues that “If we are willing to follow Freud and see the mind as a city, it may be fruitful to follow him a little further than planned to lead and see the city as a mind, a mind with unconscious depths and contradictory currents, a mind that can not only be in two places at the same time, but can also embody two (or more) times in the same place” (2).

What we remember is not what is necessarily real. But the remembered and the real, Berman argues, can be in the same place at the same time. The consequence is that our remembrance of the city as we knew it before is now fixed on a point of loss.²⁸ The point of

²⁸ Before our excursions in the spring of 2015, the last time Howard Kaminsky had been in his old neighbourhood was the late 1960s with a cousin who had also grown up there and had relocated to Florida. How did his cousin feel when he came back? “He cried [...] It was so different from what we knew, what we had grown up with.”

origin around which these differences converge becomes a place, a real, tangible place, which is somehow linked to, or houses, a localised, locatable memory. Upon returning to these material sites of memory, we feel suddenly a chasm between what we remember and what we see. We feel a sense of alienation and betrayal: these places have been reconfigured, rearranged in our absence. This is perfectly articulated by Berman's sense of bereavement at looking out across the once-familiar landscape which is now an alien wasteland; a construction site: "standing above the construction site from the Cross-Bronx Expressway, weeping for my neighbourhood" (*All That is* 295).

In Joan Didion's 1967 essay on the atomisation of West Coast society, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," she repeats Yeats' warning that "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Yeats 158) and the language used by Berman throughout *All That is Solid* (not least in his choice of Marx's famous estimation as his book title), and indeed all of his work on the Bronx, suggests that there is resonance in this very prospect – that any solidity and cohesion he might have known has since proven transient. Not only has much of what he knew disappeared, but the entirety of his neighbourhood has been opened up and stretched out beyond its capacity. The "malignancy," as Moses would have referred to it, of this now-dead space has been "cut out," but so have its surrounding areas also been completely divested of history (Moses, Statement 2).

In 1966 the United States Congress reaffirmed the preservation of landmarks as a national policy, stating that "the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people" (Pyke, Jr 2).²⁹ The idea of orientation as an essential

²⁹ Frances Morrone told me that the buildings which have been classified thus by the Landmarks Preservation Commission are, in the minds of the organisation, "a kind of palimpsest of its neighbourhoods' history."

component of the fabric of a city was tackled in a 1974 address to the Back to the City Conference in New York by James Marston Fitch, Director of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University, in which he referred to the city as “a theater of memory,” continuing that familiar urban spaces form a “sort of physical matrix for your own experiences” and citing an example provided during his visit to Warsaw after World War II: “The city was all under rubble, and you couldn’t say ‘meet me at the corner of Fourth and Main.’ The question of orientation was not just a physical one, it was a psychological one as well” (7). In order to make sense of vast urban space from a distance we must look for landmarks which allow us to distinguish, divide, and quantify space. But often when we seek out “objects of memory” which we had anticipated would be eternally anchored to the landscape, we sometimes find gaps where these should be present (Vidler 64).

The past can sometimes be sensed in particular spaces because of the absence of a building rather than the presence of a landmark. It is this schism which is at the heart of the experience described by Freud as “the uncanny”: the coupling of the familiar and unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely or “unheimlich” (“Uncanny” 132) which is endemic to life in the modern city (see also my discussion in Chapter 1). Freud asserts that the “uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148). When one experiences the uncanny this is, in Freud’s terms, the unconscious heralding the *return* of that which has been repressed. Freud tells us that the perpetual encounter of oppositions creates friction, or tension, which he deems an uncanny experience. For example, when we return, as Berman does, to a childhood place which has been completely remodelled or even destroyed, we experience a curious unease and feel suddenly lost and alien in a place that should be intimately familiar. Again, this sense of absence or disorientation defines an unfamiliar space in which knowledge or familiarity is at odds with empirical perception. Freud warns us that if

we attempt to remove certain parts of our personal history because they are too painful, they will only return in a more ghoulish form. But equally, leaving the pain of the past unchecked is to live in a kind of suspended animation between a history that cannot be dealt with and a present that feels incomplete, is a particular kind of madness that is predicated on the inability to define the border between one's past and one's present. The uncanny can denote "intellectual uncertainty about the shifting and collapsing boundaries between otherwise distinct categories of the strange and familiar, the past and the present, the other and the self" (Rau 184). It represents the "thinning of the membrane" between one seemingly distinct thing and another (Bowen 195). This sense of collapsing boundaries is made manifest in the uncanny landscape through which Berman walks like a flaneur in mourning.

Writing about the Bronx of the early 1980s in "Views from the Burning Bridge," Berman repeatedly refers to fragmented and fractured buildings, cratered sidewalks, open spaces, and vacant lots. These are descriptions which recall the abandoned oil fields of *The Big Sleep*, the dilapidated buildings which sit across the street from the Cattleman house waiting to be torn down in *The Nowhere City*, or the eerie "thief's emptiness" of the Washington Avenue sidewalks in *A Meaningful Life* (120). "Now many tenement and apartment houses are cracked, burnt, split apart, caved in," Berman observes, with many blocks entirely "vanished or disintegrated into wreckage and debris" ("Views" 71). Some blocks are "wide open and empty as deserts," others exist amidst the urban detritus that speaks to the "shards of thousands and thousands of lives." He finds signs of incoherence and disintegration; the streets are in "various stages of demolition or decomposition" ("Roots, Ruins" 18).³⁰

³⁰ In Tom Wolfe's epic novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, published in 1987, there is a famous scene in which his antihero Sherman McCoy gets lost in the South Bronx in his Mercedes. Having been unceremoniously dumped out of the Bruckner Expressway and on to Bruckner Boulevard, he grows increasingly anxious that he may never escape. Wolfe's bleak description matches Berman's, who was conducting his own expedition around the same

When Freud compares the life of the city to the “life of the psyche,” which can only retain its sense of history if it has remained “intact and its fabric has not suffered from trauma,” it is difficult not to think of the Bronx and the tearing of its spatial fabric (*Civilization* 18). Norman M. Klein writes in *The History of Forgetting* that modernity is best symbolised by the appearance of a “suture” (313) which physically marks the spot where the trauma of “Hausmanization” (for which in the case of the Bronx we can read “Mosesisation”) has altered both the landscape and one’s perception of it. The violence of the change forged in Haussmann’s Paris and Moses’ New York generated signs of the uncanny because it created a sharp schism between the present and the past. James Donald contends that the uncanny represents “the internal limit of modernity, the split within it” (72). The uncanny, in its sense of splitting and schism and in-between-ness, is not necessarily a sign of modernity being unable to internalise and reconcile the myriad oppositions – before/after, memory/history – that jostle for prominence, but in fact is a sign that modernity *is* these oppositions, *embodying* the uncanny. This in turn is significant because the presence of the uncanny signifies the presence of the past and the return of the repressed, not its absence.

What are the consequences for a borough like the Bronx, which has seen its own fabric stretched and torn, its stitches unpicked? In his 2007 Introduction to *New York Calling*, Berman reflects on the visceral experience of visiting its strangely unoccupied spaces: “In 1979, 1980, 1981, I spent many lonely afternoons wandering through the Bronx’s ruins. I couldn’t believe the enormity of these ruins! They went on and on, for block after block, mile after mile. Some blocks seemed almost intact; but look around the corner, and there was no corner. It was uncanny!” (Introduction 19). As Berman walks through the borough he is

time: “Utterly empty, a vast open terrain [...] entire blocks of the city without a building left standing [...] The eerie grid of a city was spread out before him, lit by the chemical yellow of the street lamps. Here and there were traces of rubble and slag [...] the hills and dales of the Bronx...reduced to asphalt, concrete, and cinders” (86).

occasionally “lulled to sleep” (*All That is* 344) by the sense of the ordinary and the vaguely familiar as he re-traces his old neighbourhood steps. Should you walk around Southern Boulevard or Longwood, he advises, you will find blocks “that feel so much like blocks you left long ago, blocks you thought had vanished forever, that you will wonder if you are seeing ghosts - or if you yourself are a ghost haunting these solid streets with the phantoms of your inner city.” But upon turning a corner, “the full nightmare of devastation” is revealed in the form of “a block of burnt-out hulks, a street of rubble and glass where no man goes,” which rudely awakens him. “For Freud,” Vidler explains, “‘unhomeliness’ was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (7). This sense of defamiliarisation creates a feeling of surreality and alienation, and it is the shock of difference, the confrontation with an unexpected *tabula rasa*, which awakens Berman from his dream of the past into present-day alienation. The final pages of *All That is Solid* find Berman seeking and meeting signs of the past in the street he loved and abandoned: “I thought to end up with the Bronx,” he discloses, “with an encounter with some ghosts of my own” (345).

Mental Maps

If the uncanny is essentially the ambivalent and cyclical journey from familiar to unfamiliar, this ties it to memory, which is at heart the perception of absence – indeed Mary Warnock writes that memory is “explicitly identified with thinking about things in their absence” (17). In similar terms, Fredric Jameson argues in “Cognitive Mapping” that our modern global reality cannot be represented by us as individuals because it is defined by what is *absent* to us – what we can no longer see and perceive – rather than what is present, visible, and therefore representable (350). Drawing on Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City* (1960), Jameson writes

that the “mental unmappability” of certain cityscapes, which are unmappable because those who live in them have become alienated from their physical reality, has consequently led to a split between “the here and now of immediate perception” and the “imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality” (353). When we remember, we are attempting to recall something which is no longer there; to make the absent into the present. It is the same sense of *difference* or tension between those two states – between the intimate and the strange; the present and the absent – which galvanises into existence the knowledge of a shift between what we feel to be true and what we experience empirically to be real. In a similar way, the uncanny does connect us to the past, but not the past as an external projection. Instead the uncanny denotes the presence of something more autobiographical and internal and thus distinct from a *sense* of the past put on display.

Walter Benjamin, when writing about the Arcades of Paris early in the twentieth century, describes them as “*a past become space*” (923); a century later, Henri Lefebvre writes that the centre of the city “bears the imprint of what it hides, but it hides it” (34). Like the Paris of Benjamin and Lefebvre, Berman’s Bronx demonstrates how in modern city spaces a chasm can emerge between what one feels should be tangible and visible in the spaces with which one is familiar, and the reality of what is actually seen in those spaces. The literal rubble of Berman’s past is a manifestation of the way in which the past can “*become space*” – by reminding those who traverse it of what used to exist there.

Michel de Certeau suggests that it is the “childhood experience that determines spatial practices,” and that this experience “later develops its effects, proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, and creates within the planned city a ‘metaphorical’ or mobile city” (110). In this way, we create two spatial realities: one which we behold empirically in evidence, and one which came to us before we even knew the words. Within this “planned city” is enclosed the “mobile” city – respectively, the city of the

eye and the city of the mind's eye. In a *New York Magazine* article titled "Mental Maps of New York," Susana Duncan further articulates de Certeau's idea of the "mobile" city. She details the experience of Professor Stanley Milgram, who, in the late 1960s, "found himself, for the first time since his Roosevelt-era youth, in his childhood neighborhood: Boynton Avenue in the Bronx, off Bruckner Boulevard" (51). Like Marshall Berman, Milgram is met with the profound material change of a new expressway; in his case it was the Bruckner Boulevard Expressway: "many new buildings had appeared, and the ethnic cast of the neighborhood had altered." Despite this, he was able to find his way back to the apartment in which he had lived for the first five years of his life without any cartographic guidance. "Mental maps are drawn from a city's buildings and avenues but they are not the same as the physical reality" Milgram explains (52).³¹ The professor writes that, much like the idea of the mobile or metaphorical city, there is also the "soft city," the implications of which mean that "you can mold the city to your own needs and peculiarities. [...] It is not hard and unyielding but takes on the impress which each individual gives to it" (62).³²

Likewise, Berman's symbolic city can and does exist irrespective of its 'present' context because he carries it with him. Vivian Gornick, whose memoir *Fierce Attachments* pieces together her childhood in the Bronx, felt much the same when she went back in the early 1970s. She wished to better-represent her neighbourhood authentically for the purposes of reproduction in *Fierce Attachments* but discovered that so much had changed that her attempt to revisit sites of the past was redundant. So instead she turned to her own memory to recreate her history, which she found had outlasted the neighbourhood itself: "we went up

³¹ Here I am reminded of Joseph Mitchell, journalist and author who reported for the *New Yorker* for over twenty years, painting indelible portraits of the people he met at (amongst other places) the Fulton Fish Market and South Street Seaport. In August 1992 he was interviewed for *New York Newsday*, the journalist commenting that "Sometimes when Mitchell looks at a building, he won't see the present-day fast-food joint but the speakeasy it replaced. 'The past is obliterated,' he says, 'but somehow it's still there'" (Streitfeld).

³² 'Soft city' was a term first coined by Jonathan Raban in his 1974 book of the same name.

there and it had all changed [...] I was so panicked about not being able to get it, I said ‘now concentrate,’ and I wrote the scene. So, there it was. Whether it was actually as I remembered it, what does it matter? But I didn’t need to actually see it” (Personal interview).³³

In *All That is Solid* Berman describes with great pathos the scene of destruction as the bulldozers rolled in, reducing his home to ashes: “My friends and I would stand on the parapet of the Grand Concourse, where 174th Street had been, and survey the work’s progress [...] and marvel to see our ordinary nice neighbourhood transformed into sublime, spectacular ruins” (292-293).³⁴ For Moses and his crew were not simply blasting through concrete and steel, they were obliterating the physical locus of memory – effectively demolishing history. In the case of Berman and his friends, surveying the wreckage of their home, the annihilation of a city’s memory that those in power did *not* wish to preserve presented to them an acute and tangible moment which perfectly expresses Halbwachs’ notion of the discrepancy between memory and history.

“History,” Halbwachs explains in *The Collective Memory*, “is neither the whole nor even all that remains of the past” (64). There are “two sorts of memory,” he continues, the first being “internal or inward memory” and the second, “external memory,” or alternatively “‘autobiographical memory’ and ‘historical memory’” (52). Historical, social, external memory “represent[s] the past only in a condensed and schematic way” and can be mapped spatially by “clearly etched demarcations” (52, 82). Meanwhile, our personal memories present “a richer portrait with greater continuity” (52). These are more collective in nature,

³³ Author Lynne Sharon Schwartz said much the same to me when I asked her about recreating her childhood neighbourhood in Brooklyn for her novel *Leaving Brooklyn*: “I use it a lot, I can remember everything, I can tell you the blocks going from East New York Avenue up to Eastern Parkway one after the other and I’ve written a lot about that. [...] When I want to write something about the past I just remember it.”

³⁴ This marvelling at the destruction of the urban environment, and its description as “sublime” (293), arguably anticipates the debates concerning so-called ‘ruin porn,’ of which Detroit in particular provides many examples. See: <https://www.john-adams.nl/detroit-ruin-porn-architecture/>

and thus retain the parts of the past which are “capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (80). Memory is not so easily mappable as history; it is marked instead “by irregular and uncertain boundaries” (82). When Berman describes his walks around the Bronx as visits to his “inner city,” (*All That is* 344) he is perfectly summarising the concept of the “autobiographical memory” as found in the “mobile city” and the “soft city.” These cities can exist independent of time or place. They represent a psychic split tearing through the walls of the mind and of memory; something which is real and unreal, there and not there, or an “irrational” response to the imposition of logic on a wild place which has none inherently of its own (Donald 73).

De Certeau’s concept of the “mobile city” is brought to life in the uncanny feeling of there being a gap between *what was* and *what is*. This feeling is evident when Howard Kaminsky talked to me about the history of the borough, simultaneously describing what he saw around us in the present-day in the context of this history. Howard drove me around his old stomping grounds, narrating the landscape as we stopped and started, his reminiscences peppered with references to absence and negation (“This is a high school that was never here. This is a public school that I went to that never looked like that”). The reminiscences of Bronx residents like Kaminsky and Vivian Gornick are full of discontinuities – my interviews with them were peppered with remarks concerning what they could see no longer existed in the built environment, these absences jarring them out of their recollections, creating bumps in smooth surfaces. In a 2001 article for the *New York Times*, Gornick recounts that upon her return to her childhood neighbourhood almost two decades after she left, she felt a “sense of disconnect [...] Jack’s Appetizing was now Rivera’s Auto Parts, the shoe repair Bar-B-Que Chicken, the hardware store a pawnbroker” (“My Neighborhood”). Nothing is the same – every place she could have pointed to as a child as a local landmark has been, inevitably, replaced.

In the course of my research I found many texts devoted to the notion of returning to one's childhood home after a long absence. These homes were frequently located in the outer-limits of either the Bronx (as articulated by Gornick) or Brooklyn. *Mainland* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer depicts its protagonist, *en route* to somewhere else, automatically driving to the homes of her grandmother and parents in Sheepshead Bay ("Nothing stays the same. She knows that but does not believe it" (126)); "The Long-Distance Runner," a short story by Grace Paley, takes its protagonist back to Brighton Beach where she ends up staying with the family who now live in her old apartment; and "Miss Darlene's Dancing School," a poem by Lynne Sharon Schwartz, portrays the author's bemused homecoming to East Flatbush ("A woman asked, What was I doing there?/I didn't say this was my childhood home, simply/that I wanted ice cream, and she said,/You must want it real bad, to come out here" (*No Way Out* 67-68)). In all cases the family home is the centre of gravity towards which the author/protagonist finds themselves magnetically drawn, but more often than not their return provides a sense that the place, and thus their memory, has been diminished by the journey back.

From Nothing to No Place

Where before there was cohesion, now there is "disconnect" (Gornick "My Neighborhood"). Gilbert Tauber said to me that the Cross-Bronx Expressway in particular created this sense of what *was* (familiar) and what *is* (unfamiliar) by constructing "a psychological barrier – whereas *before* you would go and visit Aunt Minnie twice a week, *now* to visit Aunt Minnie you've got this scary, noisy place." I spoke to Joe Rosen, born in the East Bronx close to Tremont Avenue in 1953 (where he remained until 1972), who recalled having to cross to the other side of the Cross-Bronx to get to his school: "I thought I was going to another place" is how he describes his journey, continuing that it was "almost like a foreign country [...] 'I

better bring my passport” was the attitude, ““because I’m going to the other side of the Cross-Bronx.”” The evolution from the Grand Concourse to the Cross-Bronx had created a powerfully symbolic before and after.

In *All That is Solid* Berman bemoans the fact that the Interstate Highway System encouraged drivers to fall into a seamless flow which could quite feasibly take them from one coast to the other “without encountering any traffic lights at all” (330). Vidler states that in a city stripped of memory, one wanders “across already vanished thresholds that leave only traces of their former status as places. Amidst the ruins [...] we cross nothing to go nowhere” (185). Arguably this city is much like the one Berman describes – a city which encourages people to drive endlessly without needing to stop or look back, encouraging what Jean Baudrillard describes as a “a spectacular form of amnesia” (10).

Writing about the ways in which the Los Angeles freeway has led to the subdivision of that city, encouraging a sense of “extraordinary isolation” that he argues is now a defining characteristic, Klein contends that the “habit” of forward momentum without the structure of a backward glance is “well fixed, like the freeway to work. One literally passes through to arrive, but rarely stops” (85). There seems to be no sense of either space or time quantified in a city like this, no before or after, just movement. This is the ultimate symbolic endpoint of the roadscapes, parkways, highways, and bridges created by Moses and his team – an intertwined system of transit through the metropolis, creating momentum seemingly without end or direction. This is precisely what Jane Jacobs, the hugely influential Greenwich Village activist and writer on postwar urban planning, decried in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* when she wrote of “promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders; expressways that eviscerate great cities” (14). In the rubble of the modern city, stripped of its significance, there is no link between the past and the present; no crossing that can bridge the two, and no way to cast a backward glance. Deprived of this connection,

this sense of tangible evolution, both the past and the present become meaningless – become this “nowhere,” or no place, which we cross into.

M. Christine Boyer builds on the work of Halbwachs when she argues in *The City of Collective Memory* that while history (that which is made visible in the landscape, or Halbwachs’ “historical memory” (52)) is “manipulable and re-presentable in a play of lost significance,” memory is “plural, alive, and cannot be appropriated” (Boyer 67). Boyer contends that history “fixes the past in a uniform manner [...] reorganizes and resuscitates collective memories and popular imagery, freezing them in stereotypical forms [...] sets up a fictional space manipulating time and place, and re-presenting facts and events” (66-67). Meanwhile, memory, defined separately and distinctly, “occurs behind our backs, where it can neither be appropriated nor controlled” (67). This definition of history, in the context of *All That is Solid*, is given physical form in the Cross-Bronx Expressway and in Moses’ plans for the future of New York City. Dolores Hayden also articulates this distinction when she writes that the power of place is its ability to encompass: “shared time in the form of shared memory” (9). It is memory she singles out here, not history, or a more physical representation of the past. Memory, what used to be visible in the landscape and now remains only in symbolical form, is represented by Berman’s witnessing of the familiar buildings being torn from their foundations. Halbwachs’ definition of memory as multiplicitous and intangible also has much in common with de Certeau’s conception of the “mobile city” (110). These are insights that the first-person interviews I draw on in this and subsequent chapters help to confirm.

How to create a dialogue between history and memory when the pull of the latter is so much more intimate? To be modern, Berman tells us, is to “experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal” (*All That is* 345). In a 2012 plan for a new university course he decided to call “The Romance

of Public Space,” he begins by contextualising his wish to structure his classes around the Cold War years and its consequences for our ability to feel at home in such a world. In those years, he argues, “the great world powers nearly destroyed the world. Hope for a place where the self could feel at home still survived, but there were serious doubts that that place was a nation state [...] Was there something else?” (quoted in Sclan, “Romance” 336-337). For Berman, that “other sort of place” was the city, where people could truly “become themselves,” at home in a world on the street where they could meld their own identity with that of their city (337). We must find a way to make a home in the maelstrom, he argues, but we must also accept that this home is haunted. In order to survive in the modern urban world you must create a dialogue with the ghosts you are haunted by, even if one of those ghosts is yourself.

Berman often expresses a desire to go back to the start, to confront the Bronx he left and which New York City seems to wish to forget. At the end of *All That is Solid*, this confrontation takes the imagined physical form of a Bronx Mural. This mural, he suggests, could run alongside eight miles of the Cross-Bronx, so that the driver’s view would become “a trip into its buried depths” or a vision (or hallucinatory flashback) of “houses, even of rooms full of people just as they were before the Expressway cut through them all” (341, 342). Here is the Cross-Bronx, again, smashing through Berman’s symbolic history and the formerly intact buildings; it is the before and after of his life. In the absence of the familiar and the empirically real, Berman’s borough becomes dominated by the symbolic. To this “forest of symbols [...] where axes and bulldozers are always at work,” (289) why not add our own symbols, Berman seems to ask, in the form of what Vidler would call a “harbinger of the unseen” (167)? For Berman these harbingers should remain somehow visible, because “a world in which all ruins have been cleared away” or made invisible, “is a world that wants to forget” (“Roots, Ruins” 23).

His remedy is that the past (in the form of these houses, these “rooms full of people just as they were”) should not be forgotten as the modern conception of progress in postwar urban space seems to demand, but should instead continue to exist and to run in parallel. This is an opportunity to build a bridge between history and memory. His proposition speaks to his desire to make the absent present. Berman sees the “rich and strange experience” of the Mural, which conjures “fantasies” and “ghosts” (*All That is* 343), as providing access to, or an outline of, the parts of the city which are felt (memory) but not seen (history). This is a project to anchor memory at the heart of history. Like his childhood home and the rubble that characterises its environs, the Mural is also a “harbinger of the unseen” (Vidler 167). Its actual construction would mean that the unseen and absent (the past) becomes the seen (the present), or at least the memorialised. This begs the question of whether the Mural would make the city more uncanny, not less.

Berman believes that dialogue is necessary. By this he means dialogue between history, i.e. what is tangibly real and visible in the present (the Cross-Bronx) and memory, i.e. the symbolic (the Grand Concourse) *and* the imagined (the Bronx Mural). But this ongoing dialogue means that “modernists can never be done with the past: they must go on forever haunted by it, digging up its ghosts, recreating it” (346). This rather romantic longing for ghosts and ruins suggests that its true object may not be something real, something solid. A desire to wallow in nostalgia can signify, writes Anne Friedberg, an attempt to smooth out something rough-hewn; it can provide a space in which one can “hide the discontinuities between the present and the past” (188). But these “discontinuities” are where the uncanny thrives. The uncanny *is* a discontinuity, somehow given physical form. It is a manifestation of an in-between-ness, and it is this ambivalence which exacerbates into existence something other than the binary of history as represented by the visible landscape and memory as found

in the image held in the mind's eye. Something which lies in the space between the two is revealed through this juxtaposition.

Grief and Homesickness

In a 1984 article for *The Village Voice*, Berman writes about having returned to his old neighbourhood four years previously in terms that speak to the performance of a pilgrimage of sorts. This is similar to Vivian Gornick's 2001 essay "My Neighborhood: Its Fall and Rise," suggesting there is a certain audience for nostalgic returns to the ruined place of one's birth. The timing of Gornick's article should also be noted; it was published less than three months before the attacks of September 11, 2001, after which, Gornick told me, the very concept of nostalgia in the city became obsolete: "it was so hard to think about the city as it ever was before that moment" (Personal interview).

Berman explains in the *Village Voice* article that he and his family had often spoken of their home on 1460 College Avenue ("we would talk about 'our house'" ("Roots, Ruins" 18)), the apartment building where they had lived for twenty years. None of them had been back. "No one had heard anything about the building since the fires, collapses, and abandonments had begun. Maybe no news was good news, but during the plague years none of us could bear to go back and take a look." In *The Cost of Living* (1983), the author Bernard Malamud articulates this same fear of looking directly at the haunted spaces of the past that now mean too much to glance at: "Afterwards when Sam went by the store, even in daylight he was afraid to look, and quickly walked past, as they had the haunted house when he was a boy" (185). Just as Berman describes in *All That is Solid*, his words contain the sense that a return is somehow forbidden, or at least bad luck, as though the fleeing residents of the South Bronx were repeating the Biblical escape from Sodom (recalling Didion's words in *Where I Was From*: "Were not such abandonments the very heart and soul of the crossing story? [...]

Never dwell on what got left behind, never look back at all?” (198-199)). But Berman does return, setting out to rediscover what he felt he had lost. He explains, as though feeling he must justify his wanderings, that “Many modernisms of the past have found themselves by forgetting,” continuing that the modernists who came later in the 1970s had to, conversely, “find themselves by remembering” (*All That is* 332). Either way, he implies, we can only be “found” in our history, through our relationship with the past.

Berman chooses to find himself through communing with the latter type of 1970s modernism, in order to “generate a dialogue with my own past, my own lost home, my own ghosts” (340). But Berman’s home (like the homes depicted by all the authors examined throughout this thesis) is haunted. “I want to go back to where this essay started, to my Bronx, vital and thriving only yesterday, ruins and ashen wildness today.” Such a house can, if “condemned to history or the demolition site” as Anthony Vidler states, produce its own ghosts and become an “object of memory [...] an instrument, that is, of generalized nostalgia” (64).

In *All That is Solid*, Berman describes the act of walking through the South Bronx as an adult; as a child of the pre-Cross-Bronx Bronx, this is a process of recognition followed inescapably by mourning. Returning after a long absence he is reunited with neighbourhood blocks that “feel so much like blocks you left long ago, blocks you thought had vanished forever, that you will wonder if you are seeing ghosts – or if you yourself are a ghost” (344). As time went by Berman found it increasingly unbearable to walk in the shadow of the past; he felt that the “ruins” (he repeats the word frequently, pointedly) were overwhelming his sense of what had preceded them. So much of what he knew is gone, he writes, that “we know we will never feel so much at home anywhere again” (325). He confesses in the Afterword, written in 2010, that during the 1970s he had “walked through those ruins obsessively,” seeking a “core of meaning” inside the skeleton of what used to be (352). He

quotes Octavio Paz, who laments the fact that because modernity cuts itself off at the root, willing itself forward, it is therefore “unable to return to its beginnings” (Paz 162). Berman expresses a desire to overcome this inability by continuously returning to the site of memory which now seems bereft, its insides carved out, leaving only holes and cracks in the landscape which speak to what used to exist. Friedberg writes that the nostalgic pull which Berman articulates here is a form of compulsion – the compulsion “to repeat” which is “based in the desire to return” (189). Berman finds himself determined “to go back,” his display of repetition compulsion setting him on an endless loop (*All That is* 340). In his Introduction to *New York Calling*, Berman ponders this pull backwards, writing of *All That is Solid* that he “came to feel I couldn’t finish till I had gone back to where I’d started. So I went back [...] What was I looking for?” (Introduction 18-19).

What does Berman want to go back *to* exactly? So much of his Bronx, “our Bronx” has gone; he knows he will “never feel so much at home anywhere again. Why did it go? Did it have to go?” (*All That is* 325). As Roberta Rubenstein writes in *Home Matters* (2001), the very notion of home is not just “a physical structure of a geographical location but always an emotional space” (1). Berman explains, as though feeling he must justify his flaneur-like wanderings, that “the look towards home is a look ‘back’, backward in time [...] back into our own childhood, back into society’s historical past” (*All That is* 333). All that seemed solid in his own life has fallen apart, and though he recognises that the past is always “in a process of disintegration” he finds himself compelled to seek out signs of that disintegration (“When I talk about ruins, I’m an interested party” (“Roots, Ruins” 18)), just as he watched the fall of the Grand Concourse as a boy. Nostalgia, from the Greek *nostos* (a return) and *algos* (painful), describes a sense of longing for something, for a particular space or place from which one is “separated by distance and time” (Friedberg 188). It is, in short, homesickness. As Hugh Haughton puts it in his Introduction to “The Uncanny,” this feeling

“reminds us not only that there is no place like home, but that, in another sense, there is no other place” (Haughton xlix). There is no place like home; home is that ‘no-place’. What to do when your point of origin, your centre, could not hold? For Berman, there is a home somewhere, buried in the Bronx, that has been lost to him. Though he chose to leave, he can’t help but look back; though the return is painful, he can’t help but revisit. There is no other place, but that place is no-place. In his search for “something solid” he instead finds himself “embracing ghosts” (*All That is* 333).

The overwhelming sense that something has been omitted from the physical text of his history permeates much of Berman’s writing. In his work on the Bronx he writes in terms of mourning and bereavement. “As I saw one of the loveliest of these buildings being wrecked for the road,” he tells us, “I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life” (295). In 1955 Berman and his family had moved into the Northwest Bronx, at his father’s behest, settling at Claremont Park. In a 2013 lecture, Berman waxes lyrical about these halcyon days and the verdant landscape of their new neighbourhood: “It was very green, there were the remains of forests. My sister and I missed the old neighborhood, but our parents were happy in the new one. They had a room of their own [...] they would walk in the woods hand in hand” (Lewis Mumford Lecture 3). In his programme notes accompanying the play *The Day the Bronx Died*, Berman goes so far as to compare the South Bronx as was to Arcadia: “I started to write this essay with the phrase, ‘I, too, grew up in the South Bronx.’ Then I realized how much my words sounded like the classical elegiac motto, Et in Arcadia ego, ‘I, too, was in Arcadia’” (“Life and Death” 208). Though he cannot help but note the ominous melancholy that accompanies such a vision, as he continues: “And I remembered [...] that even in Arcadia, death is there. It rings true, all right. People who grew up in the Bronx [...] can’t seem to write about our sweetest, happiest childhood years without implanting deep shadows in the landscape.” The effect of his father’s sudden death only six

months after the move is explicitly linked to Berman's fascination with urban ruin and renewal:

We moved because of what my father said was coming to our neighborhood, and indeed what did come, not instantly, but soon enough: RUINS [...] The whole episode would be a perfectly ordinary 'move to the suburbs,' at a time when millions of people were making that move – except that, six months later, suddenly, my father died of a heart attack. Our family crashed and plummeted. Our life was shattered, in a place where we hardly had a life. People had a hard time getting to our new house, to mourn with us; mostly they didn't come. I became obsessed forever with the destruction of cities.

(Lewis Mumford Lecture 3-4)

In *On the Town*, his investigation into Times Square and its chequered past, Berman writes about the connection he made between his father and downtown Manhattan. He consciously links the bereavement he felt at the loss of his father with his hesitance at returning to that part of the city for some time after his father's death. "I remember how I knew 'downtown' was there, just a subway ride away, and I knew I'd been there only yesterday, or maybe the day before, yet today, with my father dead, it sounded so hopelessly far away" (xxiv). This point is reiterated in a paper given in 1997:

It was my father who first took me to the Square. In the early 1950s, on Saturday afternoons, we would go to the Paramount and the Palace theatres and Lindy's and Tofinetti's restaurants and the lobby and café of the Astor Hotel. Afterward, we would hang around the streets and check out the people and the signs. [...] All those places and spaces were magical, as he was, like him (d. 1955), they were all torn down before their time. For a time I walked in empty spaces alone. ("Too much is not")

Here Berman gives us further examples of what Milgram deemed the “mental maps” (52) of this “mobile city” (de Certeau 110), a city which has taken on Berman’s “impress” (Duncan 62), rendering a series of seemingly insignificant city landmarks as deeply ingrained with meaning and history. In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo reveals that each description of the many cities he has seen in the realm of Kublai Khan could be an echo of Venice, his hometown: “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice” (86). In much the same way, for Berman it is the Bronx, Tremont, 1460 College Avenue, which he sees refracted in splintered fragments throughout the larger urban tapestry of New York City. For Berman, memory is a place, or a series of places, the distance to and from which cannot necessarily be calculated; a distance which becomes, after his father’s death, almost impossible to breach.

Grief underlies this city of collective memory, like the oil that sits beneath the earth in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* and the water that alternately bursts through and retreats into the land in Lurie’s *The Nowhere City* and Waldie’s *Holy Land*. Each text I have examined in this chapter contains signs and traces of Berman’s attempts to process his sense of loss – the loss of his neighbourhood, his childhood, his sense of personal history, his father (each folded inside the other). As Halbwachs says, “Any inhabitant for whom these old walls, run-down homes, and obscure passageways create a little universe, who has many remembrances fastened to these images now obliterated forever, feels a whole part of himself dying with these things” (134). These feelings of loss have deep roots; often he asks himself what more he could have done to prevent these losses, finding himself wanting. Could he have stopped “the dread road from being built?” (*All That is* 326). For though he lays the blame for the end of his childhood at the feet of Robert Moses, he is also unflinchingly honest about his own choices with regard to his separation as an adult from the site of his youth. He confesses that regardless of the path bulldozed through the Bronx, he would have ultimately, embodying the

very spirit of modernity, left his childhood home of his own accord. “Men need to recover their roots,” he writes in 1966, “not to sink into, but to grow out of” (*Lower East Side* 1).³⁵

In a 1975 paper for *Ramparts*, Berman anticipates what he will later conclude in *All That is Solid* – that we are culpable for our own desertion of the past, and that this is the tragedy of our modern lives: “a tragedy in which we ourselves turn out to be implicated, a lot more deeply than we think” (“Buildings Are Judgement” 38). The Cross-Bronx, he muses elsewhere:

gets you out of the Bronx in eight minutes flat. I think sadly of a time that life in the Bronx was so sweet that you wouldn't want to get out of it at all. (Was it really so sweet? Can real life ever be as sweet as your memory of your lost childhood?) When I do ride Moses' road, I feel at once elated, as if I'm in touch with the deepest springs of my life, and horrified, as if I'm trampling on loved ones' graves. (“Expressway and Me”)

He recalls a conversation in 1967 with a fellow-Bronxite, anticipating that in a discussion about Moses and the Cross-Bronx, they would feel the same pain at the demise of their neighbourhood. Instead, the man expresses a sense of satisfaction that the highway would destroy any trace of their childhood homes: “Fine, he said, the sooner the better” (*All That is* 327). For this is the paradox of modern urban life: we are as desperate to grow up and leave ourselves behind as we are to preserve that which we abandon. Or as Berman puts it when describing the rush to get out and move on: “We fight back the tears and step on the gas” (291).

³⁵ This is something nearly everyone I spoke to who had grown up in the Bronx repeated. Howard told me that everyone in his neighbourhood eventually moved: “the children, they wanted something better,” while Vivian confirmed that “We all wanted to get out. As children nobody dreamed of repeating this life.” Berman repeats this notion that abandonment was necessary in one of many notes he made while researching Robert Moses: “Our hearts break for these neighborhoods now that they're gone – but when we ourselves were growing up in them, didn't most of us basically want out?” (Handwritten notes).

Chapter 3. Imagining California: *The Nowhere City* and *Play It As It Lays*

In this chapter the two works of fiction I examine which represent the imagined spaces of California, specifically here the urban sprawl of Los Angeles during the mid- to late 1960s, are Alison Lurie's *The Nowhere City* (1965) and *Play It As It Lays* (1970) by Joan Didion. *The Nowhere City* is concerned with its urban spaces being somehow out of, or beyond, a quantifiable sense of time. In the first half of this chapter I track the divergent attitudes of the novel's central characters, Paul and Katherine Cattleman, towards a Los Angeles which seems to reach for the future and disrespect the past. Both must live within the temporal and spatial incongruity of Los Angeles and react to this new reality in different ways. Is any value placed upon history in the Los Angeles of *The Nowhere City*? Are any historical traces rendered spatially visible? How does the city's pre-urban past physically manifest itself? I seek to provide answers to these questions in my examination of Lurie's depiction of a city seemingly defined by what David Fine describes as its "spatial disarray" and "temporal confusion" (*Los Angeles in Fiction* 12). Fine's "spatial disarray" is very similar to Dolores Hayden's "spatial conflict," (9) previously mentioned in Chapter 2, in terms of its articulation of the way in which urban renewal in cities like New York and Los Angeles can disrupt the connection, as visible in the physical landscape of a city, between the past and the present. As we also saw in Chapter 1, at first glance, in Los Angeles it seems that the past does not count and is not accounted for, because the city makes the very concept of time passing conspicuous in its absence. Yet the past has been built to last in unexpected ways. It is not entirely buried or absent, but instead secreted and awaiting excavation.

In the second half of this chapter I look at Didion's novel, *Play It As It Lays*, which tells the story of Maria Wyeth and her psychological disintegration, played out across the soundstage of late 1960s Los Angeles. I begin with a discussion of Maria's desire to control the narrative of her past and mentally compartmentalise components of her personal history,

the ways in which she fails to completely excise painful memories, and how this failure manifests itself in her disturbed experience of space and her articulation of particular associative objects and images. Thereafter, I consider her attempt to remain in the eternal present in the form of the freeway, querying whether this gives her real freedom from looking backwards, before questioning whether she does indeed embody her mantra to “Never discuss. Cut” (*Play It* 203). Both *The Nowhere City* and *Play It As It Lays* query the consequences for those who endeavour to exist in an a-temporal state, outside the borders of their own historical context.

“An Eternal, Dizzying Present”: *The Nowhere City*

Paul and Katherine Cattleman are at odds from the start of Lurie’s *The Nowhere City*. Her two central protagonists, temporary emigrants from the East who reside for a short but life-changing period of time in the West, approach the foreign terrain of Los Angeles from two opposing points of view. Initially, where Harvard historian Paul feels curiosity, his wife, research assistant Katherine, feels revulsion, seeing only a flagrant inauthenticity and wilful surreality where Paul sees “limitless freedom and opportunity” (231). Paul admits this vision is based on a mythological view of the frontier: “it had come to him straight out of American history: ‘Go West, Young Man.’” Katherine, conversely, is fearful of the *newness* that surrounds her; the fact that everything seems “so exaggerated, so unnatural” (11).

Despite his professional commitment to the past, Paul is fascinated by the city’s ability to imagine itself as the urban wave of the future. Like Reyner Banham in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Paul sets out to “read Los Angeles in the original” (Banham 5) or to submit to, rather than fight, the tide which pulls him out to sea. Thus, he goes about diligently exploring this future-scape, for if “he wanted to find out how it felt to live in the future, wasn’t that almost his duty?” (*Nowhere* 6). There has long been a tradition

of writing about Los Angeles which paints it as a city somehow speaking to us from some future space. In agreement with Katherine's sense that she has left a meaningful life defined by continuity behind her in the East, Fine writes that the past "is left behind, in the East; the future lies before us, in the West" ("Running" 209). In fact, what Paul learns is that the Los Angeles of *The Nowhere City* is a place where the future is deferred. He finds himself living in a seemingly permanent present – caught ambivalently between anticipating an imminent imaginary future and comparing it to a past he has only read about. In turn, what at first seems to Katherine the most awful impediment to her acceptance of the city, that is, its apparent fraudulence and lack of consequence, ultimately becomes the reason why she grows to accept it and to find her place within it. As Richard Lehan puts it, they both, in different ways, "fall into a hole in time" ("American Novel" 449). "Los Angeles is so far away from everywhere and everything here is so peculiar; it's as if it weren't real," Katherine observes (*Nowhere* 200). If it isn't quite real, then surely nothing that happens here counts.

In the end, the diametrically opposed positions of husband and wife are reversed, and Paul comes around to Katherine's initial diagnosis of the city: "there was no past or future – only an eternal dizzying present" (267). But I argue that their new roles are not so easily assumed, and that neither Katherine nor Paul are quite right in their assumptions about Los Angeles. Katherine describes her erstwhile husband as someone who is so obsessed with "what happened before now or what might possibly happen some time later" that he is "squeezed up between the past and the future" to the point where he is not able to fully experience life (275). The couple implicitly appear to agree on one thing: in Los Angeles, Paul's future is something continually anticipated but never quite realised. But this is equally true of his life on the opposite coast. Safely ensconced in the East, he dreams of the wife he has left behind, her imaginary figure "running across the grass towards him [...] her arms full of leaves and wild flowers" (270) like some bucolic goddess. Simultaneously he

contemplates other potential love affairs in the near-to-immediate future: “they exclaimed how much they had missed him, how glad they were he was coming back – suggesting long, long talks, perhaps more, to come” (268). His wife, a remnant of a past life, is no more than a fantasy (even the physical attributes with which he associates her are no longer accurate), and his future lovers are hypothetical rather than tangible.

Just as his long-gestating report for his employers at the Nutting Research and Development Corporation is reduced to a few loose sheaves of paper signifying nothing, for Paul, in the end, Los Angeles has been merely a transient state of mind; a fantastic playpen in which he amused himself for a while. It was not real, and ultimately disappears from whence it came when he decides he has had enough. But for his wife, his relocation has made *him* emphatically unreal (“It’s funny, but you just don’t seem real to me any more” (276)), and as the city melts into the smog beneath the plane that will take him back East, it seems they both disappear, as though their existence on opposite coasts is mutually exclusive: “Now everything below, between the mountains and the sea, was gone. Los Angeles had disappeared into a bowl of smog” (276).

At the beginning of his stay in Los Angeles, Paul frequently expresses his admiration for the city’s commitment to living in the now: “Thank Christ he had decided to come to Los Angeles, where people were really alive and things happened right now as well as in the past” (107). But its ability to transform and recalibrate itself begins to have negative connotations for him. In due course Paul discovers that despite having been hired to write the history of the Nutting Corporation, his employers care very little for the fruits of his academic labours: “They didn’t care about the past: they were only interested in the present and the immediate future” (49). His research, without the proper context within which to situate it outside of the “piles of paper” given to him which contain insufficient data, becomes nothing more than “flakes of paint fallen on to his desk [...] broken, meaningless messages” (156). There is no

sense of connection or continuity that links these messages together. Reduced to “disordered layers of paper,” Paul’s work lacks a sense of accumulation. Rather, these scraps and flakes reduce the past to the parts of its sum: “nothing remained but these scattered notes and scraps” (158). Presenting his findings to an uninterested executive, Paul realises that what he is contributing to is the sense of lack which permeates the city: “it was the expensive manufacture of nothing [...] no result – no product.” Paul imagines the machinery of the Corporation devouring his research – “Had it already eaten his history?” – his papers reduced to nothing more than “unwanted and obsolete materials” which are processed and pulverised (159). History at the Corporation becomes a disparate collection of scattered scraps which, without a sense of continuity, mean nothing at all. “Paul’s history turns out to be ‘Nutting’ in every sense” comments Judie Newman drily (47). Anyway, “what does it matter,” asks Paul’s colleague, “It’s all in the past” (*Nowhere* 231). Ultimately Paul finds value in history, defining himself in the end, above all, as a historian. But history, in academic, theoretical terms, has little explicit value or currency here.

Katherine in turn is ultimately able to move beyond her own history, but this is achieved through a rejection and inversion of all and any signs of her past. While she ultimately embraces the “eternal present and disordered spatial (dis) organisation,” her husband returns East, having hit his limit “in the antihistorical city” (Fine, *Imagining* 245). By the time Paul has been back to his Cambridge coterie, re-establishing himself as a dyed-in-the-wool East Coast historian, and subsequently returned to collect his wife, Katherine has come to see Los Angeles as her permanent residence of choice. “Welcome home” reads her note to him, not “Welcome back” (*Nowhere* 271). She changes her name to Kay, her brown hair to ash blonde, and her soft New England tone to a California twang. It is the act of ridding herself of signs of her previous history (she even bestows her inherited furniture upon Paul to take with him back East), in addition to her insistence on constructing a self-narrative

which befits her new identity (her hair “wasn’t dyed, she had insisted, only bleached by the sun” (275)) that most aligns her with the Los Angeles attitude.

In Los Angeles it seems possible to alter one’s identity. But are such alterations permanent? Is it possible to completely distance oneself from one’s identity, and from the past which informs it? Paul thinks not: “He wondered whether, after so many months in Los Angeles, he were still an historian. [...] In his imagination he saw the smog gathering inside his mind, too, month after month, until – But thank God, that turned out to be an illusion” (267). We are privy to a brief moment of slippage in Katherine’s façade at the mention of her parents’ furniture which symbolises the past she has rejected (“Katherine’s face altered, a shadow of her old, pale, complex inward look crossed it”) before she recovers, resuming her new identity (275). This suggests that it is simply sleight of hand that allows her to maintain the illusion of who she now is.

Upon first arriving in the city, Katherine, removed from the rote and the familiar, struggles to adapt to what she sees as total de-contextualisation. Los Angeles refuses to situate itself within the context of chronology (“a dozen architectural styles were represented in painted stucco”), within a cyclical seasonal framework (“I don’t like lilies or whatever they are growing at this time of year, or peaches”), or even within a familiar time-zone (“‘What time is it really?’ she asked. ‘It feels dreadfully late’” (4, 11, 12)). The notion of things being somehow out of time or displaced recurs with frequency throughout the novel. “I don’t like the sun shining all the time in November,” complains Katherine, “and the grass growing. Its unnatural, it’s as if we were all shut up in some horrible big greenhouse away from the real world and the real seasons” (38). The fruit is “over-ripe” or “out of season” (55, 44). The complete absence “of seasons that conform to those of the East or Midwest,” argues Fine, “signals the disappearance of time itself” (*Los Angeles* 12). Without

the juxtaposition of the winter and the summer, the old and the new, there is no sense of repetition and renewal. Without sequence, there is no sense of consequence.³⁶

Everything here is very slightly out of context or somehow ill-fitting. Los Angeles residents look “out of place [...] much too small for the roads and buildings” (*Nowhere* 231). The animals Katherine sees at the Putty mansion have “the air of creatures who have been forcibly torn from their natural habitat” (58), as do the paintings by the Old Masters which line the walls of the millionaire’s abode. The *unnaturalness* of Los Angeles, its ludicrous incongruity and failure to observe or even care about notions of correct time or seasonal weather or realistically-sized fruit, strike fear into Katherine’s rigid notions of what is appropriate, at least when compared to what is deemed normal on the East Coast. The Cattlemans’ Victorian furniture, inherited from Katherine’s parents, looks incongruous in the blinding brightness of the bare Mar Vista bedroom. The wooden fruit carved into the mahogany bed frame is a dead weight next to the superfluity of peaches and golden flowers splayed across various surfaces. Katherine’s desire to hold on to her sense of East Coast history is evident in her itemisation of each piece of furniture. The past is for her a static image that she does not at this point wish to change, much like her inflexible idea of who she is as a person under the watchful eye of this vision of inescapable history. Her family heirlooms are taken out of plain sight and sequestered in the garage: “Gradually, over the past few months, the garage had filled up with ghosts” (130). Such homely objects are literally, as Freud puts it, “removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden,” becoming signs of an ambivalent attitude to a once-cherished heritage (“Uncanny” 133). Here the old is replaced by the new and the past is neatly displaced: “it just didn’t look right here” (*Nowhere* 129).

³⁶ Alison Lurie explains that the novel is structured around the missing “moods and forms” which define life on the East Coast and are missing on the West, in her experience: “there are no seasons in Los Angeles [...] there is no day or night [...] there are no days of the week [...] there is no past or future. It is sort of an eternal present” (“Alison Lurie: The Nowhen City”).

Katherine is accustomed to deriving meaning from the passing of time in a sequential, structured manner. But Los Angeles lacks “the dimension of time” (267) and the absence of seasons or inclement weather means that ““everything runs together”” (144). Even the stores do not adhere to normal opening hours. Day and night become almost interchangeable, and mealtimes are not strictly observed in uniformity: ““You go to a restaurant for dinner and you see people sitting at the next table eating breakfast. Everything’s all mixed up and wrong”” (144). For Dr Einsam, Katherine’s boss, the absence of a schedule imposed by appropriate timings for all activities means he is free to create his own sense of temporal structure: ““A place like this, Los Angeles, actually it’s a great opportunity”” (148). Between midnight and four a.m., it transpires, Los Angeles experiences its “best time”; even Venice Beach, discovers Paul, “came alive” at night (148, 105). Paul is equally aware of the fact that “out here it was so easy to lose track of time” (208). As I describe in Chapter 1, time also seems to have its own logic in the Los Angeles of *The Big Sleep*. The entire book spans only a period of five days, which seems absurd, as though Philip Marlowe has become a kind of Southern Californian Rip Van Winkle. ““This is Marlowe”” he says to Norris over the telephone, ““Remember me? I met you about a hundred years ago – or was it yesterday?”” as though the two are interchangeable (84). Perhaps in Chandler’s Los Angeles, they are.

Time seems to work differently here, with the five days of *The Big Sleep*’s time-span furling and un-furling endlessly and erratically, and memory proving to be equally fitful. In “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” published a year after *The Nowhere City*, Joan Didion describes a similar sense of unquantifiable time. “Time passes and I lose the thread,” (80) she writes, her words echoing Katherine’s anxiety about losing her thread in the labyrinth, as though she is Theseus without Ariadne. Katherine’s sense of time in Los Angeles is defined by suspension and anticipation; the movement of the present into the past is endlessly deferred, and even the time of day is an irrelevance. In a 2014 interview Lurie describes Los

Angeles as “really the nowhere city and the *nowhen* city” (“Nowhen City” emphasis added). What is repressed here does not seem to be individual memory so much as persistent signs of tangible city history. Katherine’s attitude in the earlier stages of the novel are reflective of a longing for history, but her historical context is dislocated, her family’s furniture removed to the garage. How can one possibly situate oneself within any kind of space/time continuum when space is constantly expanding and time apparently does not exist?

Alongside the temporal derangement which resides in Los Angeles is its counterpart: a sense of spatial disorder. In *Postmodern Geographies* Edward Soja contends that Los Angeles has long defied “conventional categorical description of the urban, of what is a city” (245); indeed it has “deconstruct[ed] the urban into a confusing collage of signs” which signify only the imaginary and outlandish. In *The Dream Endures*, Kevin Starr describes Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s as an “eclectic, even a hodgepodge city,” full of a “sometimes phantasmagoric variety of streetscapes” (157).³⁷ Paul sees this for himself when he looks at the modern houses which are built as signifiers of a past never personally experienced by their inhabitants, these reconstituted versions of history becoming ludicrously anachronistic when taken out of the context of place and time. The “Louisiana plantation house,” for example, and the “movie executive’s castle,” which is “glaringly Colonial” (*Nowhere* 232-233). Fine writes that in the landscape of Southern California there is a sense of constant juxtaposition, disruption, and contrast, which he calls “spatial incongruity” (*Los Angeles* 11). This can be found in the offsetting of the mountains against the plains, the ocean against the arid mass of desert, the flora and fauna met by smog and neon lights. “Built into

³⁷ James Howard Kunstler in *The Geography of Nowhere* points to the “fantasy aesthetic” of the Los Angeles movie set as the originator of the fact that “Angelenos became accustomed to outlandish buildings springing up in their communities, buildings that had no physical continuity with their surroundings” (209, 210). For further reading on architectural anachronism see also: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*.

the order of the city,” writes Richard Lehan, “was the disorder of nature; neither completely contained the other” (*City in Literature* 170).

In *The City in Literature*, Lehan posits that the city promises “a way of regulating the environment, subduing the elements and allowing a certain control over nature” (13).

However, the irrepressible character of the land is an equal and opposite promise. Despite attempts by the city to suppress its nature, notably in the form of the grid system (as outlined in my chapters 1 and 4 on Raymond Chandler and D.J. Waldie respectively), there is a certain chaos deep in its foundations which cannot be entirely extinguished. The articulation of space is integral to any discussion about Los Angeles, and Richard S. Weinstein contributes to this through his definition of topographic development in Southern California as “ad hoc” and characterised by a “lack of hierarchical organization” (34). These are features which contribute to the seemingly nonsensical approach to the organisation of space in this city, much of it either misused or disused.

The struggle to irrigate the region pushed Southern California into its famous horizontal sprawl – the funnelling of water from the Owens River in 1913 (as first detailed in Chapter 1 on Chandler) encouraged the moulding of the city into one continuous form, connecting the various townships which required water. Starr argues in *The Dream Endures* that equally important to the eventual shape of the region was the “interurban electric system created by Henry Huntington” and his Pacific Electric Railway, which also emphasised the settlement of the region as “one continuum, one vast horizontal city,” as did the emergence and sustained popularity of the automobile and the creation of the freeway system (a subject also explored earlier in Chapter 1) (159). Autophilia aside, for Starr it is the “vast spaces” of the Southern California land that have ensured “the bold and continuous progress of the Los Angeles plain.” These spaces have predicted and even ensured the particular form that the city would ultimately take. The horizontal scope of L.A. was embedded in the very fabric of

the emerging city; it was “the fundamental orientation of the urban settlements filling the coastal plain between mountain and sea.” In the years between 1880 and 1932, Los Angeles grew “from a town of 10,000 people to covering roughly 29 square miles to become the country’s principal western metropolis with 1.2 million people and a territory of 442 square miles” (Dear 89).

Ultimately, Los Angeles was “gridded and subdivided seven times larger than was necessary” (Starr, *Dream Endures* 159), before being sold off, as explained in Chapter 1. The disorganised sprawl of Los Angeles as it expands throughout Southern California creates pockets of misinterpreted and misused space – the “Vacant lots, parking lots, irrational left-over spaces” which in turn encourage a sense of “porosity, flux, and impermanence” (Weinstein 35). In *The Nowhere City*, Lurie presents a city in which this sprawl continues to unfurl. Both urban and pre-urban landscapes are alternately riddled with marks of disrepair and cosmetic enhancement. She notes the incessant disruption of continuous construction within the built environment of the city, the “dust of excavation” that hangs in the air, the “groans of trucks hauling dirt up and down the hills” and the “great ugly hill[s] of bare earth” that are interspersed between houses that will soon be pulled down (13, 14, 270). Wherever Paul sets his gaze he sees “the red and orange iron skeletons of tall buildings rising above the palms,” and hears the ominous “bang, bang, of construction and demolition” (13, 14). This is a sound which echoes the spectacle created by the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway (see my discussion of Marshall Berman in Chapter 2), a similarity which becomes more emphatic when it is revealed that many of the houses in Paul’s own neighbourhood are being torn down to make way for the extension of the freeway.³⁸ Los

³⁸ Lurie herself lived in Mar Vista in the late 1950s, disclosing that this was due to its affordability because “a freeway was about to be built over it. While we lived on the block, other people began moving away to avoid the dropping trees” (“Alison Lurie: The Nowhen City”).

Angeles, Weinstein argues, is not able to physically represent traces of its past because it is continually in the process of erasing “previous urbanisms,” thus rupturing the possibility of temporal and spatial continuity (76). As previously discussed in Chapter 2 with regard to Marshall Berman, Robert Moses and the Bronx, the movement towards recasting urban spaces in a more modernist light reverberated in a disconnection between past and present in pursuit of the future. This evidently also applies to postwar construction in the Greater Los Angeles area, where the value of progress was greater than that of preservation and, to quote Spiro Kostof, “the concern for context became an irrelevancy” (90). Lewis Mumford writes in *The Urban Prospect* that continually choosing the new and rejecting the old in too extreme a fashion “is bad for continuity and stability in life” (93). Progress should be, he argues, “cumulative” rather than violent, but it seems that not much has changed since nineteenth-century attitudes towards urban (de)construction sought to destroy “every vestige of the past, without preserving any links in form or visible structure between past and future” (125).

At the end of *The Nowhere City* Paul briefly returns to his home in Mar Vista, watching as the bulldozers raze the remaining buildings to the ground and level the lots. Katherine’s exclamation that it should be re-named “Spoil-the-View, California” becomes rather prescient in retrospect (38). He imagines that “everything that had once been across the street was there still, buried beneath the dirt: the flowering bushes, the stucco walls and tiled roofs, the kitchen tables, the lemon trees, the children on their tricycles” (271). Though it may not be possible to excavate kitchen tables and tricycles, the novel implies that remnants of history *are* visible in the Los Angeles landscape. Paul, though seemingly adept at casting himself as a futurist, is still an historian at heart, seeing evidence of the past everywhere in a city he thought existed purely as a facsimile of the future: “he saw parallels between Los Angeles and his ‘own’ period of English history, the late sixteenth century” (7). He goes back further than that – looking at the Santa Monica mountain range visible from actress Glory

Green's pool Paul sees the prehistoric jungle that used to be in the vicinity, replete with "ferns twenty feet tall and giant carnivorous reptiles" (238). As I state in my introduction, Mumford once wrote that "in the city, time becomes visible" (*Culture of Cities* 3). In *The Nowhere City*, the natural wilderness upon which apartment buildings and oil wells now stand was once the stomping ground of the tyrannosaurus and the brontosaurus, whose battles are now "petrified in rock for tourists" (13). The mountainous land visible from Mulholland Drive, which was once home to "flowers and brush" is now a construction site comprised of "flat rectangular lots [...] marked out with stick and string and red rags" (162).

At Venice Beach, Paul wonders at Abbot Kinney's plans for a resort town in 1905 ("I wonder what this place used to be" (105)). The streets of Venice, which once made for a "fashionable seaside resort," have sunk into disrepair. Botanist Kinney had set his sights in the early 1900s on a stretch of beach twenty-five miles outside Los Angeles. He envisioned, of all things, a replica of Venice with its accompanying network of canals, gondolas, marble palaces and gold basilicas. Unfortunately nature could not quite be sufficiently corralled into behaving itself for the masses, and the canals became home to, as historian Morrow Mayo describes, "the perfume of dying kelp and dead fish" (207). By 1933 only remnants of Kinney's dream remained: "Nailed to a telephone pole near the fallen 'Ponte di Rialto' there is a crude wooden sign, a pine board awkwardly lettered, which some romanticist no doubt made and put up tenderly with his own hands. Bravely and sadly it reads: 'The Grand Canal'" (Mayo 209-210).

The transformation of Venice Beach from transplanted resort replica to rundown beachside neighbourhood populated, according to Paul, by "Bums and cripples and criminals" suggests that the past *is* able to persist, but only by taking a rather different form: "The ruins of its earlier glory [...] still stood: the long arcades, the graceful balconies, arches, and pilasters of coloured stucco. But it was all in the last stages of desecration" (*Nowhere*

85). In this city, time is made visible through signs of abandonment, like Kinney's lost Venice and the roads which take residents on an unwitting tour of the city's neglected history, razed to lie beneath new construction or buried beneath the refuse of the city: "Olympic Boulevard, along which Paul was now driving, rose up between the two sections of the Twentieth Century Fox lot, where oil derricks and the plaster-and-lath towers of disused movie sets showed fleetingly above the trees" (231).

Towards the end of the novel, across the street from Paul's house, the buildings sit empty and dark. While the flora and fauna have quickly overrun the derelict buildings, the houses themselves prove structurally unsound and disintegrate with little provocation: "devil-grass cracked the sidewalks, and vines, some flowering profusely, poured over the ruins" (204). The plaster "crack[s] under his feet" as he walks through the rubble, the cement crumbles beneath his weight, and although they have been only empty for a short period of time, "the little stucco villas and castles had already begun to come apart" (205). The stucco houses on the Cattleman's block in Mar Vista, which are short-term architectural "experiments," exhibit "cracks [...] in the flimsy pink and green plaster walls" and are removed in their entirety like chess pieces plucked from a board and taken out of the game: "the chateau slowly turned the corner on to Sepulveda Boulevard [...] and disappeared forever" (5, 205, 206).

The flimsy craftsmanship of the Mar Vista houses anticipates Didion's apocalyptic visions of houses crumbling into the sea in *Play It As It Lays*, the fragile rooms of Waldie's Lakewood house in *Holy Land*, and recalls Chandler's descriptions of cliff-edge abodes living next to potential catastrophe, not to mention Berman's Baudelairean walks through the rubble of the Bronx. Nothing man-made seems to last very long in Los Angeles or in these other examples of fabricated urban and suburban spaces; indeed nothing is built with the idea of lasting in mind. The grass that surrounds the row of vacant houses on Paul's old street is

“half a foot high” when Katherine first shows her employer Dr Einsam her home; the houses are at that point “deserted” but not yet dilapidated (132). By the time she is in the midst of her affair with him, and her husband is at the nadir of his own extra-marital relationship, the area is a “swath of desolate jungle two blocks wide” which resembles the “prehistoric jungle” populated by dinosaurs and inordinately large ferns described by Paul as the original L.A. landscape (204).

It seems feasible that such a past could return, pterodactyls aside, whilst the present crumbles, literally in some cases, under the slightest disruption. Here history is found secreted in the land itself, and in what lies beneath it. Just as the continuing presence of the oil beneath the surface of Chandler’s Los Angeles reminds us that its primordial history has not been entirely excised, in Lurie’s Los Angeles we find a reverberation of what *Lakewood Online* tells us about the geological history of Waldie’s hometown: “A lot is going on under Lakewood. Beds of water, stacked like a gravel, sand, and clay layer cake, lie beneath” (“The Lakewood Story”).

As outlined earlier in this chapter, and in Chapter 1, the mercurial and troublesome history of water in Southern California is another story which brings the past to light. “The drama of water,” writes Starr, “would long remain the essential metaphor of the struggle in Southern California for a regional civilization” (*Inventing* 7). Newman suggests that “Ceci’s cracked bathtub, Glory’s empty pool and the dried out canals of Venice” emphasise that the presence and distribution of water is a defining characteristic of the region (73). Carey McWilliams reports that “In a sense, the history of Southern California is the record of its eternal quest for water, and more water, and still more water” (“Water!” 147). The problem of irrigation resonates even in 1965. Lurie tells us that there has been no rain at all “for months,” and by the time Paul has flown to New England and back, it has not rained “for a year and a half” (*Nowhere* 239, 266). In Beverly Hills the palms are “richly bathed in

artificial rain” while the Colonial mansion belonging to a movie executive is conversely overflowing with water: “Glory stood at the edge of a long, luxurious sunken living-room, done in Beverly Hills Chinese Chippendale. It was now sunken indeed, under two feet of water, which lapped softly at the green plush carpeting” (232, 241-242). Meanwhile, Ceci sometimes has “practically no water in the building for days,” and Paul observes the “dry, barren yards of the slums near the Nutting Corporation” and the taps in Venice Beach which “often gave only a brownish, brackish trickle” (72, 232).

As in the novels of Raymond Chandler, here we find a decayed, deadened natural environment. Yet it is an environment which is capable of claiming back its spaces now covered over by the landscape of modernity like AstroTurf over grass seeds. Though Alison Lurie implies that in Los Angeles history is reduced to “notes and scraps,” her novel is full of signs that it does nonetheless endure (158). In *The Nowhere City* we are presented with an “ambivalent Eden” (Newman 47) in which the past is located in unexpected places: it is a piece of land bulldozed into a space for more development, a dirt road ending in a pile of trash, a garage full of disused, cloaked furniture, or the constant struggle to irrigate the unevenly parched land. A little excavation in this city reveals the deep marks of history.

Damnatio Memoriae In L.A.: Play It As It Lays

At the opening of *Play It As It Lays*, Maria Wyeth, our ostensible heroine, is insistent upon living “in the now,” emphasising from the start her desire for a firmer connection to her present in lieu of the past (8). It is significant that, with the exception of the first and some of the closing chapters, for most of the novel Maria is deprived of a first-person narrative. Indeed, she seems to sit outside her own narrative, becoming “she” rather than “I” and being talked about rather than leading her own story. It is only when we turn to the present at the beginning and towards the end of the novel that the first-person is used, implying that Maria

herself only exists, or only wishes to exist, in the present tense of the preliminary and final chapters. Throughout the rest of the book she exists only in the removed reflections of others. As the novel opens, the reader is moved quickly through three years of history during which Maria returns to her childhood home in Nevada after her father's death and the end of her marriage. The passing of time after a sojourn into childhood in this early part of the novel is not quantified for the reader and instead is categorised merely as "bad" or unmemorable: "I am not sure what year it was because I have this problem with *as it was*, but after a while I had a bad time" (9). Certain meaningless phrases are used to signify much more than they articulate; expressions such as "the bad season" (60) and "a bad time," (9) for example, cover all manner of past sins. In her simultaneously retrospective and present-day storytelling, *as it was* melts almost instantaneously into *as it is* and *as it will be*. The line dividing these states is as vague as the horizon towards which she drives when she returns obsessively to the freeway later in the novel. Despite her efforts, *as it was* remains at the centre of her narrative.

Maria describes herself as "a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work," referring to the man who performs the abortion which so traumatises her for the course of her remaining narrative (203). Such an equation speaks to the novel's preoccupation with removal and erasure. Maria may boast at the novel's conclusion that she has superior skills of excision, but this ability is belied by the novel as a whole, which is full of seeping wounds both real and imaginary, physical and emotional: holes in domestic interiors that gape and emit strange, accusatory noises; random acts of frenzied behaviour; snakes hidden beneath rocks; and houses falling into the ocean. Neither Maria nor her environment truly embodies the imperative to never discuss, but only to cut. Maria herself, far from being an acolyte of the clean work she purports to be capable of, bleeds profusely across the pages of the novel. Her past haunts her at every turn, making unpredictable appearances in various guises and

consuming her thoughts in the form of fantasy, dream, nightmare and delusion. As Waldie articulates in a 2016 essay, “I write about Los Angeles where, despite our desire for forgetfulness, the back-and-forth of past and present persists” (“How I Found”).

As mentioned previously, Maria hails from Nevada, more specifically from a place called Silver Wells, which is now an uninhabited wasteland. As David Fine writes: “The town she remembers is gone, like everything else. It has become, appropriate to her state of mind, a nuclear test site” (*Imagining* 248). Mark Royden Winchell describes Silver Wells as a “prospective boom town that never materialized” (130). It sits at the time of Maria’s present “in the middle of a missile range” and was an incomplete prospect even during her formative years (*Play It* 6). Indeed, everything she had as a child is described in terms of being intangible or transient: “We had a lot of things and places that came and went, a cattle ranch with no cattle and a ski resort picked upon somebody’s second mortgage and a motel that would have been advantageously situated at a freeway exit had the freeway been built” (5). There is nothing of her past in Silver Wells that is built to last with more than the near-future in mind; everything there has melted into air before it could solidify. The loss of the home in which she spent her childhood years is something vague and distant.

For her father, she explains, the future was the point. This was something to anticipate as being better than the past, simply because it had to be: “I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what came in on the last. I no longer believe that, but I am telling you how it was” (5). Maria’s father had always lived ahead of himself (“he was a man always twenty years before his time” (6)), but now only exists in Maria’s past, as fragments or impressions of moments she does not wish to fully extrapolate. He, unlike Maria, “always had a lot of plans,” but what he imagined never actually came to be. The Silver Wells he envisaged did not exist then and does not exist now. Family friend Benny Austin insists that what matters is the past: “I’m speaking about *then*, Maria. As it

was” (6). But Maria does not wish to think about *as it was* (an incantatory phrase repeated throughout *Play It As It Lays* in much the same way that “never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can” is repeated throughout her memoir, *Where I Was From* (75)). In *Where I Was From*, Didion explains that when writing *Run River* she had been of the opinion that “California ‘*as it was*’ [...] got bulldozed out of existence” in the postwar boom years (170-171 emphasis added). It is notable that “as it was” is a refrain found in both her fiction and nonfiction, and used in reference to places both literal, in the form of the California Didion knew that has changed beyond recognition, and metaphorical, in terms of the past which Maria Wyeth does not wish to contemplate.

Only by existing wilfully in what Leonard Wilcox describes as a “fatalistic yielding to an eternal present” (72) can Maria bear to return to the past, and even then she must “stick to certain facts” in order to maintain that illusion of control (*Play It* 8). It seems that it is only in the blinding light of Los Angeles, from her prone poolside position, that Maria is able to exist in her preferred present. For her, thinking about the past “leads nowhere,” and thinking about the future gives her occasion to dream, not to plan (7). Silver Wells now exists only as a dreamscape or imagined place where the past is played out on an empty stage: “An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing” (204). Ultimately the site of her childhood is completely destroyed. Indeed, as Royden Winchell writes, her “ties with her past have been so irrevocably severed that she is unable to ‘go back’ even under hypnosis” (130). Maria has no past to which she can return, but unlike Marshall Berman feels nothing at the prospect.

In present-day Los Angeles, Maria is insistent upon seeing “no one I used to know,” as though by barring particular people who carry remnants of the past from her, she can exclude them entirely from her story (*Play It* 10). Later in the novel even benign figures like Benny Austin, who is too closely associated with her past, her home, and her dead parents,

become people to avoid. When she sees him in Las Vegas she finds herself paralysed by an inability to acknowledge his presence:

She could not go back to the tables because Benny Austin was out there.

Somehow she had never expected to see Benny Austin again: in her mind he was always in her father's pickup, or standing with her mother and father on the tarmac at McCarran waving at the wrong window. (147-148)

Her mother is another past subject she does not wish to think about, but turns over in her mind torturously regardless. After her abortion Maria thinks of her: "Silver Wells was with her again. She wanted to see her mother" (86). When she visits a Silverlake hypnotist who claims that her worries can be traced back to her mother's womb, Maria sees only visions of driving along Sunset when she places herself in his apparently healing hands. "'You're lying in water and it's warm and you hear your mother's voice'" he insists, but Maria can hear no such thing, and the repeated emphasis of the word "lying" infuses the scene with the suggestion of fraudulence (124). When she sees nothing, the hypnotist blames her own resistance to the process of remembering, claiming that she "couldn't open enough doors to get back" (143).

This statement is significant for its invocation of voids in space – doors are ambivalent holes in walls, creating hyphenate spaces which provide ways in and out, entries and exits, and both link spaces and separate them, subdividing interiors. In the opinion of the hypnotist, Maria cannot find an opening through which she may return to some primordial state of being. A sense of ambivalence and separation characterises her memories of her mother. It is revealed that Maria spent her last moments with her mother inside an airport – a place of transience and impermanence, of leaving and arriving simultaneously. One is never really in the present in an airport. These are places in which one exists in a continual state of anticipation and future projection. The final glimpse of her mother's face is caught through

the window of the plane, mimicking the car windscreen through which she now continuously views the world. Even in memory she is separated from her in a demarcated space.

As I also demonstrated in Chapter 1 with regard to Chandler's uncanny architectural fissures, internal spaces in *Play It As It Lays* are porous, flimsy, and in this case often disturbing. Maria Wyeth, when forced to exist inside various pseudo-domestic settings, is filled with a nameless, creeping horror. Each interior is troubling in a distinctive way: the too "immaculate" motel room in Oxnard which, upon leaving, she straightens out "as if to erase any sign of herself" (132); the bedroom blanched white and cream in Encino where she has her abortion, and in which she "had left the point" (135); the Vegas interior painted purple in which she recalls that she had been told by her mother that "purple rooms could send people into irreversible insanity" (165); and the apartment on Fountain Avenue with the unnervingly slow-draining shower. The open mouths of sink plugs and shower drains threaten to unleash some torrent of subterranean discharge, and she dreams of "gray water bubbling up in every sink" (96-97), certain in the knowledge that the pipes contain "hacked pieces of human flesh" (97). Every interior which should emit a sense of the familiar and the impregnable, becomes instead a rather Freudian potential crime scene at which her sense of guilt, which she has tried to repress, is exposed and made manifest in the pipes bursting with the detritus of human waste, threatening to overwhelm the borders of each space inside which she attempts to take shelter. I am reminded of a passage from "The Uncanny" in which Freud recounts a conversation that illuminated for him the trajectory of heimlich as it moved towards unheimlich: "I have the same impression with them as I have with a buried spring or a dried up pond. You can't walk over them without constantly feeling that water might reappear.' 'We call that uncanny'" (129).

Such feelings of culpability recur throughout Didion's work. There is often guilt tied specifically to various forms of abandonment that can be traced through both Maria and her

author. Maria leaves behind Silver Wells just as Didion left Sacramento, while Didion's great-great-great grandmother came from a long line of travellers who had left Virginia for Missouri and then for the Pacific Northwest to seek out California by way of Oregon. Maria is consumed by thoughts both of her mother and of her abortion, and continually refers to her daughter, Kate, who she just cannot seem to find her way back to. Kate, too, belongs in the past and is therefore unreachable no matter how intense Maria's longing. The desire to forget history, to leave behind, in particular, home and children, is as strong as the sense of propulsion Didion herself feels, propulsion that sometimes manifests as repulsion, back towards the land and the past that it represents.

As we see in Maria's propensity for narrative excisions, Didion is often ambiguous on the subject of whether gaps in her narrative are a sign of control or of a contrivance to remove certain defective or unwanted memories from the pack. Maria conceptualises the past as a series of scenes or pictures, assembling a series of static moments into a more rational narrative of her choosing. This is her attempt at instituting order amid the chaos of de-contextualised fragments of time: "After BZ's death there was a time when I played and replayed these scenes and others like them, composed them as if for the camera, trying to find some order, a pattern. I found none" (*Play It* 14). Didion has also represented memory as a kind of dysfunctional slide show in her nonfiction. In "Goodbye to All That," her 1967 essay which details the eight years she spent in New York, working for *Vogue*: "six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and old-fashioned trick shots [...] I enter a revolving door at twenty and come out a good deal older, and on a different street" (177). Her slide shows contain a number of faulty slides blighted by age, their pictures partly obscured, some missing completely, others displayed out of their correct order. Where

is the time in between? What do the missing slides show? There are fingerprints on the negative, holes in the narrative.

In *Play It As It Lays*, the “flash images” (18) Maria shows us contain a distinct sign which accompanies or heralds a particular memory (such as Cuba Libre and snakes). These recurring images are almost wholly location-specific: the tulip on Park Avenue; an attempted convalescence at Montego Bay; her mother’s corpse discovered outside Tonopah; and Cuba Libre at the Flamingo in Vegas. Maria presents the reader with an itemised list of signifiers which strike several matches at the site of memory, briefly illuminating the past as a series of *things*, or “scenes” (13). Chris Anderson in *Style as Argument* (1987) argues that Didion’s repeated phrases, images and objects are sometimes “metonymic, triggering associations in the reader’s mind which lead to a fuller impression of the scene” and that she also uses images which are “synecdochic, symbols of some larger meaning” (138). Didion always “means more than she says” and her meaning must be excavated and extrapolated from syntactical clues. Particular images, therefore, are revelatory in Didion’s text, due to their associative properties.

This technique is utilised in both her nonfiction and her fiction, as I also examine in my next chapter – she seeks to cultivate and collate the past through visions of specific objects. For example, the synecdochic cracked crab in “On Keeping a Notebook,” the actual existence of which is deemed unimportant but which nevertheless serves as a conduit through which Didion can be drawn back inside a particularly precious memory. In *Play It As It Lays*, she achieves this through different linguistic means, for example beginning sentences by providing details which at first seem insignificant, for example, “The tulips on Park Avenue looked dirty” (61). Subsequently she makes incremental revelations that increase in significance as she progresses through the text: “I was sent twice to Montego Bay to get some color back in my face but I could not sleep alone and stayed up late and it was falling apart

with Ivan Costello and everything showed in the camera by then” (9). Upon looking at the sun setting in New York, Maria is reminded of the “desert light” which accompanied her mother’s death (61). The “Eastern dark” of the city provides a stark contrast to this arid whiteness. The metonymic dirty tulips on Park Avenue signify the fact that Maria can no longer see light without shadow, that her state of mind is likewise becoming dirtied by the grit and pollution of the outside world, that her exhaustion with New York has taken root in her environment and that all of this dirt is encroaching little by little on her own self to the point where it is as visible in her face as it is on the tulip.

Frequently when finding herself unable to cope with the reality of the present, Maria allows herself to slip into dream-like reminiscences which may or may not be true replications of the past. During her abortion, she recreates a fantasy of the past, constructed upon the foundation of a single image, and focusing on small details to pull herself into this image: “if she could concentrate for one more minute on that shed, on whether this minute twenty years later the heat still shimmered off its roof, those were two minutes during which she was not entirely party to what was happening in this bedroom in Encino” (81). Interestingly she explicitly excludes her father from these thoughts as though his inclusion would somehow blight the purity of the memory: “her father was not in this picture, keep him out of it.”

As I previously examined in Chapter 1, in *The History of Forgetting* Norman M. Klein discusses the use of erasure in conceptions and (re)presentations of history in Los Angeles culture with particular reference to the concept of the “imago.” This is a heightened iconographic image of someone (usually a parent) which he defines as “an idealised face left over from childhood – a photograph, the color of mother’s dress on the day she took ill (the photological trace)” (3-4). These imagos, so convincing that they prevent us from seeing their true fraudulence, do not stray so far from reality as to draw attention to their fictive nature.

Thus such images or visions can easily replace an authentic, but less palpable or even perhaps less desirable, memory. Klein writes of the internal diversionary tactics through which we forget the past, of “the quiet instant where one imago covers over another” (13). Even if what we are privy to here is indeed an authentic vision of Maria’s childhood, captured in the image of her reading a book about contending with rattlesnake bites on the steps of the house in Silver Wells, we know that it is not the complete picture. This is Maria attempting to internalise her mantra to “Never discuss. Cut” through cutting out parts of her own history in order to create a less painful narrative (*Play It* 203). She is the one who continuously attempts to replace the original with the imago.

But if she cannot live in her own edited version of the past, the white noise of the present is the state in which she wishes to permanently reside. In Los Angeles, it becomes “essential” to Maria that “she be on the freeway by ten o’clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway” (15). By ten o’clock she must be in the present, not on her way to the present, but actually there, driving forward within it: “If she was not she lost the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum.” What does the freeway mean to Maria? The stasis of a permanent present, the way of the future, or the evasion of the past?

Maria’s self-imposed metronomic existence recalls Henri Lefebvre’s discussion of rhythm, time, and movement through space in *Rhythmanalysis* (1992). Lefebvre argues that in order to properly understand the internal logic of urban spaces, one must first attempt to observe and sense their rhythms. Rhythm, he writes, consists of the linear (the pendulum back and forth of the quotidian) and the cyclical (longer and more circuitous movements). In order to internalise this rhythm, to “abandon oneself” to it, one must assume a position of ambivalence, of liminality, by which he means one must somehow be suspended between the twin poles of inside and outside space: “it is therefore necessary to situate oneself

simultaneously inside and outside” (27). Lefebvre recommends a balcony or window, as this perspective offers an empirical view which allows one, from on high, to appreciate the rhythmic patterns made manifest in the urban sprawl which lies below.³⁹ While Maria is not looking *down* at the world around her, but *out*, she does “abandon herself” to rhythm, and she is both inside (the car) and outside (on the freeway). Though she claims to be a “a radical surgeon of my own life” (*Play It 203*) it becomes apparent that this merely signifies her ability to divest herself of any semblance of agency and amputate the shadow that is her own history. And though the freeway purports to be a space in which individual autonomy rules, it requires, as Reyner Banham points out, “the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey” (217). Giving herself over to the control and rule of a higher power, her route is languorously cyclical and repetitive and seemingly endless.⁴⁰

Banham contends that the “freedom of movement” in the city is its “prime symbolic attribute” (18). The appropriate way to approach Los Angeles, he suggests, is not in a straight, sequential line, but via a circular motion. As though mimicking the highways and freeways which loop and interweave their way through the city, chronology is not linear, but spherical. The essential fact about Los Angeles is that it has “grown almost simultaneously all over,” thereby making “all its parts equal and equally accessible from all other parts at once” (18). Banham finds the automobile to be the perfect expression (or symptom) of the city’s unique spatial structure. If Los Angeles is a city which moves forwards, collecting additions to its “extraordinary mixture” as it progresses, the only way of looking back is to glance quickly into the rear-view mirror of one’s insular cell (6). There is no other way of

³⁹ See also Roland Barthes, who writes of the panoramic view from the Eiffel Tower providing a rationalisation of the space below in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (1979).

⁴⁰ For more on the freeway and its purported freedom, see also both Paul Virilio’s *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy* and “Dromoscopy, or The Ecstasy of Enormities,” and Nigel Thrift’s “Driving in the City.”

looking backwards in a city which one can only navigate by taking to the road and driving onwards. Movement and mobility requires forward momentum, and thus “since it is manifestly dangerous to face backwards while at the steering wheel, the common metaphor of history as the rear-view mirror of civilization seems necessary, as well as apt, in any study of Los Angeles” (6). History in Los Angeles is always behind you, never pantheistic or contextual, and can only be seen in fleeting, smudged glimpses as one leaves it further and further behind (an idea Didion returns to towards the end of *Where I Was From*).

For Leonard Wilcox, Maria’s “daily runs on the freeway” (72) are symbolic of more than just the desire to escape the past; for him they are in fact “a debased version of the journey west, a parody of the effort to find new passages in a land beyond history” (72-73). Ironically, by taking these drives, rather than evading history Maria is re-living it. This is Maria’s crossing story (a classic California travel narrative which I further explain in the next chapter), but instead of continuing in order to settle, Maria continues for the sake of continuing. Maria is a prime example of Katherine Usher Henderson’s assertion that all of Didion’s heroines “inherit the legacy of the frontier experience” (vii). When she remembers the last time she saw her mother, she recalls her father speaking of opening a hash house adjacent to the freeway, an idea to which her mother objected: “‘Not on 95,’ Francine Wyeth said. ‘Somewhere else’” (*Play It* 87). In her own endless circling of the freeway, Maria does not actually get *somewhere else*, instead going through the motions of forward momentum without moving beyond this insular, labyrinthine space.

When writing about the small town of Gilroy and the many existing definitions of its past in *Where I Was From*, Didion describes these definitions as “a hologram that dematerialises as I drive through it” (174-175). According to this assertion, driving allows one to shelter oneself from the past, rendering it a harmless mirage on the other side of your window, a perspective that recalls the attitude of Maria Wyeth. You can speed through the

land and ignore the presence of history there on the way to *somewhere else* (think of Berman's note in *All That is Solid*: "We fight back the tears, and step on the gas" (291)). As Jane Jacobs notes about the highways built by Robert Moses in New York (see Chapter 2), these are paths which take you from "no place to nowhere" (14). The freeway offers "endless mobility without destination" (Fine, *Imagining* 248). For Maria, the lack of conclusion, the ability to continue on and on without reaching any finite point, *is* the point and the lure of the freeway.⁴¹ In fact, she wants to leave the point somewhere else. For her, the mindless rhythm of the road is a form of erasure, and rather than sharpening her perception (as per *Rhythmanalysis*), it numbs her. On the road she is submerged and can separate herself from her past like oil from water. Only when she stops is her mind once again filled with those images "of Les Goodwin in New York and Carter out there on the desert with BZ and Helene and the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway" (*Play It* 18). From the safety of her car, she is spared the pain of remembrance; in her mind there are "no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself" (69).

Jennifer Brady writes that Maria's obsession with driving the freeway represents an "attempt to find refuge from thought and memory" (52). The freeway is a place she associates consciously with the freedom of forgetting. Maria's intention is to put as much distance as possible between herself and the events of the past. By the end of the first month succeeding the breakdown of her marriage, she has quantified this necessary distance into a total of seven thousand miles. Jean Baudrillard writes in *America* that the speed of travel made possible by the car represents the "Triumph of forgetting over memory, an uncultivated, amnesiac intoxication" (7). In short, speed represents "a squandering of time." It also represents a certain fascination with "the void" – with disappearance, emptiness, and a seemingly perverse

⁴¹ It could also be argued that her endless freeway quests are in fact proof that she is actually trying to get home; to forge a sense of return to something. In going away, she is creating the possibility of coming back.

desire to return to “immobility, concealed beneath the very intensification of their mobility” (7). Driving itself is deemed “a spectacular form of amnesia,” and the journey embarked upon on the road is one of “excessive, pitiless distance” (10). How far can we persist on this “journey which is no longer a journey,” Baudrillard asks, one which aims only for “the point of no return”? Maria does in fact wish to disappear into a vacuum in which she is able to remain immobile, suspended in time. For her, that place is the freeway. The freeway is the present, and if she can only find a way to live indefinitely in that present, she does not have to look back.

In *Where I Was From* Didion relays the counsel of Virginia Reed, who made the 2500-mile journey to California in the early 1800s: “Never dwell on what got left behind, never look back at all” (199). California has always encouraged the notion that it is possible for one to escape history, escape oneself, by choosing to “move to the better neighborhood, take to the hills, or travel across the landscape and enjoy, for a time, a state of amnesia. Ultimately, though, the road ends or turns back on its beginnings” (Fine, “Running” 218). Maria finds that, ultimately, she cannot move any further into forgetting; history, it turns out, “is not so easily outstepped.” From the very beginning of *Play It As It Lays*, Didion makes clear that the past is something we can never be rid of. We see this in the sheer effort exerted continually by our protagonist to block, repress, cut-out or move away from the physical sites of unwanted memories. Her freeway drives, her inability to settle in one place, her refusal to meet with old family friends, her horrifying visions of disintegration in the world beyond her car windows and her unnerving delusions of hazardous domestic interiors, all point to the impossibility of forcing one’s past underground. In the end, the attempt to do so exhausts her to such a degree that she lies near-catatonic by the swimming pool, talked about by others who now control her narrative but terminally silent herself.

In *The Nowhere City* the past eventually comes back to life in the perennial re-growth of the wilderness, or can be located in the built environment in the form of detritus or sites of abandonment. In *Play It As It Lays*, Didion gives us further proof of this in the form of the synecdochic snakes. Despite the fact that Maria has moved away from Nevada to New York and then to Los Angeles, she sees these snakes, which were an ever-present part of her childhood out in the desert, everywhere. Their appearance throughout Didion's work (as I also show in the next chapter) signifies that a finely-tuned consciousness of one's environment has been neglected and that the very history of the land has been forgotten. When Maria confesses that "I never ask about snakes," the implication is that she is attempting to ignore her past until it goes away of its own accord (*Play It* 3). But on the same page Didion makes clear that to ignore the snake is fatal: "two honeymooners, natives of Detroit, found dead in their Scout camper near Boca Raton, a coral snake still coiled in the thermal blanket." One of Maria's recollections finds snakes taking the place of sustenance on her plate when she attempts to eat: "She had known that there was no rattlesnake on her plate but once the image had seized her there was no eating the food" (60). This memory leads her to thoughts of her mother's demise in her car, and she tortures herself with imagined scenarios of her thwarted attempts to speak to her on the day she died. Snakes imbue the environment with dread and death and the promise that the past remains to pick off future possibilities. At the end of the novel, Maria speaks of one of the lessons her father taught her as a child: "overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake" (200). One must, Maria is instructed, be vigilant about one's environment, which is synonymous with one's personal history.

Maria's desperation to face forward, to pursue the frontier's endlessly-deferred end, is a recurring trait echoed in other nonfiction tales of Southern California, as detailed in the next chapter. "*Remember,*" warns Virginia Reed, "*never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as*

you can” (*Where I* 198-199). Didion, who takes it upon herself to bestow these warnings upon her brother’s children, articulates the sense that future generations should not be spared the knowledge of California’s bloody history, lest its nightmare be revisited by those who did not learn its lessons; did not kill the snake.

**Chapter 4. Remembering California: *Where I Was From, Slouching Towards Bethlehem*
and *Holy Land***

In this chapter I further examine literary representations of Southern California in the second half of the twentieth century, continuing to look at the work of Joan Didion, with a more specific focus on her nonfiction, before moving on to an exploration of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996) by D.J. Waldie. Waldie's semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical narrative depicts with delicate specificity a particular area of suburban Los Angeles County during the early-to-late-1950s, namely Lakewood, one of what Becky Nicolaides refers to as the "Sunbelt suburbs" which were constructed after World War II (24). Moving from Didion's imagined Los Angeles spaces to her remembered places in Southern California and Sacramento, I here explore one memoir, *Where I Was From* (2003), and three essays from her collection of journalistic nonfiction *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968): "Notes from a Native Daughter" (1965), "On Going Home" (1967), and "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (1967).⁴² In the personal essays, "Notes from a Native Daughter" and "On Going Home," both of which are forerunners of the later autobiographical *Where I Was From*, we find Didion attempting to pin down the elusive Sacramento, where she was born in 1934, and articulate how she feels about her erstwhile home, a place defined by a commitment to a past that may be more mirage than reality. "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" meanwhile is her account of the role played by San Francisco in the American countercultural movement during the spring of 1967.

Katherine Usher Henderson writes that the essays collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* "measure the world we have now against the world we once had (or think we had)

⁴² "Notes from a Native Daughter" first appeared in 1965 in *Holiday* magazine; both "On Going Home" and "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" first appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1967.

and have lost” (93). Didion writes of memory in a number of ways, including through engaging with story-telling and myth-making in historical narratives; with the seemingly insignificant objects which are utilised as conduits and signifiers of the past; and with concepts of home, land and the disintegration and impermanence of both. These themes are expressed through the repeated articulation of absences, gaps, loss and erasure in the narratives of both Didion and Waldie. For both authors, the articulation of memory and its ability to both conceal and expose the past is of paramount concern. In particular the ways in which we remember the past through space, through embedding or inscribing memory in space, is perfectly symbolised by Waldie through his use of the familial home as a site or locus of the past. It is for this reason that I close the chapter with an examination of *Holy Land*.

In the work analysed here by both authors, the separating line between fiction and nonfiction or autobiography is an ambiguous one. Though I have made this and the previous chapter distinct by categorising the texts analysed as either imagined (Chapter 3) or remembered (this chapter), there is something about California which renders this distinction somewhat questionable. As Waldie explains in a *Los Angeles Times* interview: “California is a place that was imagined before it was any place” (“How to look”). This line becomes further blurred when one considers that Didion is associated with the New Journalism, detailed by Tom Wolfe in a 1972 article for *New York Magazine*. He writes that this genre established that “it just might be possible to write journalism that would...read like a novel” (4). For the new journalists (such as Wolfe himself but also writers like Norman Mailer and Gay Talese) it was:

all-important to be there when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had

always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters (10).

As Hunter S. Thompson writes in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*: “there is no way to know the truth – except to be there” (180). Jason Mosser suggests in *The Participatory Journalism* (2011) that Didion participates in the narrative she constructs through threading both her own autobiography and the ethnography of the place she writes about seamlessly through her work. As Mosser explains, she often places “her own engagement and responses within the context of an ongoing historical narrative that is both incorporated by and subsumes her own. [...] Didion takes history as the text – and sometimes the sub-text – that informs her own writing” (197).

This sense of a deep personal engagement with history is reflected in the emotional resonance of place we see in Didion’s nonfiction discussed in this chapter. In *The New York Times Magazine*, Michiko Kakutani describes Didion’s California as “a place defined not so much by what her unwavering eye observes, but by what her memory cannot let go” (Didion, “Joan Didion: Staking” 29). She continues that everything new is measured against “the memory of the old California”; by inference this is specifically Didion’s own “old California.” It is the “presentiment of loss” that compels her to keep a notebook, and it is this anticipation of grief and abandonment which haunts all of her work (“On Keeping” 108). “I felt the grief that [...] is endemic to modern life,” writes Marshall Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (295). This is just as true of California, the eternal landscape, as it is of New York, the endlessly reconstructed urban space. Didion’s obsession with the past, with significant objects and with storytelling, is therefore at odds with the California attitude to keep moving forward, never look back (expressed in *Play It As It Lays* through the repeated mantra of “Never discuss. Cut” (203)): “This moment of leaving, the death that must precede the rebirth, is a fixed element of the crossing story” (*Where I* 30). In a letter to her publisher

and friend Henry Robbins, she explains that all the pieces collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “report on the ways in which the center is not holding” (Letter to Henry Robbins). Throughout this chapter I consider the ways in which Didion draws our attention to absences where a point of origin or centre of gravity should be.

Joan Didion’s Sentimental Journeys

Sacramento, the Central Valley capital city of California State which is Didion’s place of birth, began its life as a single fort alone on the prairie, cut off from the entire continent by the Sierra Nevada. The discovery of gold in its foothills put Sacramento on the map, and before long its settlers, descended from farmers who had been moving west across the frontier for two hundred years, came and cultivated it with myopic determination.⁴³ For Didion, “Sacramento *is* California,” (“Notes from” 138) a synecdoche that represents the whole, meaning that her hometown and her home state are often written as though they are interchangeable. Katherine Usher Henderson goes further when she writes that “her native state represents for Didion an emblem of the entire country” (93).

In Sacramento, as in California, the land, above all else, is the defining quality: “There is [...] no reality other than land” (“Notes from” 146). She wistfully describes her memories of running over “the same flat fields that our great-great-grandfather had found virgin and had planted” as a child, and swimming “the same rivers we had swum for a century.” It is hard, she qualifies, to “*find* California now,” yet she seeks what may be ephemeral in the Sierras and the Donner Pass and the “wide rivers” (141, 142). Usher Henderson writes that Didion locates “the pulse of Sacramento not in the town, but in the

⁴³ For further reading about the environmental evolution of Sacramento, I refer the reader to *River City and Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Region*, edited by Christopher I. Castaneda and Lee M. A. Simpson. For a more comprehensive history related to environmental and topographical changes in California as a whole, see *California: A History*, by Kevin Starr.

river ranches where hops are grown and in the fruit ranches whose pears and oranges were shipped across the country” (3). This, she emphasises, is the *idea* of California which is eternal – the idea of the garden, its cultivation and its propagation, and the frontier which must be endlessly pushed back to maximise its potential.⁴⁴ Richard Lehan argues that the very concept of the frontier is a bastion against the wild places of the New World: “encountering the frontier meant encountering the wilderness” (167). Didion quotes Josiah Royce, born in 1855 in Grass Valley, near Sacramento, who wrote of the “familiar sacred stories” told regarding the “pilgrimage” undertaken to settle in California (*Where I* 29). Nothing else has quite the same value; even the crossing story (about which, more below), which is another idea about California that continues to drive its identity and is rooted in its land: “When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden [...] The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried” (7).

In *Inventing the Dream*, Kevin Starr argues that “The land conferred identity and stability upon a rather haphazard, genetically diverse band of colonists” (16). Throughout *Where I Was From*, in which she recounts her family’s California history, Didion examines the minutest of details, tracking their particular significance in an attempt to understand the land, the past, and herself as a product of these things: “I am trying to place myself in history. I have been looking all my life for history and have yet to find it” (*South and West* 117). She looks to the landscape of Sacramento to find herself; to establish some kind of continuity with her past that she cannot find elsewhere:

Flying to Monterey. I had a sharp apprehension of the many times before
when I had [...] ‘come back’, flown west, followed the sun, each time

⁴⁴ In its contemporary form this spatial expansion – the annexing and buying up of land, the re-drawing of borders – has turned into the contemporary urban sprawl, or “sprawlscape” as James Howard Kunstler describes it, for which Los Angeles in particular is notorious (250).

experiencing a lightening of spirit as the land below opened up, the checkerboards of the Midwestern plains giving way to the vast empty reach between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada; then *home, there, where I was from, me, California*. It would be a while before I realized that ‘me’ is what we think when our parents die, even at my age, *who will look out for me now, who will remember me as I was, who will know what happens to me now, where will I be from* (*Where I* 204).

The answer to each rhetorical question is the same: *California* will remember her as she was; *California* will be where she is always from. This is Joan Didion’s point of origin, in the same way that the Bronx, as we have seen in Chapter 2, is Marshall Berman’s centre of gravity.

Didion confides in *Where I Was From* that California is so ingrained within her that, when living in New York in the late 1950s, she felt the need to recreate it in the form of *Run River*, her 1963 novel about life on the Sacramento River. The intention of *Run River* “was to return me to a California I wished had been there to keep me” (170). Later she comes to the realisation that this California had likely never “been there” at all, except in her mind’s eye. Assessing the novel 40 years after its publication, Didion finds within it a strange resistance to the changes experienced by California during the time in which the novel is set. It seems the young author was herself not immune to the self-mythologising bent of her state. This is not dissimilar to the “nostalgic strain in New York writing,” to which I refer in my chapter on Marshall Berman and the Bronx (Waterman 233). Despite her growing understanding of the impetus to constantly expand, subdivide, and sell the land, an impetus which ultimately she sees as an endemic and defining characteristic of California (see also Chapter 1 on Raymond Chandler), her past self, as expressed in *Run River*, believed there was a divide between the California of old, and the postwar boosterism and boom of the later California. She did not

yet believe in the “weakness for the speculative venture” that, writing in the 2000s, she acquiesces is its most timeless feature (*Where I* 167).

“The creation of the entirely artificial environment that is now the Sacramento Valley was not achieved at one stroke, nor is it complete to this day,” Didion writes in *Where I Was From* (22). Her description of this “artificial” landscape – something constantly in the process of reinventing and expanding itself – is equally applicable to California storytelling as it is to the repurposing of the land. She argues elsewhere that after World War II, Sacramento “woke to the fact that the outside world was moving in, fast and hard” and began to lose sight of its character (“Notes from” 138). In allowing such changes to happen, Sacramento has “lost its *raison d’être*” without realising it (146). It has parted company with the past to which it thinks it clings. People have been “selling their rights-of-way and living on the proceeds.” Land formerly cultivated to grow green hops is now called Larchmont Riviera, the Whitney ranch has become Sunset City, the agricultural history of Gilroy is turned into the Bonfante Gardens (now Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park). The Didion family were not exempt from this California tradition of selling off their heritage:

Occasionally, late at night, my father and brother and I would talk about buying out the interests of our cousins in what we still called ‘the hill ranch’ [...] My mother had no interest in keeping the hill ranch, or in fact any California land (*Where I* 14).

All are merely “one more enthusiastic fall into a familiar California error, that of selling the future of the place we lived to the highest bidder” (184). This is another systematic erasure of all previous “traces of custom and community” to create California anew and pretend it had been ever thus (173).

Throughout *Where I Was From* she itemises the extensive list of enterprising people and companies which have laid claim to the land in California, and have made money from

its cultivation, subdivision and acquisition. California has been said to have given way “first to industrial parks and subdivisions and then to strip malls and meth labs” (177). Land in California has perennially been subdivided and sold off to the aerospace and defence industry, or to be used for housing and country club complexes, or to make way for the further expansion of the freeway. Norman M. Klein points out that “the continual restructuring of the built environment” was done in “response to the automobile, which brings with it the steady loss of green space” (84). Land is no longer land alone; it is real estate. The conquest of the West led to its near-instantaneous conversion into “marketable real estate” (Waldie “L.A.’s Crooked Heart”). As Morrow Mayo wrote in 1933 about Los Angeles, this has long been the case: land is “and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes, and mouth washes” (319). There was no point in the history of California when land was not for sale.

Equally there was no point it seems at which land was not subject to the *myth* that it was not for sale, a myth which draws a line in history before and after which land was and then was not sacrosanct. “*In what way does the Holy Land resemble the Sacramento Valley?*” Didion repeats as she has learnt to do by rote. The answer is always the same: “*In the type and diversity of its agricultural products*” (“Notes from” 139). Historian Steven Avella argues that Sacramento ultimately chose to betray its own image as cultivators of California’s garden. He writes that the Sacramento and American Rivers, which merge and flow together through California’s state capital, proved both a blessing and a curse, having wrought havoc in the form of terrible floods whilst also nourishing this earthly paradise. Originally the new city’s land had been “platted and gridded for easy sale,” but after the floods of 1862 residents chose to “raise the city grade” above the cresting level of the rivers, “rather than abandon what had been chosen in haste” (5). Avella contends that the very creation of the city was “an

act of defiance against nature.” That it continued to survive is testament to California’s ability to suppress its own nature whilst simultaneously maintaining its image as the guardians of that very same nature. The garden always represented an idea of California’s history, which is, in turn, a way of seeing oneself as an agent and participant of that history.⁴⁵ This is the story, to paraphrase Didion, that Californians tell themselves in order to live. “Discussion of how California has ‘changed’ [...] tends locally to define the more ideal California as that which existed at whatever past point the speaker first saw it” (*Where I* 174-175).

In *Where I Was From* she recalls accompanying her mother and young daughter Quintana to Old Sacramento. Upon beginning to explain to Quintana that everything around her was imbued with the history of California, Didion suddenly realises that she has “no more attachment to this wooden sidewalk than Quintana did: it was no more than a theme, a decorative effect” (219). Old Sacramento, which has redeveloped the sidewalks “to give the effect of 1850,” represents a reconstituted history, which itself is pre-dated by an ever more unreachable, untold past. She charts her realisation of the “blinkering effect” of California’s “dreamtime” on her – “it would be some years before I recognized that certain aspects of ‘Our California Heritage’ did not add up” (17). “A good deal about California,” she repeats later, “does not, on its own preferred terms, add up” (19). She remarks drily that the question of how and from where to supply the land with water was just another in a long line of “inconvenient features of California life” which had to be controlled or rearranged (23). Throughout its history, California has attracted “the hunter-gatherers of the frontier rather than its cultivators” (24). It was the local entrepreneurs who, in building the railroad through the state, opened it up to extensive settlement, creating a conveniently-located, immense swathe of subdivided land to be cultivated and irrigated, bought and sold.

⁴⁵ See *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx.

“Which is the true California?” she asks herself in “Notes from a Native Daughter” (142). Perhaps the more apt question is: *where* is the true California? “Going back to Sacramento is not like going back to Vermont, or Chicago; Vermont and Chicago are relative constants, against which one measures one’s own change. All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears” (140).⁴⁶ This makes California, for Didion at least, more a state of mind than a locatable place. Her “sentimental journeys” to and from Sacramento compound Berman’s notion that to live in the modern world is to expose oneself constantly to grief. Here we can relate her text explicitly to Berman’s writing on the Bronx – his narrative of gradual destruction and the accompanying sense of his own childhood disintegrating before his eyes. However, arguably it is this very rate of disappearance, to paraphrase Didion, which allows Berman to measure his own change and his own distance from the site of his youth.

Though he watches his neighbourhood become a building-site and vows revenge against the man he holds responsible, he later admits that this deconstruction only hastened his inevitable departure; the end of his childhood is, in a way, heralded and made tangible by the flattening of tenement buildings and neighbourhood stores. He too can measure his own changes, but he can measure them against absence and difference. Berman’s own maturation is reflected in the evolution of the city around him. Small details noted by Didion regarding the discontinuities visible in her hometown on each return express her gradual realisation of the grief Berman describes: “there is no longer a veranda at the Senator Hotel – it was turned

⁴⁶ Robert Bennett argues that the root cause of this disappearance is the expansion of the suburbs. Didion has places like D.J. Waldie’s Lakewood to thank for the erosion of what she considers to be home: “the West is now defined less by the existence of free land than by its disappearance [...] And much of this disappearing West can be blamed directly on pervasive suburban sprawl” (285).

into an airline ticket office” (141). To reminisce is “the favoured conversational mode in Sacramento,” she discloses, as though this were not already implicit in her own writing (140).

Even at its peak of vibrancy, the law of diminishing returns is embedded in the Californian landscape. Didion’s idyllic reveries are laced with foreboding in the form of the sinkholes and the rivers in which many incautious children were drowned; the three-week-long spring after which the “brilliant ephemeral green” of the fields would diminish into arid yellowed stalks; the sight of rattlesnakes sunning themselves on the rocks (139). She frequently refers to snakes in both her fiction and nonfiction writing. Their appearance usually suggests that the past has not been properly dealt with, that one’s garden has not been adequately tended to, and their continued existence implies some future reckoning. In *Where I Was From*, she recollects that:

If my grandfather spotted a rattlesnake while driving, he would stop his car and go into the brush after it. To do less, he advised me more than once, was to endanger whoever later entered the brush, and so violate what he called ‘the code of the West.’ New people, I was told, did not understand their responsibility to kill rattlesnakes. (95-96)

Furthermore, new people did not understand “the physical reality of the place” (96). Didion herself learns that the environment of California is something primeval, and this is a lesson learnt several times. Upon seeing a rattlesnake at the Matthew Kilgore Cemetery east of Sacramento, she never again gets out of her car when paying a visit there. As a child in Durham, she watches as a copperhead approaches the bars of her brother’s playpen, only to move on without striking. On both occasions, she notes later, her grandfather’s counsel was ignored. In “On Going Home” she drives to the family graveyard, where she stations herself in her car due to having seen a rattlesnake in the grounds during a previous visit, an experience she also mentions in *Where I Was From*. She observes the newly-vandalised site,

its monuments broken and overturned on the grass. Her journeys home are fraught with this sense of exponential decay and impending expiration. She has spoken of the reasons why, in the wake of her husband's death in 2003, she is glad to have moved back to Manhattan in 1988, stating that "In New York I didn't need to drive to dinner. There wasn't likely to be a brush fire. I wasn't going to see a snake in the pool" ("Joan Didion, The Art of Nonfiction"). The snake in the pool – an image so evocative of her fiction – is a sinister vision of life haunted by death.

The myth of the eternal, life-giving, unchanging landscape which underpins the story of California is not the only fabrication Didion unpicks in order to come to a true understanding of her own history. In *Where I Was From*, she refers frequently to the crossing story of America's early pioneers – those who travelled westward from the 1840s to claim and cultivate unsettled land.⁴⁷ California became home to travellers who were "reborn in the wilderness," with the crossing a literal and metaphorical journey of relinquishment and sacrifice (*Where I* 29). Ultimately what was left behind was one's old life, making the decision to embark upon such a journey "a kind of death, involving the total abandonment of all previous life." In this way, the crossing story, another primordial narrative by which California defines itself, is one not only of new life, but of the death of one's previous history.

In *Where I Was From*, Didion asks herself what, in fact, was the purpose of the original journey west? Was it really a "noble odyssey," or was it instead a "mean scrambling for survival, a blind flight" (35)? The mythic narrative of the crossing story insists upon the former, but she scratches at the surface tenaciously until she reveals some darker truths beneath the polish. A fragment of a letter written by Virginia Reed, a Donner Party child who

⁴⁷ Though of course this is contentious, seeing as much, if not all, of the California they sought to claim had already been settled and inhabited by Native Americans.

survived the crossing into California, is repeated throughout the book by Didion like a sinister mantra: “*Remember, never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can*” (75). This fragment becomes a refrain imbued with an increasing sense of horror.

The Donner-Reed party, memorialised in the Pass and Donner Summit Road and Donner Memorial State Park, was one such group of early settlers, comprised of about 80 people who left Missouri in 1846.⁴⁸ Their decision to take a shortcut, the Hastings Cut-off (“never take no cutoffs”), was fatal, and in determining to cross the Sierra Nevada mountain range to reach their final destination they became subject to such harsh winter conditions that only just over half survived the crossing, many of whom did so having resorted to cannibalism to sustain themselves. During the journey west undertaken by Didion’s “great-great-great-great-great” grandparents, the Scott Hardins, they travelled part of the way with members of the Donner-Reed party, binding her family history to that of a group defined by madness, starvation and cannibalism (3). “What exactly was our heritage?” she asks uneasily, at the beginning of her memoir not truly wishing to know the answer (160). In an interview with Hilton Als for *The Paris Review*, Didion explains that she initially did not want to write a personal account of her California history for exactly this reason. She was not yet ready to reconcile her new-found understanding of the place with the nostalgia and romanticism imbued by her parents: “I didn’t want to figure out California because whatever I figured out would be different from the California my mother and father had told me about. I didn’t want to engage that” (“Joan Didion, The Art of Nonfiction”).

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” (195) she asserts in “The White Album,” and it seems that in *Where I Was From* she has expanded upon that tradition. Jason Mosser suggests that she “interprets her experience textually, that is, as a series of stories” (197).

⁴⁸ For more information about the Donner-Reed party and their California crossing story, Michael Wallis’ *The Best Land Under Heaven* makes for compelling reading.

Didion observes that storytelling in California is almost as old as the land itself. For example, despite the fact that Southern California was responsible for reprehensible behaviour towards the Native Americans, Carey McWilliams insists that a certain mythology has been spun concerning “the well-being of the natives under Mission rule” (“The Growth” 3).

Notwithstanding the mistreatment of Native Americans under both Spanish and American rule in the region, history in its re-telling is often replaced with a fantasy notion of halcyon days. The land itself, it seems, asks for this purifying treatment: “The newness of the land itself seems [...] to have demanded, the evocation of a mythology which could give people a sense of continuity” (4). Helen Hunt Jackson, a writer and poet who visited California in the late 1800s, became one of the most vocal proponents of this myth-making. During her frequent stays in the region she became increasingly enamoured of the Spanish Missions which littered the Southern California landscape in varying states of dilapidation, taking it upon herself to write a novel describing, in hyperbolically romantic terms, the “Mission legend” of the land (5). According to McWilliams, Jackson’s novel, *Ramona*, published in 1884, was based loosely on research she had conducted into the area on behalf of *Century* magazine. However, her interest in the facts quickly dissipated in the face of a desire to create a rosier myth out of the ashes of a more unsavoury historical truth, and the novel became responsible in its way for the perpetuation of mythology over historical accuracy.

Didion’s forefathers likewise told themselves stories to justify and validate *how* they chose to live; to legitimise and even romanticise in history the fateful decision to push back the frontier. In the telling and re-telling of the crossing stories, she argues, there exists a “problem with point of view: the actual observer, or camera-eye, is often hard to locate” (*Where I* 30). She uses the example of a story told by Josephus Adamson Cornwall, who in turn is repeating the tale told by Nancy Hardin Cornwall, who was herself not a witness to the events. We are left to contend with unreliable narrators and second- or third-hand

information, with re-iterations of stories purporting to be truths from multiple perspectives, passed down the family line like heirlooms. In “Notes from a Native Daughter,” Didion wonders what proportion of these stories are “merely imagined or improvised,” and indeed how much of this institutional memory is “no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else’s memory, stories handed down on the family network” (141).

In *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), David Lowenthal writes about the problematics of memory, nostalgia, and collective narratives of the past, arguing that the recollections of other people “occlude and often masquerade as our own” and that in the “process of knitting our own discontinuous recollections into narratives, we revise personal components to fit the collectively remembered past” (196). Didion asserts that it was through narratives like that of the Cornwall family that “the crossing stories became elevated to a kind of single master odyssey, its stations of veneration fixed” (*Where I* 31). She implies that there is a certain difficulty in reporting the truth of a place so swathed in its own mythology, and so intent upon indoctrinating its inhabitants with a sense of the infallibility of that mythology. She points out, as one example of this tendency towards mythomania, the irony of Collis P. Huntington’s decision to commission a painting (Albert Bierstadt’s *Donner Lake from the Summit*) depicting the traversing of the Donner Pass by Central Pacific Railroad. Didion calls the painting “a wilful revision to this point of the locale” (75). Here, again, we see the California narrative at work. Bierstadt’s painting illustrates the vista of the Donner Pass as romantic, even sublime. In thus representing this part of the land and wiping the slate clean of any remnants of the bloody history which previously stained it, the history of California becomes likewise ennobled and romantic. But the truth is that those who were slowed by sickness or age were sometimes abandoned to the wilderness; children of other parties who were discovered, orphaned, on the journey, were left behind. The crossing story, the version of history told and re-told through the generations, denies that such tragedy exists.

This form of remembering, of purposefully excising and controlling the narrative, is just another type of storytelling, or “embroidery,” which seeks to (re)define the past (*Where I* 3). “How much of it actually happened? Did any of it?” Didion asks, writing that it is “easy to deceive oneself” about the reality behind any memory (“On Keeping” 108). Likewise, she begins *Where I Was From* by stating that what she tells us “may be true or it may be, in a local oral tradition inclined to stories that turn on decisive gestures, *embroidery*” (3 emphasis added). Mosser observes that “Autobiographical narratives are sometimes unreliable, unverifiable, even fictional” (7). Didion sets the scene for the presence, and perhaps the inevitability, of fabrication, spinning a yarn and adding her own decorative touches. Stories, like the objects discussed below, are also artefacts, passed down the family line. Are they any more or less reliable or accurate as representations of the past? Her use of the word “embroidery” to connote the storytelling which lies (so to speak) at the heart of recollection at the opening of *Where I Was From* compounds this connection (a point I pick up again later in this chapter).

Didion is as much a product of her environment as Carmen Sternwood, Maria Wyeth or D.J. Waldie. They all reorganise and resuscitate history, to paraphrase M. Christine Boyer, creating a “fictional space” where it can live in fabricated form (66). The “weakness for the speculative venture” expressed by California’s endless real estate sales spree is mirrored in Didion’s self-narrative – she continuously provides a speculative history of her home state that is not rooted in a knowledge of the facts on the ground (*Where I* 167). She portrays the California landscape in both her fiction and nonfiction as full of dangerous breaches in the form of devouring sinkholes and rapid rivers and houses leaning perilously close to the ocean, all of which create chasms in its veneer, replicated in the narrative lacunae of each of her texts which are likewise perforated with gaps and omissions in the stories told by her subjects, both fictional and nonfictional. Like Maria Wyeth, whose memory of events we

must question throughout *Play It As It Lays*, Didion presents herself to the reader as another unreliable narrator. In *Where I Was From* she argues that “Conflicting details must be resolved, reworked into a plausible whole” (30). In “On Keeping a Notebook,” she recalls the cracked crab eaten the day her father returned from Detroit in 1945. In reality she reveals that it is unlikely that cracked crab was in fact eaten that day. But no matter. It is this detail which leads her into the memory: “it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again” (109). Physical talismans like the crab, the snake, the loose hem of a dress, a fragment of dialogue overheard, or the smell of disinfectant, generate huge synecdochic significance in Didion’s work; significance beyond the fact of themselves.⁴⁹ Each seemingly arbitrary detail becomes a memory palace in miniature.⁵⁰

In “On Going Home,” Didion reports on her 1967 sojourn back home in the Central Valley. Her family live in houses mouldering in their antiquity, rife with dust and “filled with mementos” (131); these mementos prove to be conduits into her past. But at times the sheer volume of family artefacts proves overwhelming. When a home becomes a museum, it can transform itself into a mausoleum. As I mention in Chapter 1 with regard to Marlowe’s memory palace, David Farrell Krell compares memorialisation to a kind of entombment: “*he mneme* is remembrance in general but also a record, memorial, or tomb” (2). At her family residence in the Central Valley Didion is rendered near-catatonic by the inescapable sense of “meeting one’s past at every turn, around every corner, inside every cupboard,” the contents of which range from a bathing suit worn at seventeen to a letter of rejection from a newspaper, three teacups initialled by her grandmother, and a photograph of her grandfather

⁴⁹ She also refers to significant objects in *Play It As It Lays* – the motifs of letters, snakes, and tulips, for example, recur throughout the novel.

⁵⁰ In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 2006 Didion says that in the work of VS Naipaul he makes explicit that “the seemingly insignificant things that most of us spend our days noticing are really significant, have meaning, and tell us something” (“Joan Didion, The Art of Nonfiction”). This statement can clearly be applied to her own writing.

surveying Donner Pass in 1910: “I smooth out the snapshot and look into his face, and do and do not see my own” (“On Going” 132). Much like the conversation made amongst the Didions, which speaks the coded language of “the yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling and the mountain roads closing when the heavy snow comes in,” (131) these small mementos are in fact family heirlooms which encapsulate and articulate a larger sense of ancestry and selfhood. The thread of continuity which she feels she is losing in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” to which we will turn shortly, can be found within objects like these with strong locational associations. Didion pulls each one in turn, unravelling memories which may or may not enlighten her regarding her family history.

“It all comes back,” (112) she writes in “On Keeping a Notebook,” through the conduit of these objects and through the small details to which she pays such specific attention, including the cracked crab and the pale green organdy dress the same colour as “the local landscape only for a few spring days when the rice first showed” (*Where I* 17) and the quilt made by her great-great grandmother. Chris Anderson assesses that “Rather than explain her feelings about the disjointedness of her own past,” Didion instead “inventories childhood treasures” (137). Particular objects, seemingly without value or significance, are bequeathed to future generations with urgency. “*Take it,*” insists Didion’s mother on her death bed, forcing the silver flatware and ladle into her daughter’s hands, “I don’t want it lost” (*Where I* 226). This is an attitude which goes a long way towards explaining Didion’s obsession with any object which could be a venerated relic of the past. Didion writes of her grandmother’s “thick blue towels and Helena Rubinstein soap in the shape of apple blossoms,” the recollection of which leads her to the memory of her mother requesting that she give the soap “to the wife of a departing colonel, a goodbye present” (209-210). Even before the death of her grandmother the items associated with her such as the “two pieces of silver flatware, a small ladle and a small serving spoon, each wrapped in smoothed scraps of used tissue

paper,” the apple blossom soap and the rich towels, signify leaving and loss (225). Inherited items are meticulously listed in *Where I Was From*, items which become facsimiles of home and family. Not only does Didion itemise the heirlooms bestowed upon her by her mother, but the objects which she retained on her grandmother’s death are also detailed. She does not explain the inclusion of these items, instead leaving them out for the reader’s delectation, as though laying a table. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that some things cannot be explained, or their importance articulated. Such small things must now stand in for what can no longer be held. “There is no real way to deal with everything we lose.” Yeats tells us, and Didion repeats, that “Things fall apart” (Yeats 158). Witnessing the gradual decline and disappearance of an old, familiar world, Didion must find something tangible to cling to. When one’s sense of history disintegrates, the image, the object, at last becomes paramount – a powerfully emblematic “object of memory” (Vidler 64).

Details and objects, like the crab, fictitious or not, act as talismans which embody a significance that exceeds their empirical worth. The cracked crab “might as well” have existed, and though Didion admits that she is capable of telling “what some would call lies” (or, when she feels kinder towards herself, “embroidery, worked into the day’s pattern to lend verisimilitude”), she remains unconvinced that this tendency towards fabrication is truly important (“On Keeping” 109). As I detailed earlier in this chapter, she makes frequent use of the word “embroidery” and “pattern” to describe the potential fabrication of the truth as she sees it in retrospect.

Such vocabulary has also been used in discussions of femininity and women’s art. In *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (1997), Karen Jackson Ford notes in a discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that “women’s creative expression has usually occurred within boundaries determined by a predominantly male tradition. That sewing is Hester’s means of articulating herself points up the traditionally limited outlets for

female creativity” (10). She argues that the way Hester Prynne takes up needlework and uses it as a means of communication “challenges and complicates” our understanding of how women are able to both engage and transgress conventions. The care she takes over the work and her elaborate handicraft re-writes and works over the original narrative of the letter “A.” Hester’s art thus “produces new meanings through a proliferation or ‘embroidering’ of representation” (10). In the same way, Didion uses textual fabrication and embroidery to re-decorate and replenish the old stories passed down by her family, stitching her own decoration through and over the pre-existing text. Jackson Ford writes that “excesses of style” such as those exhibited by Hester and her decorative workmanship, “enable crucial and liberating excesses of meaning” and that this makes her party to a “poetics of excess” which can “contradict, revise, and affirm existing meanings” (10). Didion likewise continues the art of storytelling through her own revisions and contradictions that further embellish the family biography.

Jackson Ford refers to Roland Barthes and his text “The Third Meaning” (1970) in her assessment of Hester’s contribution to representations of the female experience. Barthes writes that a text possessing multiple meanings in the style of Hester’s newly fashioned “A” has “a multilayer of meanings which always lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation” (Barthes, “The Third Meaning” 58). Didion likewise makes her family’s stories just like the “geological formation[s]” referred to above by Barthes, stitching her own decoration through and over the pre-existing text, and this sense of placing layer upon layer connects her textual fabrications to both Freud’s notion of “different contents,” (*Civilization* 18) as seen in Chapter 2, and to the pentimento and the palimpsest which I will explore in Chapter 5.

Words like “embroidery” and “pattern” are also tactile and speak to the notion that the past is something you *make*. The embroidery that memory provides has been stitched by

Didion's family inside various texts: "fragments of local oral history" have been "preserved by daughters and granddaughters on legal pads and the backs of envelopes" (*Where I* 157). These pads and envelopes become kin to Didion's notebook (mentioned in "On Keeping") which anticipates, and attempts to ward off, loss and forgetting. "Time passes and I lose the thread" Didion writes in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," and now this lost thread becomes imbued with greater meaning (80). Not only does it represent her anxiety about the discontinuities she finds, but also now we find it is the thread that she uses to weave her sense of chronological narrative.

How much of Didion's Sacramento ever existed, outside of family stories told and re-told? "Perhaps in retrospect this has been a story not about Sacramento at all, but about the things we lose" she realises, understanding now that the "real past" is never entirely real in the first place ("Notes from" 147). If a "sense of Chekhovian loss" is built into the very foundations of Sacramento-as-California, perhaps the rate of its disappearance is entirely characteristic and to be expected (138). What is Didion actually mourning, asks Katherine Usher Henderson, "the old Sacramento or her own irretrievable childhood" (111)? The past of California pre-dates her own, but it is *her* California for which she mourns; the disappearance of her own past which causes her the grief Marshall Berman expresses. Didion closes "Notes from a Native Daughter" with the final lines from "Spring and Fall" by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "*It is Margaret you mourn for*" (147). She knows that we mourn ourselves, seen in the places we once knew and to which we can no longer travel.

In *Where I Was From*, Didion articulates the strange and simultaneous desire to be away from and close to the West Coast by writing about it from the East. The aforementioned *Run River*, written as a way of going home without actually going home, in fact put "a protective distance between me and the place I came from" (*Where I* 169). Thomas Mallon points out that throughout her fiction, every Didion heroine loses track of their personal

history in their pursuit of *somewhere else*, a characteristic that can be applied to Didion herself: “She knows that anyone of her generation – and her heroines are all roughly of it – travels at one’s peril any real distance from home and the past” (62). Yet both the family and the home prove ambivalent concepts for both Didion and those she writes about.

Again in *Where I Was From*, Didion quotes Jane Hollister Wheelwright, daughter of rancher and land-owner William Welles Hollister, who recalls (twenty years after the family ranch was sold) her feelings about the land, as described in appropriately heightened, hushed terms. Despite her apparent ardour for this “fantastic but real world of [her] own discovery,” (56) it turns out that she chose to leave it at the age of twenty-four to travel to China and to London and settle in San Francisco, which begs the question of whether one’s nostalgia is contingent upon one’s distance from its object. Didion herself left behind her own “web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors” at 22 to travel from California to New York (“Slouching” 99). Despite her homesickness and nostalgia, she remained on the opposite coast to her own childhood context for eight years, and later went back again to New York in 1988. Didion tries to explain in “Notes From a Native Daughter” why she left her hometown despite her intense connection to the place. She tries “to prove that I had not meant to leave at all,” as though attempting to exonerate herself of any wrongdoing, or any guilt (140). Like Eden, California is surely a place from which people would only be expelled, not willingly expel themselves: “it is assumed that those who absent themselves from its blessings have been banished, exiled by some perversity of heart.” The Donner-Reed party, who as we know both suffered and enacted unspeakable horrors to make fruitful their part of California, casts a long shadow over her reminiscences. Their original sin surely makes it impossible to see the Sacramento Valley as a place which could have ever been innocent.

The rejection of the familiar, or perhaps one should say *familial*, seems to be a rite of passage.⁵¹ Like Marshall Berman's admission that he would have eventually left the Tremont neighbourhood of the Bronx of his own volition, despite his retrospective yearning for the Bronx of his childhood, and indeed Didion's own transfer from California to New York, Jane Hollister Wheelwright's simultaneous reverence for and desertion of the California ranch on which she grew up speaks to a sense of myth-making that makes both departure and veneration easier. In *Where I Was From* Didion details the occasion on which, a few months after her father died, she drove her mother from Monterey to Berkeley where she was due to speak at a ceremony at the University of California. Her mother protests that they cannot be on the right road because nothing looks the same; "where did it all go?" she asks (215). Instead of Gilroy and the Milias Hotel and the grazing cattle, the Didions see only "mile after mile of pastel subdivisions and labyrinthine exits and entrances to freeways that had not previously existed" (215-216). After the ceremony Didion, being "The child of the crossing story that I was," leaves her mother in Berkeley with one of her grandchildren in order to catch the redeye to New York (217). "I remembered this abandonment the day she died," states Didion baldly, her actions speaking again to that California survival instinct to *hurry along as fast as you can*, no matter who you must discard along the way.

The very idea of home and its attendant domestic items carries for her a huge emotional weight with which she struggled until she reached the end of her twenties: "some nameless anxiety colored the emotional charges between me and the place that I came from"

⁵¹ This is the case for several of the authors in this thesis. Alison Lurie, born in Chicago, grew up in New York State and lived in Los Angeles, Massachusetts, and Ithaca, while her creations the Cattleman's moved from New England to Los Angeles. In *A Meaningful Life* we find Lowell Lake abandoning Berkeley in favour of Brooklyn; its author, L.J. Davis, moved from Seattle to Boise to Manhattan, before ending up in Brooklyn like his antihero. Raymond Chandler came to Los Angeles in 1912, having been born in Chicago and educated in London as a child. The sense of ostracism and (some might argue self-imposed) alienation felt by Marlowe is also evident in Chandler's personal letters, for example in August 1939 he wrote to Blanche Knopf: "I still feel rather out of place here" ("Letter to Blanche" 20).

(“On Going” 132). Home does not always have a fixed address to which one can perpetually return. Writing in 1967 she sees her home through her daughter’s eyes, and knows that for her, home will not be yellow fields and cottonwoods and initialled tea cups: “I [...] would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now” (133). Didion frequently asks whether it is possible to know what home is, or to go home again once one has left – a query which she adds to her sentimental baggage. In her short story, “Sunset,” published in 1956, she fictionalises this idea in a very literal sense – her heroine returns to her childhood home in the Sacramento Valley which no longer stands: “All the land had been sold and subdivided [...] and even the house in which she had lived her first sixteen years had been turned into a day nursery” (21).

Her anxieties about home and its disappearance are rooted in family history. In an 1849 diary entry quoted by Didion, Sarah Royce, who ultimately made her home in Sacramento, writes of being “without house or home to shelter us,” and this nomad’s sense of homeless wandering is exemplified by Didion’s mother, during her husband’s war-time absence, desperately seeking a temporary home for her family (*Where I* 29). “When our mother came back out onto the sidewalk she was crying: it seemed to be the end of some rope, one day too many on which there would be no place for us to stay” (208). Though the very point of the crossing story invoked throughout her work was to leave one home in search of another, there is a strong sense of ambivalence about the home that was eventually created amidst much suffering. Not only is home an ambivalent concept for her, but so is California as a whole. It is “somewhere else,” she writes in “Notes from a Native Daughter” (137), repeating the phrase spoken by both Maria and her mother in *Play It As It Lays*; somewhere more than five hours away from New York by air, and somewhere unrecognisable to inhabitants of Los Angeles or San Francisco. Travelling to California is “a longer and in many ways a more difficult trip” than one might imagine, “one of those trips on which the

destination flickers chimerically on the horizon, ever receding, ever diminishing.” Didion’s heritage seems to undermine the notion of home as a stable, mappable place.

The *idea* more than the reality of family and of home confers, to this daughter of the West Coast, a sense of identity and history, both of which can be traced back to the California landscape and the crossing story, suggesting this is all impermanent and fabricated. In *Where I Was From*, Didion writes that for those who attempted the long crossing west, “Sentiment, like grief and dissent, cost time. A hesitation, a moment spent looking back, and the grail was forfeited” (32). As we have already seen in *Play It As It Lays*, she is teaching us that this is an archetypal California mantra: “Never discuss. Cut” (203). In the following section I explore the ways in which this mantra also recurs in her title essay from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Here we find further instances of the synonymous abandonment of both home and history, this time in the form of the lost children of San Francisco.

Losing the Thread: “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”

The title *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is of course taken from one of the most famous lines from the W.B. Yeats poem titled “The Second Coming,” in which the speaker ominously cries that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (158). The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* all reflect a sense of decomposition. The “atomization” of which she speaks in her Preface is mirrored in the Californian landscape (“A Preface” 9).⁵² The title essay, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” depicts the lives of those who, continuing the tradition of the crossing story, moved west to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco during the late 1960s as part of the wave of enormous social changes crashing over the country. During this period university campus rebellions against the government spread from its nucleus in

⁵² Didion writes by way of explanation that the title essay represents “the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fall apart” (“A Preface” 9).

Berkeley, near San Francisco. Hugh Brogan remarks that the “sixties youth movement” of which the people Didion speaks to in “Slouching” were a part, “discovered just how racist and brutal parts of the country were,” resulting in an increasing “[a]lienation from conventional society and its pieties” (657-8). The events of this revolutionary epoch go beyond the remit of this thesis but suffice it to say that the mid-1960s into the late 1970s was a particularly charged period in the U.S.A during which groups such as the civil rights protestors, the women’s rights movement and the anti-war demonstrators echoed each other’s calls for revolution. From the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy and Malcolm X, to the war in Vietnam, the Watts Riots, President Nixon and Watergate, Charles Manson and the murder of a pregnant Sharon Tate, the pill, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Patty Hearst, Neil Armstrong’s giant leap – the list of social and political earthquakes which occurred during this time seems endless.

“Slouching” is ostensibly more clearly rooted in the historical processes of a particular moment in American history, and yet it is still deeply connected to Didion’s personal fears regarding the way that the kids she discovers are living outside the structures she had taken for granted as an American. In a 2005 interview with Didion, journalist Susanna Rustin hypothesises that in her subject’s style of reporting, “the alienation and distress she perceived all around her were refracted through her own emotions” (Didion, “Legends” 20). Everything in the late 1960s seemed to have melted into air and re-emerged some uncanny form. Like Didion herself these young people have cut themselves loose from family, home, geography, where they were from, and so they have become uncanny doubles of herself, but a self whose memory has been wiped, who has fallen apart without the thread to hold her in a chronological, ancestral line.

The setting for much of the essay takes the form of a series of interior spaces, each of which is suggestive of this same alienation felt by the youth movement outlined by Brogan

above. These spaces suggest a disconnection or discontinuity from the original purpose for which they were built, and from the spaces outside these insular communes. Interiors include run-down buildings built for one purpose, used for another, and lived in by collectives of transient adolescents rather than conventional nuclear families. There is a summer quiet to these spaces, in which only the slight billow of a curtain or the distant shriek of a child on the street can be heard. Mechanical noises bring disturbance, wrenching Didion out of her immersive experience: “I feel that my mind is going [...] when the telephone rings” (“Slouching” 95).⁵³ The ringing telephone is a sign that she uses in other texts to show interruptions and disruptions in the surreal narrative constructed by those who chose to submerge themselves.⁵⁴

Everything seems somehow de-contextualised, as though removed from its right place. As we have learnt from Freud (and as previously applied to the eerily unoccupied interiors of the Sternwood mansion in *The Big Sleep*), this sense of ambivalence, in, for example, the domestic becoming the unfamiliar or the estrangement from a formerly intimate space, is a sign of the uncanny. “Slouching” is littered with references to missed connections and to a pervasive sense of emptiness and lack. She writes of “misplaced children and abandoned houses,” of disappearances and reappearances (72). Her notebook is confiscated by the police. Phone numbers are given out and not called, whole afternoons drift by with

⁵³ This can also be connected to the ringing telephone in *Desperate Characters* (1970) – a signal of an imminent reckoning between the past as ensconced in the cosy interiors of brownstone Brooklyn and the modern present of the street and the world outside.

⁵⁴ For example, in “Goodbye to All That,” she recalls that towards the end of her time living in New York, she couldn’t bear to stay in her own apartment, residing instead for a period at her friend’s place in an attempt to find respite from the outside world in the form of the telephone’s insistent appeal: “A friend would leave me the key to her apartment in the West Village when she was out of town, and sometimes I would just move down there, because by that time the telephone was beginning to bother me” (183). Likewise, in *Play It As It Lays*, Maria is frequently drawn out of a dream or reverie by unwanted callers like Ivan Costello and her estranged husband.

little activity to account for the expenditure of time, and characters enter and exit the narrative to answer phones or go to the hospital with pneumonia or chicken pox. She is constantly seeking people out who may or may not wish to be left undiscovered, asking questions and receiving either vague platitudes in return or a refusal to respond, experiencing the passing of time without structure or schedule. The days are a “continual happening,” she says (79), worrying that they “do not seem to be getting to the point,” a statement that seems to be a description endemic to the text (81). Everything circumnavigates “the point,” as though there is a black hole at the centre of the narrative. The “centre cannot hold” perhaps because there is no centre to speak of (Yeats 158). We are continuously returned to the sense that something is missing or that the world has exploded and been pieced back together incorrectly.

Amidst the many gaps and absences throughout the essay, signifying this vacillating centre, memory stands out as being the biggest: “What happened ten minutes ago or what is going to happen a half hour from now tends to fade from mind [...] Time passes and I lose the thread” (“Slouching” 79-80). The people Didion meets and writes about seem to have all lost the thread of continuity with their past lives or the thread of a historical narrative. All have a problem with remembering. Interviewees fail to remember where they came from: “I ask where he comes from. ‘Here,’ he says. I mean before here. ‘San Jose, Chula Vista, I dunno’” (74). Recalling the temporal obscurity of *The Nowhere City*, they forget how long they have been in San Francisco: “Vicki [...] has been here ‘for a while’” (85). Lacking the historical context within which to place their own narrative, the people with whom Didion speaks lack a point of origin. Chris Anderson asserts that “Didion’s deep concern is the loss of ‘home’ in the ‘fragmentation’ of America after World War II, a general undermining of order and cohesiveness at all levels of society” (145). This is made explicit in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” in which she sees the fragmentation of society in the postwar years

made manifest in the homeless rootlessness of these children who live utterly detached from their own familial past, “cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors” (“Slouching” 99). Amongst the makeshift family homes of Haight-Ashbury she finds an unsupervised three-year-old child chewing an electric cord, his arm horribly burnt from the fire he started earlier that morning, while a five-year-old girl wearing white lipstick is discovered to be high on the acid her mother has fed her. Didion, her journalistic detachment crumbling, despairs: “We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed” (98).

It is the inarticulacy of these children which frightens her the most. “They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it [...] They feed back exactly what is given them. Because they do not believe in words” (99). Thus they resort to the only vocabulary available to them, that of “platitudes” and snatched pieces of regurgitated dialogue which are repeated throughout Didion’s text. Stock phrases include “the trip,” “media poisoning,” “the flash,” and “groovy” (92, 93, 87, 100). Haight-Ashbury inhabitants make a habit of peppering their vague explanations with equivocations, like “kind of,” “sort of,” and “dunno,” (93, 76, 77) which she dutifully and diligently repeats. Usher Henderson contends that for the most part, people “need words to integrate their past into their present” (104). The ineloquence of the young people in Haight-Ashbury is therefore suggestive of their failure to commit to this integration, and the consequence of this is their inability to become fully-formed adults, willing and able to articulate experience. They have no need “for words to shape understanding, to define themselves as individuals.”

In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria Wyeth also frequently speaks in cliché or euphemistically, using stock phrases to stand in for real information. Implicitly there is a relationship between

this superficial engagement with language as a means of self-expression and Maria's inability to fully articulate and integrate her personal history. The children of Haight-Ashbury are likewise living "without memory or plans, outside of time" (Usher Henderson 104). The collapse of language is equated to a discontinuity in the line from past to present, with Didion seeing this as "a symptom of deep disorder in the society as a whole." This lack of linguistic ability is another sign of a historical rupture. Something has snapped, everything is now out of context, and Haight-Ashbury nomads have broken with their own history even in terms of language. As David L. Ulin writes, "Slouching" presents "the embodiment of a culture outside history" (30). Leonard Wilcox reasons that the historical context (the postwar period leading into the 1960s) for her writing on Haight-Ashbury is what defines it. This was a period characterised by "The simultaneous sense of exile from and paralysis by the past, the breakup of an old order, a loss of a sense of historical coherence" (69). He continues that, for Didion, "the counterculture phenomenon is the final symbol of the fall from an intact historical world into a chaos of historical discontinuity." This is clear from the text when she notes that "Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins" ("Slouching" 72).

Many of the people Didion meets in Haight-Ashbury have come west from somewhere else, making this another in a long line of Southern California stories, like Lurie's *The Nowhere City*, peopled by non-natives who do not quite belong. For Paul Cattleman, one such non-native, Los Angeles is a utopia; for Katherine Cattleman it is nothing and nowhere. Perhaps they are both correct: *utopos* of course means *nowhere*. Indeed, the enormous spinning doughnut Katherine sees atop a roadside stand is a synecdoche for the city as a whole, "a great big advertisement for nothing" (*Nowhere* 38).⁵⁵ This "big empty hole," which

⁵⁵ For more on roadside architecture, see the discussion between Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown on "ducks" vs "decorated sheds" in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Katherine sees almost immediately upon arrival in Los Angeles anticipates in particular Didion's fear that, in Southern California, the centre cannot hold, because in fact there *is* no centre. For her this means, fatally, that history has been forgotten and its lessons neglected. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that *absence* is the centre. For Katherine, as for Didion in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," the absence most keenly felt is that of a tangible sense of time passing, without which life is for both a frightening, empty prospect.

The void at the centre of the doughnut is a heightened symbol of the sense of lack which permeates the other works discussed in this thesis. It is the "negative path" (Vidler 180) forged by the obliteration of Berman's entire Bronx neighbourhood, as we have seen; it is Didion's descriptions of the absence of history in Haight-Ashbury and the intentional omissions in Maria Wyeth's narrative and the gaps in memory traced in "Goodbye to All That." It is the gradual disappearance of the familiar Sacramento landscape in "Notes from a Native Daughter" and in *Where I Was From*; the abandoned oil fields and eerily vacant Sternwood mansion in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*; and the heartache of Waldie's empty rooms in *Holy Land*, his 1996 memoir to which I turn next.⁵⁶

Becoming the Grid: *Holy Land*

Stephen M. Buhler in his review of *Holy Land* describes Waldie's collection of vignettes as providing "a spiritual geography of Lakewood, California, a place often dismissed as soulless, as 'no-place' at all" (201). He argues that most "adopted Californians" associate the state with "a sense of displacement" rather than homeliness. Martin Dines also suggests that suburbs like Lakewood have long been aligned with a certain "blankness" due not only to their "perceived demographic and architectural uniformity" but also to what has been seen as

⁵⁶ As previously discussed in the chapter on Chandler, the abandoned house and empty lot are archetypal symbols of absence and lack in an urban space, which speak to a previous history now (wilfully) forgotten.

an “absence of history” (81). Dines continues that the result of what is deemed a “fabricated and tamed modernity” is a space that is utterly removed from history “and devoid of memory.” But in fact, he argues, it is possible for the suburb to retain traces of history and hold memory “palimpsestically” (84). Dines ultimately contends that, contrary to arguments that the suburbs are unable to emit a sense of the past, there is evidence that “acts of remembering” are in fact “embedded in the suburban landscape” in unexpected ways. But these acts of memory are more likely, as he puts it, to “reify *absences*” (emphasis added) than make the *presence* of past lives tangible. In this section I argue that it is in these absences, silences and omissions, that remnants of undisclosed memory can be found and exposed.

In 1946, D.J. Waldie’s parents bought the house in which Waldie still lives (at the time of writing) and where he wrote the book which narrates both his childhood and the life of his hometown. Lakewood, a postwar suburban community developed by Louis Boyar, Mark Taper and Ben Weingart from late 1949 until its completion in 1953, is part of the history of endless development in California as a whole, and Los Angeles County in general. Lakewood is notable for the speed and volume of its construction, with its developers “building tract-style housing faster, cheaper, and at a higher density than had previously been done: builders broke ground for more than 500 homes per week” (Pulido, Barraclough and Chend 172). It became a model for other new communities which, after World War II, “seemed to develop overnight in Los Angeles County” (173). Eric Avila explains that the style and shape of Lakewood’s layout “epitomized the efficient organization of space that marked the development of postwar suburbia” (45). Didion, who writes about Lakewood in *Where I Was From*, tells us that just like “much of the southern end of this grid, Lakewood was until after World War Two agricultural, several thousand acres of beans and sugar beets just inland from the Signal Hill oil field” (102). Throughout the early 1950s, Waldie’s home was in the process of being constructed, forged amid the fields of lima beans: “You and I

grew up in these neighborhoods when they were an interweaving of houses and fields that were soon to be filled with more houses” (Waldie, *Holy* 3).

Holy Land, which Merry Ovnick describes beautifully as a “mosaic of personal memories,” (285) is broken up into 316 segments, like plots of subdivided land, or building blocks. Waldie approaches the personal and intimate carefully throughout the text, incrementally moving towards them through other adjoining rooms. This is akin to the careful progression from cell to cell, block to block, of the grid system. Perhaps this is what he means when he writes that he thinks he is “becoming the grid he knew” (*Holy* 1). Waldie refers frequently to the grid system according to which the spatial arrangement of Lakewood was established. This grid is “a fraction of a larger grid, anchored to one in Los Angeles,” making Lakewood an extension of a larger map which was first laid out in 1781 (22). He writes that it is possible to drive from the ocean to Los Angeles and remain on the same grid of streets. “Every square foot of my city has been tilled or built on and fitted into the grid” (54).

Avila remarks that the decision to build Lakewood on the grid system was typical for “suburban developments built on Southern California’s flat terrain [...] The grid reflects distinct traditions of city planning, and its historical application reflects a solution to the problem of ordering undeveloped land” (45-46). In *Borderland*, John R. Stilgoe explains that during the mid-nineteenth century, land speculators at the edge of every major American city were throwing “an essentially urban fabric over hitherto borderland landscape,” cultivating the margins so they resembled the urban spaces from which they originally sought to provide sanctuary (152). The street patterns being built on a “rectilinear” style was a reflection of the fact that urbanity was at the time “equated [...] with straightness.” In *The Beer Can by the Highway* (1961), John A. Kouwenhoven argues that the grid system is quintessentially American, externalising and making possible its “fluid and ever-changing unity” (44). The

“gridiron pattern of the city’s streets” is the same pattern which makes “almost any American town” legible, and is “the same pattern which, in the form of square townships, sections, and quarter sections, was imposed by the Ordinance of 1785 on an almost continental scale [...] each man’s domain clearly divided from his neighbor’s” (44-45). In “Grids”, Rosalind Krauss depicts the grid as deeply modern in its function and style: “one of the important sources of this power is the way the grid is [...] so stridently modern to look at, seeming to have no place of refuge, no room on the face of it, for vestiges of the nineteenth century to hide” (54). Indeed, the grid represents a rejection of nineteenth-century “illegibility” (which I have already detailed in Chapter 2 on Marshall Berman and Robert Moses) in favour of more regulated space (Donald 73). The site of Waldie’s memories, in its system of intersecting grids, right angles, and straight lines, is therefore not only a reflection of his attempts to textually control and contain his memory, as I explain, but is also symptomatic of the urban spatial arrangement of the twentieth-century city.

Waldie employs a mathematically-inclined language to quantify and analyse the data of his childhood in Lakewood, approaching it circuitously and through implication such that the tiniest details become hugely significant. Yet despite the sense of control emphasised by the mathematical division and subdivision of space imposed on the land by the grid, within those spaces the chaos of the individual can thrive unimpeded. In *Delirious New York* (1978) Rem Koolhaas writes that the grid system “defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos,” (20) and that buildings within this system become “a stack of individual privacies” inside each of which dwells an “unstable combination of simultaneous activities” (85). The internal world of such buildings obscures the “continuous changes raging inside it” (101). The exterior of a building therefore represents the logic of urban planning and development, while the interior contains the swell and storm of the human emotion and chaos which

threatens to overwhelm it. In *Holy Land*, characters such as Mr H and Mrs A recur, their stories dropped and picked up in between bouts of reportage of a more impersonal nature. The narrative of Mr H with his superfluity of detritus in his front yard, and the countless letters sent by Mrs A to the council concerning nuclear waste, secret military burial places, and the potential toppling of her house into a pit created by the Army Corps of Engineers, seep through the book surreptitiously. The inability, or refusal, of such people to acquiesce to the demands of the city and toe the line, a line made sometimes literal by the borders which divide one lot from the one next door, express deviations and transgressions which cast ripples across the placid surface of the neighbourhood. The grid is endless and inescapable. The grid makes land understandable. But the stories of Mr H and Mrs A make it clear that the grim, relentless, mathematical logic of city planners cannot paper over human behaviour and make that likewise rational.

Waldie, who has described Los Angeles as the “city of self-inflicted amnesia” himself embeds his own desire for control over narrative, memory, and emotional chaos into his text (“How Do We” A31). We find each section of *Holy Land* sitting side by side like rooms in a house and houses in a block, connected somehow thematically and rather loosely. At first it seems that one thought slides into the next like interlinked memories gently knocking against one another. His father’s death brings to mind, for example, the fact that, in Waldie’s home town, a fire engine will often have a quicker response time to your house in an emergency than an ambulance, which in turn leads him to the story of a woman who set her own house alight. Incrementally it becomes evident that Waldie is deliberately placing blocks in his memory between the experience of pain and the remembrance of that pain. When he alternates in his remembrances between stating facts and referring circuitously to grief, he uses the rooms in his house as repositories for memory: some of these rooms provide a buffer between other rooms he does not wish to enter. “My father died behind a well-made, wooden

bathroom door” (*Holy* 24), writes Waldie, and this material separation is reinforced by the sequestering and demarcation of personal, painful memories within his text. The segmentation of the narrative into textual cells allows him to contain things he cannot always bring himself to discuss explicitly, and on which he can shut the textual door if necessary.

A further example is provided by the two sections which stand between the disclosures that his mother died in hospital and his father died at home. These liminal sections discuss the Land Ordinance of Thomas Jefferson, written in 1785, and the sad tale of Mr H in the present day, whose Lakewood house is taken from him when he refuses to clear his front yard and the bank forecloses on his mortgage. Section 49, in which his father’s death is first mentioned, is succeeded by two sections which detail the Douglas Aircraft plant in Long Beach, and the materials of which the houses in his neighbourhood are made. In section 55 he describes his father’s death as though from a great distance (“He sat on the edge of his bed in the middle room and waited for his father to die” (28)), while in section 56 he tells the same story from the first-person perspective (“I waited on the edge of my bed in the middle bedroom”). In the latter section however he does not mention his father’s death until the last sentence. It is as though the use of “he” mitigates the pain of remembering, allowing him to tell the story as though it happened to someone else; the use of “I” on the other hand, offers no such protection. Waldie often writes in the second or third person in order to narrate both the lives of others and indeed his own. Like Maria Wyeth, who also wishes to control her own past narrative to contain her pain, when he does use the first person, it is from the position of the present, referring back to the past. For example: “*You and I grew up* in these neighborhoods;” “The house where I still live, and *where my father died*, predates the building of the rest of this city;” and “My brother and I, *who shared a room for almost twenty years*” (3, 25, 47 emphases added). These are further examples of Waldie’s attempts at

quarantining himself, in the form of his textual “I,” from the rest of the sentence devoted to a painful memory.

Throughout *Holy Land*, the narrative is peppered with references to rooms which develop particular significance. These are rooms both literal and symbolic – separate spaces in which memories he does not wish to dwell on can be placed. Though each room in the house is its own separate entity, they are in extremely close proximity to one another. There is very little separation between each room in the house, each house in the block, and each block in the grid, making each of these spaces indeterminate and conjoined. References to flimsy construction work recur throughout. Walls, posits Waldie, offer only a “thin, cement skin over absence” (42). The exteriors of the houses themselves are “little more than an inch thick” (43). In such an enclosure, one’s separation from the outside is so minimal as to be almost non-existent. At one point in his narrative, Waldie states that he and his brother slept only fourteen feet away from his parents. The segmented spaces of the domestic interiors threaten to spill over into the neighbouring rooms, melting into one entity. Waldie envisages feet crashing through the attic, the bathroom door knocked down, an earthquake forcing the “stucco and chicken-wire houses [...] off their foundations” (137). The attic stuffed with the relics of Christmases past is so structurally unsound that one “bad step will put your foot through a bedroom ceiling” (42).

In *Holy Land*, seemingly distinct spaces quickly become permeable; access for Waldie and his neighbours to a different room is only one clumsy footfall away. When it is discovered that Mr H, who has since been forced to absent himself from his house, has dug a 300-square-foot fallout shelter beneath his garage floor, a city inspector informs the new owner that should a car actually be driven onto this floor, it would immediately collapse. Space is porous, and memory within it ultimately uncontainable. The irrational behaviour of Waldie’s neighbours, and the pain of his own memory, are not always containable and cannot

always be kept sequestered in separate rooms. Just as the comportment of his neighbours continually finds a way of evading suppression and expressing itself publicly, so too does Waldie's grief, revealing itself sporadically and proving to be beyond his capacity for control of the narrative. "At some point in your story grief presents itself," he writes, as though apologising that this is beyond his control (3). "Now, for the first time, your room is empty, not merely unoccupied."

Grief is here likened to emptiness; Waldie describes his house in the present-day as "largely a void" (42). His grief is outlined very subtly in his description of the house in the wake of his bereavement: "My brother brought me back from the hospital. I spent that night in the empty house, as I continue to spend each night at home" (31). Here we find a space which was filled, but now sits empty, and we return to a sense of the uncanny. Waldie's vacant rooms echo the open voids in space Berman describes in Chapter 2, the very fact of their uncanny emptiness creating the shadow of what had filled them before.⁵⁷

Waldie consistently provides information about the measurements of rooms, the square footage taken up by houses, the distance spanned by the city which further encroaches on the land around it. Though he attempts to seal off and surround each vignette in *Holy Land* with the narration of a history which is characterised and understood much of the time through data and quantification, attempts to circumnavigate or even stop memory at the door are eventually thwarted:

My father died behind a well-made, wooden bathroom door. It is a three-panel door. Each panel is nearly square, twenty-one inches wide by nineteen inches high. From edge to edge, the door is twenty-eight inches wide. [...] The doors

⁵⁷ This also brings to mind the work of the artist Rachel Whiteread, whose casts of everyday objects, the interiors of rooms, and entire buildings, speaks to a similar interest in the ghostly echoes of negative spaces.

in my house are abstract and ordinary. The bathroom door is now forty-seven years old. My father was sixty-nine. (24-25)

Things fall apart. Death and chaos are only on the other side of a Douglas fir door.

A California of the Mind

Throughout the work that I have examined in these two chapters, Joan Didion has been determinedly seeking out signs of her past. She looks for it just as she looks for California, trying to find it in the homes of relatives, in family heirlooms, and in the myths told about the land itself. Didion is trying to see and touch memory, her California of the mind, in a visceral way.⁵⁸ She asks herself, and the reader in turn, how we remember the past in space; how we make it real. She thinks through the stories that have led her to conceive of her own personal history in a particular way – the myths which have controlled her own self-narrative. The first California myth she gently deconstructs is the sanctity and value of the land, which she traces from consecrated space to commodity; the next is the crossing story, propagated by unreliable narrators and blindly romanticised. Both myths prove to be structurally unsound, leaving her grappling with a history which is more slippery than she first imagined.

In “Slouching,” the point of origin (family, geography, home, language) that Didion seeks, which used to provide some sort of historical context within which she and her subject could be situated, no longer exists. She seeks certainty, unity, authenticity, origin, in the midst of a great sense of loss and fragmentation. The bridge that would have taken the people of San Francisco back towards a legible past has crumbled, leaving Didion with no way back to a history she can understand. Her desire to impose order on the chaos of what she witnesses in San Francisco, a chaos which is a direct result of what she sees as the failure of institutional memory, is akin to Waldie’s need to rigorously structure his account of his own

⁵⁸ Credit to Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind* for the inspiration here.

history in order to build walls around the memories which he cannot make sense of. Yet, as we see in *Holy Land*, in addition to *Play It As It Lays* and the *Slouching* essays, that which is deemed outside the rational, and repressed accordingly, will ultimately surface if it is not properly dealt with. Unpleasant and uncomfortable memories push against their cages, manifesting themselves spatially in the form of uncanny hotel suites which disturb rather than provide comfort; family homes which house runaway teenagers for whom home is no-place; rooms into which the narrator is barred entry for fear of encountering ghosts; and ancestral houses filled with an excess of mementoes left to disintegrate inside cupboard drawers.

Measuring what she sees against her memory when it comes into focus, Didion begins to ask herself whether her California, like the past, is a place in the mind rather than a location on a map. Perhaps her California, which provides the prism through which she views her own past, only comes into view when juxtaposed against a current reality. Her remembered California appears like the “gap between two [...] beats,” to quote Vladimir Nabokov; it is “the Tender Interval” that exists for a moment on either side of the empirically real (538).⁵⁹ In both *Where I Was From* and the three essays from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* she articulates this gap in terms of a sense of loss which manifests itself in different ways. The idea of a recognisable past and a way back into it is the collapsed star at the centre of her work. The central organising principle of each text is, ironically, the absence of centre. Ultimately when Didion is able to find the past, it is discovered through this sense of loss. Memory is found within the absences that suggest something is missing; in the distance between what she sees and what she feels she should see, and in the objects which

⁵⁹ Nabokov writes in *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*: “Maybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm; not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the grey gap between black beats: the Tender Interval. The regular throb itself merely brings back the miserable idea of measurement, but in between, something like true Time lurks” (538).

allow her to touch and measure this distance. The same can be said of Berman, who is homesick for a place that does not exist.

In my next chapter I move back East, to Brooklyn during the 1970s. Here I find an echo of the permeable internal spaces detailed in both Didion and Waldie's work. The brownstone apartment buildings for which the New York borough has become famous are emblematic of both a desire to hold on to a memory palace in the face of a world beyond its borders which seems to value progress over preservation, and a creeping gentrification which seeks to own and re-purpose the past.

Chapter 5. Pentimenti and Palimpsests: *A Meaningful Life* and 1970s Brooklyn

Brownstoners

Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, published in 1943, charts the formative years of Francie Nolan as she comes of age in Brooklyn, a neighbourhood in flux even in 1912 when the novel begins. The novel opens:

You took a walk on a Sunday afternoon and came to a nice neighbourhood, very refined. You saw a small one of these trees through the iron gate leading to someone's yard and you knew that soon that section of Brooklyn would get to be a tenement district. The tree knew. It came there first. Afterwards, poor foreigners seeped in and the quiet old brownstone houses were hacked up into flats (1).

Almost 60 years after the period in which Smith's novel is set, Sophie Bentwood, the main protagonist of Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* (1970), echoes Francie's musings when she wonders aloud about the fates of her neighbours whose homes are sold to the new, entrepreneurial arrivals to her neighbourhood. Two recent buyers, we learn, are a "brave pioneer from Wall Street" and "a painter who got evicted from his loft on Lower Broadway," rather different new arrivals to Francie Nolan's neighbours (Fox 5). Much like Paul and Katherine Cattleman in *The Nowhere City*, Sophie and her husband Otto are depicted in the novel's opening pages in a state of erosion that equals that of their neighbourhood. "What happens to the people in them when the houses are bought? Where do they go?" asks Sophie (5). This is a question bleakly answered by L. J. Davis' *A Meaningful Life* (1971), in which Lowell Lake, gifted with a full scholarship for a PhD programme at Berkeley, California, takes it upon himself instead to go East, to Brooklyn, to rehabilitate an old brownstone rooming house. This is a rather ironic reversal of the expected route for explorers, as repeatedly articulated by Joan Didion, and indeed an inversion of Paul Cattleman's impulse

to “Go West, Young Man” (Lurie, *Nowhere* 11). Where Paul seeks the future in Los Angeles, Lake expects the past in New York.

This chapter takes *A Meaningful Life* as a starting point for a discussion of the restoration and preservation of history by the brownstoner cause in Brooklyn during the 1960s and 1970s. Most of my focus lies with *A Meaningful Life*, but I also draw on Fox’s *Desperate Characters*, *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* by Paule Marshall (1959), and *A Walker in the City* by Alfred Kazin (1951). In addition to my primary sources, I draw on a range of contextual material relating to the early restoration of Brooklyn brownstones, including archival research, and, from time to time, on personal interviews with Brooklyn residents.

Throughout this chapter I continue to examine the ways in which both history and memory are made manifest in the urban spaces of the twentieth-century built environment – in this case, Brooklyn. In the pursuit of preservation, how is the past actually utilised and transformed in literature of this period? What does preservation actually signify to these characters? How does the relationship between external and internal spaces present itself? In order to answer these questions, I begin by tracing the emergence of both the brownstoner movement and gentrification in mid-twentieth-century Brooklyn.

Experiencing Brooklyn’s Origins

This borough, which had started its life as a pleasantly pastoral suburb, became after World War II a place from which its inhabitants were desperate to escape. Not so many decades later, they would be desperate to return.⁶⁰ The closure of the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper, the

⁶⁰ When I interviewed Richard Fine in 2015, who grew up in the Flatbush/Bensonhurst neighbourhood of Brooklyn during the 1950s (his mother came to New York from Europe at the age of seven), he explained the irony of the borough’s modern allure: “All of the people

departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers (who infamously went West), the folding of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the arrival of African Americans from the South, who were migrating to find work and escape the horrific Jim Crow politics, and the triple threat that was the creation of mortgages for returning veterans, the expansion of suburbs and the growth of the interstate highway system, have all been put forward as explanations for the postwar decline of the borough. David Gissen writes in *Manhattan Atmospheres* (2013) that during this postwar period of acute urban crisis which began in earnest during the 1960s (see also Chapter 2), New York, like so many other American cities, “became degraded physically and financially [...] The site of this time period, which extends from the end of an industrial era to a postindustrial one, has been termed the ‘crisis’ or ‘disaster’ city” (1). Kenneth T. Jackson reports in *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn* that throughout the same decade, “Rioting became a constant threat, arson was on the rise, and poverty, labor strikes, and racial tensions seemed to be the only stories the outside press reported about Brooklyn,” a trend that would continue into the subsequent decade (xxix). Yet by 1969, eminent journalist, author, and Brooklyn émigré Pete Hamill had written that somehow nostalgia had “worked its sinister charms” (31). Compared to the empty experience of the suburbs, the Old Neighbourhood didn’t seem so bad: “A little at a time, people started to drift back.” What had led people back to the borough that had been so blighted? What did they seek, and what might this have to do with history, memory, and the representations of both in the literature produced during this period?

The neighbourhood movement of which Lowell Lake becomes a part began to emerge during the 1950s, continuing in earnest and becoming more widespread throughout the later decades of the century. In *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, Suleiman Osman explains that the so-called brownstoner movement, a precursor to gentrification, was galvanised by the

who killed themselves to get the hell out of here, now their grandchildren are paying a fortune to move back into the neighbourhoods.”

desire for an alternative to the “overmodernized skyscrapers, suburban tract homes, and the ‘wild’ ghetto” (14) which were on offer elsewhere in the city.⁶¹ Sharon Zukin argues that it was also the search “for an authentic urban experience” which led people back to Brooklyn during the period of acute urban crisis which began during the 1960s (*Naked* 5). During this same period the movement trickled down to the white and white-collar professionals who were unable to afford the rising rates of Manhattan, finding more affordable housing in the borough’s surrounding areas. Brooklyn neighbourhoods like Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill and Carroll Gardens were viewed as “organic and authentic” spaces (Osman 14). Indeed, it was a desire to preserve “the ‘authentic’ city” which has been “the goal of historic preservationists” since the 1960s (Zukin, *Naked* xi).

Authenticity is a key term here. As Zukin argues, notions of what is or is not authentic in a city like New York, which endlessly sheds its historical skin, are myriad. What is sought in the name of authenticity is frequently no longer about the “mythical desire for roots” but instead a more tangible “*experience of origins*,” an experience which is actively cultivated rather than the result of a continuity which might naturally come to pass (3). She continues that those who sought to put down roots “in the old city identified with origins rather than with new beginnings” (15). Preservation is another key term – not just of buildings, returning them from dilapidation to uncannily mummified glory, but in terms of a desire to retain remnants of a collective urban identity, a throwback to the kind of small-scale community for which Jane Jacobs was an advocate.⁶² “What are we preserving?” Michael Kimmelman, *New*

⁶¹ The term brownstoner stems from the name of the stone from which many of the most desirable properties in Brooklyn are made.

⁶² There is of course a vast selection of literature available on the subject of the gentrification of New York City, including on issues pertaining to institutional racism inherent in particular housing practices, much of which goes beyond the remit of this thesis. For further reading, some recommended texts are as follows: *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2009), by Sharon Zukin; *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (2017), by Peter Moskowitz; *Gentrifier* (2017), by John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill; *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of*

York Times architecture critic, asked rhetorically at a 2015 symposium: “We’re preserving a *notion* of the city” (“Redefining Preservation” emphasis added). Randall Mason writes that preservation strategy was predicated on translating “historical consciousness into urban forms and spaces,” or in other words, on “‘spatializing’ historical memory” (xxiv). The search for both authenticity and preservation is not only about place, but rather about time. Both reflect a desire to find the ideal city incarnate in a singular time which does not change.

In a 1974 address to the Back to the City Conference at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, which was sponsored by the Brownstone Revival Committee of New York and attended by more than 200 representatives of community preservation organisations, National Trust President James Biddle states that these so-called “clock stoppers” are “part of today’s efforts to reverse the deterioration of our man-made environment,” thereby defining the brownstoners as an effective opposition against city planners like Robert Moses, who was deemed a prime impresario of urban demolition (Biddle 2). At the same conference, architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch states that “under the guise of urban renewal or urban redevelopment, the assumption was widespread [...] the only way to rebuild our cities was to bulldoze them, clear the ground, start over. In retrospect, the lunacy of this proposition should have been clear to all of us” (6). Moses wanted to rebuild the city, ignoring what was already present in the built environment. The brownstoner movement, and the gentrification that followed, wanted to restore the city in order to not just pay homage to, but actively *recreate*, what history could still be found and physically excavated. Mason contends that thanks to modernity, more traditional ties “of memory and community were strained or broken altogether,” and thus “the preservation movement responded by trying to heal the rupture” (xxv). But the work of the preservationists at this time led to the creation of “a

Gentrification from the Ground Up (2006), by Lance Freeman; and *The World in Brooklyn* (2012), edited by Judith DeSena.

spectacle” of the past rather than a genuine recreation (xxvi). Though arguably the movement, being led by those who resisted what Zukin characterises as a “forced march to progress,” (*Naked* 222) was a result of and a response to the events reflected in my chapter on Berman and the Bronx, the consequences of both ideologies in action, unintended or otherwise, are not dissimilar. Both the city planning of the modernists and the preservationist desire to save buildings deemed historically significant, privilege history over memory. For Moses, this was expressed in terms of favouring its onward momentum, and for the brownstoners in terms of their creation of restored architectural artefacts which appropriate and fix the past through the preservation of a visible outward shell.

In *A Meaningful Life*, Lowell Lake attempts to strip what physical evidence of the past he finds of its layers, to scrub it clean, in order to reach back to something primordial, to some kind of “real” and original past which seems to kill the very thing that gives it meaning. He brings to life instead some kind of undead replica; the uncanny in tectonic form. Lake personifies what Osman describes as the brownstoners’ drive to “symbolically [strip] layers off the built environment to restore a seemingly authentic past” (23).⁶³ In *Desperate Characters*, Otto and Sophie Bentwood struggle to contend with the many changes in the urban fabric of the external world. As Martha Conway writes in her review of the novel, it seems that “the world outside their renovated brownstone is turning over on its side” (173). The

⁶³ At the Park Slope branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, I joined the ‘Brooklyn Transitions’ book discussion group, which, on 29th April 2015, was discussing *A Meaningful Life*. During the discussion, an older gentleman, who had lived in Brooklyn his whole life, was so impressed with the novel’s realism that he didn’t even agree with me when I argued that it was a black comedy; a grotesque satire. *This is exactly Brooklyn in the early 1970s*, he told us he had thought to himself as he read the book. Francis Morrone agreed when I spoke to him about this; he argued that Davis is “not making any of that up. Almost everything that he describes, even the murder of the man is absurd but believable [...] You’ve got to realise it’s not fantasy. L.J. Davis actually was writing from experience.”

interior spaces they frequent, their Brooklyn brownstone included, prove increasingly inadequate shelters from the storm of historical progress found in the outside world. The world beyond the familiar walls of their various memory palaces is treated with censure and disapproval, its language an incomprehensible foreign tongue they do not wish to learn.

Spatial Conflict and Transformation: *A Meaningful Life and Desperate Characters*

In *Desperate Characters*, the outside world is often on the verge of encroaching on the interior spaces inhabited by the Bentwoods and their cohorts, and indeed on several occasions does manage to trespass. Territory is invaded, for example, in the form of the incessant ringing of the telephone, an aggressive knock at the door, a rock through a window, and an actual home invasion. Early in the novel, Otto expresses his belief in the dependable impenetrability of their home. To him this is “powerfully solid [...] the sense of that solidity was like a hand placed firmly in the small of his back” (Fox, *Desperate* 4).⁶⁴ But as Marshall Berman tells us, all that is solid inevitably melts into air, and through the course of the novel Otto’s sense of imperviousness is called into question on several occasions. As James Peacock writes in *Brooklyn Fictions* (2014), throughout *Desperate Characters* Paula Fox provides visceral reminders that “the couple lives on a socioeconomic frontier,” and that “each rude interruption of their lives [...] reminds them how porous the frontier is” (132-133). I argue that the frontier is not just one of socioeconomic difference, but one which demarcates history and memory. Their Brooklyn brownstone, their farmhouse and the homes of their friends are all bulwarks against history’s devouring capacities.

⁶⁴ Speaking about Brooklyn specifically, journalist and author Jim Sleeper recounts that he has “dreams, mournful dreams” about his childhood borough: “A sociologist calls this grieving for a lost home. I am convinced that countless people who left Brooklyn have felt that. The borough is haunted by ghosts for me [...] My greatest dream is to be able to get into a time machine and make it 1952 and just roam free across the borough” (Frommer 237).

Fox quickly establishes the nineteenth-century brownstone belonging to Otto and Sophie Bentwood as a porous space, symptomatic of the couple's own fragility: it is a space vulnerable to external pressures. Their home is defined first by its commitment to the past as emphasised by their choice of interior décor, such as the "oval willowware platter Sophie had found in a Brooklyn Heights antique shop," and the "Victorian secretary" (*Desperate* 3). Her choice of furnishings is evidence of what Alan Radley refers to as "a difference in the maintenance of a particular conception of 'the Past' and the effort to be given over to remembering" (51). Sophie's decision to display signs of an antique disposition represents the "material codification" of a desire to "deliberately evoke a sense of continuity, deliberately invite remembering." The internal spaces of her home manifest "the fabrication of the past through a construction of the material world" (53). The dual meaning of the word "fabrication" recalls the vocabulary used by Joan Didion. Sophie is trying to make the past – her past – tangible in the form of her choice of interior decorations (like Katherine Cattleman), but the use of the word "fabrication" is suggestive of an inherent artifice in her cultivation of a certain look. Sophie constructs and fabricates the past, choosing to display self-consciously historical pieces.

The house is also described in terms of its lack of internal compartmentalisation. Fox's descriptions of their home confer an openness to the point of near-translucent penetrability which is compounded by the heightened visibility both of their own lives cracked open and that of their neighbourhood-at-large: "The old sliding doors that had once separated the two first-floor rooms had long since been removed, so that by turning slightly the Bentwoods could glance down the length of their living room" (*Desperate* 3). Throughout the novel, acts of

aggression committed outside the home increasingly wend their way into the inside of what should be an impenetrable space.

The first invasion comes in the form of a stray cat, which Sophie initially observes through the glass door that leads to the back yard. The cat is in possession of a shade of fur that is “the gray of tree fungus,” suggesting an insidious creeping; it is deemed “unprincipled and grotesque,” somehow exhibiting human qualities that mark it as destructive and sinister (3, 4). Sophie takes it upon herself to feed the stray and is horribly mauled in thanks. Later, the discovery of a broken window in the bedroom of the Brooklyn Heights home of their friends Flo (producer of musicals) and Myron (psychoanalyst to the stars) Holstein, its glass smashed by a stone hurled from the street, seems both a continuation and a reflection of Sophie’s attack; the hole in the window makes a mockery of the attempt to insulate those on the inside from those on the outside. Despite some difficulties during the 1950s, Brooklyn Heights retained its aura of unimpeachable class (high, with prices to match) throughout the mid-late twentieth century. Lake’s wife, intractably set against moving back to Brooklyn, makes an exception for this particular zip code: ““Unless it’s the Heights, I’m staying right here. Or maybe Albemarle Road. Is it the Heights?”” (*Meaningful* 88). By 1965 Brooklyn Heights had been designated a New York City Historic District (the first district to have been decreed so, in fact), and by the 1970s the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce was advertising the Heights as reflecting “once more the luster of her Victorian heyday” (“The New Brooklyn”). The same neighbourhood is distinguished in the 1974 *Home-Buyer’s Guide to New York City Brownstone Neighborhoods*, as “the archetype of urban renaissance in New York” (*Home-Buyer’s Guide* 10). An attack, however seemingly minor as a stone through a window, on a neighbourhood like this is therefore symbolic of its true vulnerability to the forces of historical progress outside its fortress of cosy nostalgia. As Fox states in a 2015

interview: “All the antagonisms through history are played out through that window” (“Truth of Life”).

The sense of insidious infiltration follows the Bentwoods back to their home. They are greeted by an unexpected telephone call, the noise ringing aggressively, the speaker at the other end silent, and as though to further emphasise their vulnerability in the face of an increasingly invasive external world, the same gray cat sits, impervious, at their back door. The discovery that it is Charlie Russel – Otto’s former business partner, who recommends the use of explosives to awaken the dormant middle class from their complacent slumber – who calls and does not speak is further evidence that the world outside threatens annihilation. Otto, characteristically, does not wish to pick up the phone, because “I never hear anything on it that I want to hear anymore” (*Desperate* 27). Alexandra Schwartz affirms that what lies outside their home is what the Bentwoods “have spent so much time and money fending off – the poverty and resentment that lies just beyond their well-painted front door, which they sense could combust into violence against them at any moment” (“Rereading Paula”).

Further infiltrations of the outside into the inside world occur in the second half of the novel. The first comes in the form of an African American man wishing to enter the house and use their telephone. Otto allows the stranger inside. The visceral immediacy of this first encounter exceeds that of any other thus far in the novel bar the stray cat; for the first time the Bentwoods engage with a human being who dwells in the world just outside their back door. The encounter is harmless, and the temporary interloper departs leaving only knee-jerk expectations in his wake: “Robbery and murder appeared before her in two short scenes” (*Desperate* 98). The second intrusion is the nightmare of invasion fully realised. Upon visiting their

country home in Queens, they find objects broken, strewn about and disturbed, and personal items mishandled and out of context: “lamps broken, the Paisley fabric of the couch cover torn into strips, cushions gutted, and over every painting or photograph a giant X had been drawn with barn paint” (130). Otto takes this act of vandalism, and the muted reaction of the caretaker and his family, as a directive that he himself is unwanted and unnecessary: ““it all said one thing to me. It said, *die*”” (140).

In contrast, despite her declaration to Otto that it was ““*just furniture,*”” (139) Sophie mourns the loss of her things, defining herself as a collector: “She went into the living room and looked around the bare walls. All the sweet, pretty things were gone, things she had found in junk shops or picked off the ground, or bought in antique stores” (140). For Sophie, as for Didion, such objects create a sense of permanence, a connection to the past even if this is someone else’s past, acquired at a second-hand remove. But even the once-familiar household objects begin to take on an eerie sentience, and the Bentwoods find themselves estranged from their own home. Otto expresses concern that particular rooms feel “faintly hostile” (94), and the prevalence of what Freud would deem an uncanny stillness about their house is increasingly articulated: “Chairs, tables, and lamps seemed to have only just assumed their accustomed positions. There was an echo in the air, a peculiar pulsation as of interrupted motion” (47). Sophie’s world is changing, and all of her previous notions of being exempt from such changes have proven futile.

In *Home Matters*, Roberta Rubenstein describes a particular kind of grief, a “cultural mourning,” which is experienced spatially and caused by the loss of “something with collective or communal associations” (5). This kind of grief, expressed by the Bentwoods throughout *Desperate Characters*, is twofold. Although Otto frequently articulates a certain rancour regarding the present in comparison with the past, for Sophie it is her sense of dislocation and imminent exile from a familiar space which causes her most consternation.

Otto is a man who is burdened by the past but does not wish to be part of the future. “I *want* to be left out,” he declares. Sophie tells him, with some resentment, that he is “barely in the right century” (10-11). Charlie Russel articulates this wilful denial of change and its repercussions later in the novel when he says to Sophie that ““when people change slowly and irrevocably and everything goes dead, the only way to cure them is a bomb through the window”” (37).

Sophie in turn reaches for memory where history fails her, retreating into spaces which should provide an unbroken continuity with the past. In *American Women Writing Fiction* (1989), Mickey Pearlman details the connections made between enclosed spaces and “the often negative power of memory” (138). Pearlman argues that one’s experience of memory can be a spatial one; how we decide to fold our past into our present “determines our perception of emotional and actual space” (140). Leaving first the anxiety-riddled interiors of the easily-penetrated Brooklyn home, and subsequently a ransacked, violated second home, Sophie detaches from every aspect of the material life that previously defined her, descending instead, like Carmen Sternwood and Maria Wyeth before her, into a halcyon land of controlled memory within which she can insulate herself from the external world that seems so threatening. She dreams of her old love Francis Early, her memories contained in rooms untouched by anything else in her life, as though they are cordoned-off crime scenes. Her encounters with him all occur within internal spaces: at his office on East Sixty-first Street, at the Morgan Library, in the back seat of taxis, in a bar where they meet in clandestine fashion. Next she drifts into a reverie about her childhood home, replete with small, visceral details: “the skimpy parlor of her childhood, her father and a friend speaking late into the evening while she lay drowsily on the Victorian sofa” (*Desperate* 117). These still, tranquil visions of internal life contrast with her

apocalyptic fears of the potential horror which had previously been limited to the outside world, but had now infiltrated her various inner sanctums.

Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach write that particular components of the built environment can provide a continuity that the rest of the cityscape lacks. When one's way of life has been swept away, buildings for example are one of the few tangible remnants which "survive as silent witnesses" (114). The desire for such buildings to remain standing is not, they argue, synonymous with a wish "to return to the old days." Rather, it represents a wish that the memory of a life once known "should not be unhinged from reality through the destruction of the principle elements of its setting." Where Sophie's sentimentality about buildings, objects and locations is more akin to the localised homesickness described by Marshall Berman, Otto's nostalgia is for a period of time that now lies behind him. Rubenstein clarifies the distinction: "While homesickness refers to a spatial/geographical separation, nostalgia more accurately refers to a temporal one" (4).

In *A Meaningful Life*, Lake also experiences a domestic crisis, though his is far more literal than the existential devastation wrought upon the Bentwoods. When he first arrives in New York, he settles for a time in Manhattan, and does so as though having sunk placidly into a state of unconsciousness: "He couldn't remember anything but highways and tunnels. He felt like a man emerging from some kind of coma" (*Meaningful* 54). During this period Lake's already vacuous persona further diminishes. His memory becomes increasingly faulty to the point where he cannot remember growing the moustache that protrudes from his face: "I think you grew it in 1967," his wife Betty offers, "Sometime around there" (70).⁶⁵ Significantly he appears to have lost one of the few attributes he had as a child: "He did well in school, largely because he had an excellent memory" (8). The failure of Lake's memory

⁶⁵ His wife, "Betty from Flatbush," is originally from Brooklyn and so for her this is a return home (13).

and the absence of identity are of a piece with his sudden desire to grapple with “real life and the significant issues of our time” by moving to Brooklyn (87).⁶⁶ The absence in Lake of what David Lowenthal describes as “Self-continuity” is caused by his lack of recall (*Past is* 197). In place of this it seems a sense of historical authenticity is best conferred by his proximity to the “stage set of historic buildings” that Brooklyn becomes for him (Zukin, *Naked* 6). His lack of personal history could perhaps be rectified by gaining possession of a greater sense of place, with the historical significance of that place made obvious by the buildings in the neighbourhood he moves to.

Lake’s nostalgia and sense of the past is more a vicarious experience of “cultural mourning” than an authentic one (Rubenstein 5). He yearns for a period of time he never experienced himself, choosing to replicate and re-live this experience through the piecing back together of *signs* of the past in the form of his dilapidated brownstone and the semblance of antiquity therein. In *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (1991), Marilyn R. Chandler explains why houses occupy such prominent space in American novels: “In a country whose history has been focused for so long on the business of resettlement and ‘development,’ the issue of how to stake out territory, clear it, cultivate it, and build on it has been of major economic, political, and psychological consequence” (1). The building and maintenance of a house is therefore a “kind of autobiographical enterprise – a visible and concrete

⁶⁶ In a 2009 *New York Times* profile, L.J. Davis states that Lake’s decision to move is an attempt to: “give meaning to his life by refurbishing the house and the slum it’s in the middle of, and of course it just completely dominates his life.” The author himself did “more or less the same thing” at the same time, having “undertaken the project on a large and decayed brownstone on Dean Street near Hoyt.” It was, says, Davis, ‘one of the most dangerous, poorest neighborhoods in New York [...] of course the neighborhood got much more desirable over time.’ He said he sold the house, which he had purchased for \$17,000, for \$2 million” (Konigsberg).

means of defining and articulating the self” (3). Having decided to buy the building he had originally sworn off, Lake becomes fixated with its original owner, Darius Collingwood. It is his (invented) history of which Lake is so enamoured (““Bankrupt at nineteen. A colonel at twenty-three. A part of history”” (*Meaningful* 130)) and the sense that, through his ownership of Collingwood’s house, Lake can access and become part of that historical significance.

Late in the novel, Lake meets Mr Warsaw, a man who is just as obsessed as our protagonist with identifying himself as a kind of facsimile of a history beyond and before his own life. Warsaw perfectly encapsulates the myopia and obsession that form the archetypal qualities of a brownstone acolyte. The narration of his domestic accoutrements speaks to the notion of their bearing witness to a history that somehow transfers to *him*, making him more significant and impressive by association: ““No one else had bought in the neighbourhood when we arrived. We were the first. Our house was built in 1873. The Pouch family owned it. Some of the original furniture was still in the basement.’ ‘That’s interesting,’ said Lowell. ‘Our place was built by Darius Collingwood”” (180). The so-called “clock stoppers” (Biddle 2) like Lake and Warsaw are searching for a “timeless city that never changes” (Zukin, *Naked* 29).

In thrall to the urges of gentrification, upon first arriving in Brooklyn Lake sees himself as one of the original adventurers into unknown territory, part of a new group of “Creative young people [...] buying houses in the Brooklyn slums, integrating all-Negro blocks” (*Meaningful* 87). Lake finds himself caught between approximating a history that is long gone and denying his own part in the annihilation of the more-recent past. He frets that he has not met the right sort of people that would corroborate his vision of the neighbourhood. Instead he has met “a substantial number of Negroes and Puerto Ricans” but they, of course, cannot possibly represent a “reasonable cross-section of this or any other neighborhood” and so do not count (178). Instead he dreams of Darius Collingwood (who, it

transpires, only lived in the Lake abode for six months), thumbing through his antique memoirs until its pages crumble into “a pile of brittle brown flakes that got smaller and smaller the more you handled them” (167). What little is left of these autobiographical boastings is kept in a safe-deposit box alongside Lake’s birth certificate (or the replica thereof), as though the two are as interchangeable a part of his identity as the other items in the box: “his lease, his deed, and five canceled bankbooks” (167-168). Lake is bound to the house, defining himself by it completely. He longs to have as much meaning and longevity as this place gives him by association: “‘I bought the old Collingwood place out in Brooklyn,’ he told people when they asked him what he was doing with himself these days,” a phrase which is paraphrased and repeated throughout the novel in a tone that modulates from pride to desperation (164).

In first laying claim to this territory, Lake is aiming to forge some kind of integrated persona for himself amidst the fragments. He will now be a hero of the venerable city, rather than a pathetic interloper in a foreign land with which he has no history: “In his mind’s eye he saw himself striding down the littered streets [...] exciting the envy of his colleagues in Manhattan because of all the rooms he owned” (87). Because, of course, this land is already inhabited, the question of how real or lasting his occupation and his new-found identity can be, remains. With no prior relationship with the place, he has as little history in Brooklyn as he had in Manhattan. He does, however, possess an *imaginary* history with this new space: “Actually, the thing about the street was that there was nothing strange about it at all: with its tall trees and old houses of brick and clapboard, it was the kind of street he’d grown up expecting he would live on” (94). In *The City in Literature*, Richard Lehan contends that we encounter the city in our imagination, thanks mostly to the reproductions of art and literature, long before we encounter it in person. Thus, an

alternative reality is constructed in our minds before we physically stand before it. This is a narrative created in anticipation, as opposed to in retrospect, and this personal, subjective realm of the imagination can be a form of escape, allowing us to shut out “the urban, commercial, and industrial world that ha[s] become hostile. Under such pressure the city as a physical place [gives] way to the city as a state of mind” (76). In similar terms, Davis writes that Lake is seeing the street in terms of “ambience instead of objects, interspersed with brief, vivid glances of things he really wanted to see, like bark and brickwork and turrets with sharp conical roofs” (*Meaningful* 94-95). Lake wants to see the past he expects, and so he looks past everything that does not conform to this expectation.⁶⁷

The schism between the imagined and the real that Lehan describes, and which Lake articulates, encourages artificiality. The “reality” of the neighbourhood is contrived through the distortions of Lake’s desires, rather than discovered and exactly reproduced. This act, according to Lehan, changes one’s understanding of the city from a place experienced from the *outside in*, to one experienced from the *inside out* – from the objective (based on collective history) to the subjective (based on individual memory). When Lake muses that Fulton Street seems “older and closer together” than his imagined version of it, but that there is “not enough of either to make any difference,” he is articulating this *inside out* perspective based on an internal narrative of anticipation about what the city *should* look like (*Meaningful* 94). “Anyway,” he shrugs, “he’d forgotten most of the details of how things looked back home,” apparently conceiving this new space as a replica of one first experienced in the vacuum of his childhood: “the kind of street everyone lived on when he

⁶⁷ It is telling, and ominous, that he recalls at this point reading a Ray Bradbury story “about some men who went to Mars and discovered a Midwestern town” (*Meaningful* 95). In “The Third Expedition,” published in *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury tells a tale of Americans lured into a death trap on Mars. The Martians, understanding the power of nostalgia, re-created the Midwestern childhood homes to which the potential colonisers longed to return, later murdering them inside these make-believe houses.

was a kid.” This memory of the street, crystallised in his formative years, is recalled now as something *still* experienced with the eyes of a child; he can recollect only details which are “very close up or very far away, the way a child sees things.”

Lake allows for palatable signs of the past as he walks along Clinton Avenue to Lafayette; streets which are, he observes, “lined with tall old trees, real country trees” with roots which “had tumbled the sidewalks and cracked the curbing,” and bordered by brick structures “dating from the last century” (93, 91). But the presence of African Americans, also entrenched in the neighbourhood alongside its more bucolic aspects, is conversely something to turn a blind eye to, or actively avoid. His wife sees their existence as a sign of the undesirability of the neighbourhood (““In Brooklyn there’s only one place where colored people are, and when you see a lot of them standing around, you know that’s where you are too. Let’s go”” (92)), while Lake attempts to ignore them in favour of a whitewashed nostalgic perspective, through the fog of which he only vaguely discerns both his wife and neighbours as diversions from his parallax view: “It was the same way, distracted by his wife and Negroes, that he was seeing things now” (94).

Lehan writes that the favouring of inner reality in narrative form means that the outer reality of the world beyond this perspective becomes opaque, and that how one chooses to exert one’s power of perspective – from the outside in or the inside out – can be defined as a “parallax view. When we focus on the foreground, the background become vague; when we focus on the background, the foreground blurs” (*City in Literature* 80). In the same way, when we focus on the present, the past can recede from view, whereas when we focus on the past, the present retreats. This is the parallax view in effect. As I outlined earlier in this chapter, subjective memory

(internal) is ignored when objective history (external) is focused upon and vice versa. In Lake's case, a certain nostalgia clouds his vision.

The first building that the Lakes examine in the neighbourhood is the real-estate office, which, characteristically for a novel about deconstruction, is part of a larger structure itself "in the process of being either torn down or repaired" (*Meaningful* 95). The office is missing half its cornice, all of its upper windows are broken, and many of the other rooms in the building are "filled with bags of garbage and broken television sets." Every aspect of the building in which the real estate office is housed is in the process of falling apart and overflowing with the remains of former lives like some Baudelairean vision of a rag-picker's paradise. This place, which combines "the decrepit and the sinister," is a sign of things to come, and this is compounded by the appearance of the real-estate man himself. This "preternaturally elderly young man" signifies the bizarre world into which the Lakes are now entering: a world in which external appearance and inner reality are often at odds (97). A man who looks sixteen is in fact old enough to be your uncle; a building in the process of being destroyed is home to a basement-dwelling real-estate agency; a decaying rooming house is the former mansion of one Darius Collingwood, "foremost corporation lawyer in the Northeastern United States" (101).

In *Desperate Characters*, similar signs of urban blight can be found in Chapter 2 as the Bentwoods walk along Henry Street. Fox refers to the street lamps having been smashed, driving one family out of the block; to the deficit of visible police officers ("except in patrol cars on their way to the slum people" (13)); and to the ubiquity of detritus, both human and animal. Like the street on which the Bentwoods live, the vicinity of the real estate office in *A Meaningful Life* is surrounded by the spoils of uncollected trash, with "several burst bags of garbage stacked up in the lee of the stoop, along with the remains of a pair of tubular kitchen chairs and a V-8 engine block" (*Meaningful* 95). Despite signs of life in the form of its

remains and refuse, the simultaneous barrenness of the sidewalks leads them to assume a sinister character. Much like the destroyed environs of Berman's Bronx haunts and the eerie sense of lack in Waldie's childhood home, here an anxiousness abounds: "it was the kind of emptiness that suggested if someone else was moving in it too, he probably didn't mean you well," to which the shattered glass, busted storefronts and scorched buildings are testament (120). It is a "thief's emptiness," suggesting something that was once present has been forcibly absented, possibly through the violent means of "a city occupied by a hostile power." It is unnaturally stripped of life; uncanny, even. Like the pre-urban, somewhat wild, landscape of the world beyond the border provided by the freeways of Los Angeles, as portrayed by Chandler, Lurie and Didion, external, public spaces in Brooklyn are "low and all spread out and unconfined" (121). Space here is uncontained and uncontrollable, making Lake (like Marlowe when placed in the great outdoors) feel indistinct, "small and infinitely fragile" within its boundless territory.

The Lakes proceed along Washington Avenue, the real-estate man regaling them with the history of the neighbourhood. He tells them that it "slumped up after the war [...] Before that it was by far the most fashionable part of Brooklyn, and only millionaires could afford to live in it" (99). According to *Brooklyn By Name* (2006), the neighbourhood which they now pass through was nicknamed Brooklyn's Gold Coast; thanks to its "large villas and leafy boulevards, the area was once populated by a number of Brooklyn's prominent captains of industry" (Benardo and Weiss 76). Some parties, such as the 'Brooklyn Transitions' book discussion group (see n.63), deem this area Fort Greene, while others are convinced it is more in the vicinity of Clinton Hill. Eli Epstein-Deutsch of the *Village Voice*, for example, writes that "Davis (like his protagonist Lowell Lake) is part of [Jonathan] Lethem's parents' generation, the first wave of hopeful bohemian transplants to rough-edged areas like Clinton Hill

and Boerum Hill.” When I spoke with architectural historian and writer Francis Morrone, who moved to Park Slope during the early 1980s, he was of the opinion that pinpointing Washington Avenue as the site of the Lake abode in the novel does not resolve the dispute: “ask the people in Washington Avenue, do you live in Fort Greene or do you live in Clinton Hill, and it’ll be half and half.” Each neighbourhood boundary is loose and subject to debate.

In an article titled “The Happy Reawakening of Clinton Hill,” published in 1970, L. J. Davis, wearing his reporter’s hat, writes that during the early 1900s the neighbourhood (which, as explained above, could be the location of Lake’s neighbourhood) “went to sleep for 50 years [...] and the stately homes took on that peculiar look that the homes of established wealth always seem to have: well-cared-for but not as though anyone really lived inside” (38-39). Here, again, we find Robert Moses implicated – in 1954, during the first decade of the postwar urban renewal project, a five-block area of Clinton Hill was declared “suitable for clearance and renewal” by the Slum Clearance Committee (39). Davis quotes Ralph Steinhauer, who had managed an art supply store in the area since 1946: “‘It was ridiculous to call this place a slum before they showed up,’ [...] ‘But they did their damndest to turn it into one.’” Between 1954 and 1963, when five large income cooperatives were finally erected on the site, the neighbourhood slid into a desperate decline; some houses were demolished, some stood empty, and some were converted into rooming houses. The area had been successfully “slummed up” (Davis, *Meaningful* 99), setting the scene for Lowell Lake’s entry onto a sparsely-populated stage.

But the random vacillations of neighbourhood real-estate are not kind to Lake. He is informed towards the end of the novel by the (still nameless) real-estate man that he happened to buy on a block that is “going down” as though literally descending into a

subterranean hell (193).⁶⁸ Only a few years later, in 1974, the *Home-Buyer's Guide to New York City Brownstone Neighborhoods* writes that in Clinton Hill: “New families have bought rooming houses and converted them without the scary experience of the pioneers in some other neighborhoods” (*Home-Buyer's Guide* 17). The *Guide* airily continues that “a rooming-house population has been displaced” but only in a “mild and gradual way” of course. These are terms which *A Meaningful Life* belies. Fort Greene, it continues (Lake’s alternative hypothetical neighbourhood) “is an area of magnificent brownstones [...] These brownstones predominate south and east of Fort Greene Park, and recently substantial restoration and renovation of houses has taken place” (21). There is, apparently, “a tangible sense of community among those who live on these blocks” – something else which Davis aggressively undermines.

When at last they come to it, the Collingwood edifice (soon to become Lake’s home) is a charismatic place, replete with “wrought-iron railing,” “ornamental brickwork,” “wide brownstone steps,” and “thick brownstone columns that supported a kind of porch or miniature fortress” (*Meaningful* 101). Lake is, of course, immediately struck by a “powerful subconscious craving that defied analysis” because he is using the house as a means of defining and aligning himself with history (100). The agent exhorts them not to look upon the wreckage of the street, but to instead imagine the possibility of the houses which demand only a modicum of repair to restore them to their former glory. Here we find again the juxtaposition of seeing and imagining, of ignoring the present and superimposing an image of the past. The townhouse of Lake’s particular dream was built between 1800 and 1885 and made of

⁶⁸ In a *New York Times* article published in June 1976, Pazel G. Jackson, vice president of the Bowery Savings Bank, states that the peak of renovations had fallen off at the time of writing due to the buildings that were “cheapest and easiest to rehabilitate” having already been acquired, coupled with rising restoration costs. “However,” he continued, “some bargains could still be found, in the Fort Green section of Brooklyn, for example” (Lindsey 53).

various materials including the all-important brownstone, placing him definitively in the brownstoner camp.

The inside of the townhouse beloved by Lake tells a different story to its handsome exterior. The first sign that the Lakes are unwanted interlopers rather than pioneers, comes in the form of Henry Gruen, part-curmudgeonly-caretaker, part-unwilling-gatekeeper, who refuses at first to let them cross the threshold. The interiors of the house, once they are able to view them, demonstrate that this is a space in a state of total disrepair. Not only is the entire Collingwood building already occupied (fulfilling, in fact, its original purpose as a rooming house), but the walls and floor are filthy, the stench of water damage fills the air, and every surface bristles with “a gray fur of dust and soot” (104). The house itself seems uncannily sentient; populated by others who are mostly perceived but not seen, and with doors opening and closing of their own accord: “It was sort of like being in a haunted house, except that the house wasn’t haunted, it was inhabited” (138).

Inside, an ethnically-diverse group of tenants inhabits every room, all living in cramped, often unsanitary conditions within spaces that have been compartmentalised and subdivided to within an inch of their lives: “‘Probably there was a door in that wall,’ said the real-estate man, ‘connecting this room with the one we were just in. Actually, this place hasn’t been cut up as badly as some’” (109). This description recalls both Betty Smith’s account of brownstone houses being “hacked up into flats” (1) and Rem Koolhaas’ dissection of juxtaposed external versus internal realities. In *Delirious New York*, as I previously remarked upon in Chapter 4 with regard to Waldie, Koolhaas examines the relationship between the external and internal life of a multi-story building. In his estimation, the internal world of buildings “hides everyday life” (101). He argues that while architectural interiors contain the individual and the irrational, this is masked by the façade of the exterior, which turns its implacable face to the world outside.

Each internal space in the Collingwood building is characterised by its duality. Much like the interiors of Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," the purpose for which these spaces were originally built is not now their primary function. There is a "sewing room," a "master bedroom," a "ten foot tall" turret room the size of a barrel, a series of "little rooms incredibly close together, clustered around a central foyer" that formerly acted as "servants' quarters," and the subterranean space that houses the furnace is also home to one Mrs Blouse and several small children (*Meaningful* 108, 111, 112, 113). None of the twenty-one (and counting) rooms are used for the function for which they were historically conceived, giving the entire place the feeling of being jarringly out of context. Rather than conform to such uses, these rooms are fit for other purposes, in keeping with the notion that external appearance and internal reality are at odds in Lake's new brownstoner world.

Each room in Lake's brownstone acts as the set of a whole microcosmic world; a series of rooms within rooms revealed like Russian dolls and echoing the subdivision of internal spaces in Chandler's novels. The interiors are flimsy and near-decomposed, so insubstantial as to melt into one another. Lake is under the impression that "the walls weren't really solid but composed of some substance that would yield and engulf anyone unwary enough to lean on them" (115). Space here is both segmented *and* somehow infinitely *open*. Tenants are happened upon as though by accident within their own homes, sometimes barely discernible in such indistinct spaces:

At the table was sitting a small brown man. For some reason [...] Lowell had failed to notice him before. [...] Next door was another sewing room. It was darker than Henry's place, smelled powerfully of cigars, and was occupied by

a crone who remained in the shadows, her presence barely visible but powerfully felt. (106-112)

Such visits expose the tenants in various states of being, like a collection of still life portraits that are, occasionally, literally still: “Upstairs in the largest room a family of Puerto Ricans was eating supper at a big, plastic-looking table; they became utterly motionless the moment the real-estate man and his little party trooped in” (112). The stuff of each room is equally as defined by a sense of a life arrested, paused just before a frenzy. Henry Gruen’s dwelling is full of wreckage, as though demonstrating its existence as a petrified ruin in need of excavation. Scores of newspaper cuttings line the room, coalescing with other similar items such as “rags,” “scraps of old bedsheets,” “squares of Woolworth oilcloth” and “cheap lace curtains” (109) akin to the rags, sheets of plastic and blankets that hang from the windows of the houses opposite the Bentwoods’ home.⁶⁹ The sense of multiple, and conflicting, histories pervades Henry’s room; the story of each covered window is “separate and distinct,” the layers of each covering “never completely overlapping” (*Meaningful* 109).

Lake and his wife spend their days removing the layers of the past with which the house is thickly-lined: “Lowell couldn’t guess how many more layers there were, each one cleaner than the last; they seemed to go down for inches more” (129). With much gleeful abandon he starts “demolishing,” “ripping” and “obliterating” all remnants of “his impoverished predecessors,” (133) continuing in the same vein by ridding the building of its pre-existing tenants, completely ignorant and unsympathetic to the reasons for their refusal to leave. Writing about *Desperate Characters*, Alexandra Schwartz asserts that Brooklyn’s wealthy residents, like the Bentwoods and the Holsteins, “think of their improved homes as an outward sign of inward virtue,” a criticism that can be extended here to Lake. “They don’t

⁶⁹ “Across the yard, past the cat’s agitated movements, he saw the rear windows of the houses on the slum street. Some windows had rags tacked to them, others, sheets of transparent plastic” (Fox, *Desperate* 4).

bother to notice the resigned dread of the poor they are busy displacing; but Fox does, and she makes us see it, too” (“Rereading Paula”). Lake’s life at last has meaning, but it is bestowed upon him through the destruction of the lives of others both past and present.

Gradually, as the tenants move out, Lake is left with the “vacated apartment” to take apart room by room as though engaged in “smashing someone else’s dishes for no good reason,” an analogy which reinforces the sense of wrongfully-acquired ownership (*Meaningful* 140). “The people had to go just the same as the partitions before Lowell could start putting things back the way they belonged, and that was that,” he declares, before painstakingly dismantling every artefact that might testify to a history that he does not wish to acknowledge: “‘My bed,’ said the old man [...] ‘My cabinet. My chester draws.’ ‘They’re all downstairs,’ repeated Lowell in a loud, firm voice. ‘They’re downstairs by the garbage cans. Help yourself’” (136). But the former occupants of the former boarding house cannot all be “as it were, plastered over” (Peacock 135). Signs of the past persist despite Lake’s best efforts: “the person who had occupied this room, alone of all the dozens of people who had occupied this house, had kept his window clean both inside and out” (*Meaningful* 164). Lake is constantly reminded of those who had called the now-skeletal remains of the building home in previous years.

The return of the repressed past occurs one small uncanny instance at a time, associated here with the inherent danger of open spaces. The folly of an unlocked door or window, also expressed in Chandler’s novels and *Desperate Characters*, recurs. In the latter, there is a lot of closing and locking of doors, particularly at the very beginning and the very end of the novel. When Sophie is bitten by the cat, it is a result of her failure to seclude herself safely inside her home. Fox writes this scene with a sense of inevitability, as though

this was a long-anticipated event: “I can’t unlock the door again, she said to herself. ‘It’s done,’ Otto said. He sighed. ‘Done, at last’” (8). This is reversed and repeated towards the end of the novel when the cat is caught and Otto curses the rigmarole of unlocking the door: “the elaborate sequence of steps needed to unlock the door – hook, key, insert, reach, turn again” (94). In *A Meaningful Life*, first, this danger is applicable to others (“‘The door was open,’ he remarked gruffly, assuming an expression that he hoped would intimidate the old man” (135)) and later, to himself (“‘Leave the door open,’ said his visitor with obvious exasperation and contempt. ‘I wouldn’t leave the door open’” (178)), until the open door of his own home provides access to real horror: “The front door was standing wide open [...] Minutes passed. Then, with a stumble and a wheeze, a shadow of a man appeared in the doorway” (199).

Towards the novel’s conclusion, the landscape of Lake’s neighbourhood sinks further into the glut of decline. The surrounding streets show frequent signs of human life *outside* (albeit not the kind of human life that Lake wishes to see, being mostly black and poor), but are peppered with blasted buildings, the interiors of which are home to broken windows, unhinged doors and unfurnished living rooms. Lake’s house, now emptied out of all internal domestic accoutrements, appears to him as a huge, formless mass that incubates the same sense of potential threat inside as the open expanse of Brooklyn streets outside: “the house took on the devastated look of the streets, as if it had been attacked, not recently but months ago, by a squad of compulsively tidy commando assassins” (190). Its vacuity is disturbing, and the signs of its former life that persist speak to yet another past having been rubbed not-quite-clean off the walls. Lake notes the “jagged outlines,” “heads of pipes,” “holes [...] scattered here and there” that are all that remain of his inept attempts at restoration. The house now stands vulnerable and open to the outside world, somehow both within and without the world beyond its external walls.

“The house,” writes Marilyn Chandler, “is frequently treated as a schematic reiteration of the character of the central figure in a story” (10). The Brooklyn house, acting as Lake’s double or mirror, must also be cleaned of any signs of an unwanted narrative. Where originally Lake wished to *retain* history (but only a certain kind of history), the house is now home to part of his own history of which it must be dispossessed. By the end of *A Meaningful Life*, Lake’s brownstone looks “ready to be demolished” along with the rest of the disintegrating block (*Meaningful* 190). In the dying days of his residence in Brooklyn, Lake sees hideous visions of rape and carnage in the buildings around him. In a series of strange (and, later, murderous) events, heralded by the sudden disappearance of the old ladies next door, Lake experiences an existential crisis of material and immaterial selfhood. Upon returning to his West Side apartment block, the place looks at first glance to have been looted and robbed, but it turns out that the only thing missing is him; he has been erased: “Not a single one of his belongings was anywhere to be seen [...] not a single one of the discards, nor the tiniest scrap of debris, bore the unique and recognizable stamp of his personality” (209). Much like the recollections of Maria Wyeth, piecing together her narrative by redacting certain aspects, Lake’s story has become increasingly porous and subject to excision. The apartment has been excised of any mark of his existence, just as the brownstone albatross has been emptied out. His very identity seems subject to the same decline as the Brooklyn house, so complete is his psychological alignment with its well-being. Ultimately Lake turns into a kind of Potemkin human, nothing more than a smooth external façade that provides a screen for absence.

As though complicit in his wish for eradication, this house has also rid itself of all signs of the fatal struggle between Lake and an unknown assailant (the mysterious man who appeared in the doorway). The garbage pan into which Lake deposits the dead body is gone, plaster has replaced blood spatter and holes have replaced gore

until “all trace of the deed had vanished” (214). It has been purged in an orgy of destruction seemingly without purpose or end, the entire place gutted until even items of genuine historical significance are removed: “Mr. Busterboy and his men also broke a number of windows and accidentally dismantled, smashed up, and threw out one of the irreplaceable parlor fireplaces” (212). In an article titled “You Can Have Your Brownstone...And Rent It, Too” published in 1974 in *The Brownstoner*, the author remarks that the “creation of apartments and public halls can cost a lot in lost brownstone charm. But you can save the charm. It’s just that there’s a lot of work involved, a lot of supervision – as in any renovation” (“You Can Have” 6). A similar article listing tips for brownstone hunters exhorts readers not to “be too hasty with that crowbar” (“Special Report” 5). Setting such advice against the increasing hysteria of Lake’s renovations seems to make the sagacity of *The Brownstoner* likewise delusional; saving “the charm” of this brownstone seems entirely beside the point by the time we reach the novel’s bitter end.

Freud writes in “The Uncanny” of houses which are no longer comforting vestibules for family life, enclosing the domestic sphere within a warm brick grasp, but have instead become places from which one feels estranged and inside which one feels anxious. The term represents what had been secret, private, coming at last “into the open” (132). What Freud himself had formerly experienced as a series of closed, impenetrable private spaces have been perforated and opened out, rendered transparent and exposed to public view. Likewise, in Lake’s Collingwood home, borders and partitions are eliminated completely, the house now so internally nebulous that it gapes with a dangerously infinite space: “They made enormous holes in the walls and ceiling, and you had to be extremely careful where you walked to avoid falling suddenly into the room directly below” (Davis, *Meaningful* 212). Stripped of its layers it is now characterised by a sense of pristine novelty, full of “fresh plaster and newly sawed wood,” but bereft of meaning (213). It does not belong to Lake, does not bear the “mark of

his hand”; so thorough was the job of Mr Busterboy and his men that even *he* has been scrubbed from existence. History (what the city chooses to put on display with regard to its past) replaces with relentless efficiency that which does not fit within its remit.

In her examination of the living history museum Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, and its uncanny replication of a former reality, Ada Louise Huxtable describes the process of restoration as “a difficult and unclear procedure at best; unreality is built into the process” (*The Unreal* 16). The same can be argued of the restoration committed by Lake, for whom a borrowed, regurgitated past is just as good as a real one. But this is of course problematic. Huxtable continues that to restore something back to some primordial form of itself means “re-creating a place as someone thinks it was” (recalling Richard Lehan’s words regarding encountering the city first in one’s imagination), a process which is likely to move or destroy anything that does not fit that expectation. The elimination of signs of the passing of time that filled the period between the point of origin and the present also represents the destruction of “exactly the stuff of which real history and art are made.” In this way “the intrinsic qualities of the real are transformed and falsified by an experience that is itself the ultimate unreality” (17). In short, historical reproduction should not be equated with the genuine artefact of memory.

Judith N. DeSena and Timothy Shortell, in their study of gentrification in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, ascribe a similar ideology to gentrifiers as Huxtable does to preservationists, arguing that the former are more interested “in the aesthetic quality of the built environment and support the idea of historic preservation through restoration to original façade [...] there is more social status and economic value in places designated ‘historic’” (80-81). The word ‘gentrification’ (stemming from the word ‘gentry’) was coined by sociologist Ruth Glass in

her Introduction to the 1964 book on the subject of postwar London: *London: Aspects of Change*. She observed that working class parts of the city were being increasingly accessed by the middle classes, who were buying up the “Shabby, modest mews and cottages” and transforming them into “elegant, expensive residences” (xviii). “Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working-class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.”⁷⁰

In a 2018 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Willy Staley looks at urban theorist Philip L. Clay’s 1979 book, *Neighborhood Renewal*, in which the author outlines the four key stages of gentrification. Clay explains that first of all, “pioneers” arrive in a seemingly derelict neighbourhood in search of cheaper rent; they are followed by the middle class, after which comes the displacement of “the original population” and after that arrives the wholesale ownership of the neighbourhood by private interests such as banks, developers, and the very wealthy. Ironically, the original “pioneers” are at this stage also priced out, with many beginning the whole process again elsewhere.⁷¹

Staley suggests that in its present-day incarnation, the most significant issue gentrification has produced is that of “cultural ownership,” and the greatest harm it has caused was “something psychic, a theft of pride.” It is the “perceived appropriation” of culture that is the most integral aspect of gentrification. He argues that the “flow of global capital,” represented at its peak in a neighbourhood by the final phase of Clay’s four stages, results in an ironing out of its every crease. Similar to the “cartographic lie” of the Los

⁷⁰ Gentrification is also defined by Judith N. DeSena and Timothy Shortell as the “displacement of lower status communities by higher status” (1) and by Sharon Zukin as “the conversion of socially marginal and working class areas of the central city to middle-class [...] residential use” (“Gentrification” 129).

⁷¹ One could argue that the Californian pioneers who Didion writes about are the antecedents of the Brooklyn gentrifiers portrayed by Davis. The word “pioneers” is frequently deployed to describe various members of the new brownstone generation, making the movement another iteration of the early settlers’ crossing story and their decision to “Go West.”

Angeles map now showing the “corrected” version of its streets downtown without the discordance of the original grid (Waldie “L.A.’s Crooked Heart”), this smoothing out of history so that it aligns with current expectations continues, asserts Staley, until the neighbourhood in question is as “featureless as a river rock.” *A Meaningful Life* presents a world in which the restoration of history is privileged over the preservation of memory, as illustrated by Lowell Lake’s obsessive pursuit of various external façades that speak to an *idea* of the past at the expense of the more chaotic, private, and insular spaces which typify the more nonconformist aspects of personal memory.

As previously recounted in my chapter on Marshall Berman, M. Christine Boyer contends that history commandeers the past, disrupting it so it appears in the present as “historical theatre” which “acts out” rather than lives “the past [...] slowly turning former events into an imaginary and fictional museum” (67). Likewise, in *What Time Is This Place?* (1972) Kevin Lynch reasons that when a historical object is reconstructed, often it is the “ancient form” which is given precedence over the “old materials” (32). The external life of such an object, the obvious outlines of its *form* and structure, is considered of great import in terms of historical value and authenticity. It can be extrapolated that according to this doctrine, “*only* the external historical shell need be preserved or reconstructed” (emphasis added), whereas its hidden internal life does not warrant such attention. Indeed, “internal physical modifications” are in fact “allowable.” When he writes that “‘Outsides’ are public, historic, and regulated, while ‘insides’ are private, fluid, and free,” Lynch is suggesting much the same thing as Boyer and also Koolhaas. History – what is worth preserving – is presentable, visible, external. Memory – housed within the shell of that which is publicly preserved – is unregulated, obscure, internal.

By the end of *A Meaningful Life*, Lake is left to contemplate an existence as “blank and seamless” as the interiors of the house, a space now devoid of signs that time has passed through it. His future looks “much like his past,” passing quickly and without much of significance to demarcate one year from the next (*Meaningful* 214). Shut up in his house, he pays little attention to the world outside. But beyond the blank walls, the street itself shows signs of continuing life: “From the street outside came the sound of laughter and shouting, bottles breaking, voices droning in the warm air, and children playing far past their bedtime.” Having previously been a site of uncanny emptiness, the street is now a place of renewal. Lake may have failed to purchase himself a meaningful slice of history, but the street, representing the world beyond the walls of the brownstone, is able to internalise it.

A Vale of Time in Brooklyn

Such stories are not new. In 1959 Paule Marshall articulated the experience of one Bajan community living in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn some twenty years earlier. Her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* opens with the observations of her heroine Selina Boyce. She looks at one “interminable Brooklyn street” and notes the presence of history in material form: the touches of “Gothic, Romanesque, baroque or Greek” which “triumphed amid the Victorian clutter,” an “Ionic column” here, a scowling gargoyle there, and cornices hung alternately with “carved foliage” and “Gorgon heads” scattered along the way (3-4). Just as, thirty years before, Betty Smith’s Francie Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* had anticipated the arrival of the next wave of immigrants, Selina recounts the Brooklyn lives of generations of white “Dutch-English and Scotch-Irish” which unravelled “in a quiet skein of years behind the green shades” and ultimately made way for the West Indians who “slowly edged their way in” in 1939 (4).

At the beginning of the novel, Selina does not feel a sense of belonging within her house, which seems to her to be “the museum of all the lives that had ever lived here” rather than a home (5). At its conclusion, she gazes at the buildings beyond Fulton Park, watching the kinetic life of the streets that persists in the rubble of the neighbourhood’s former glory. There is no place anymore for antiquity. The scorched earth that lies in wait for the project that will be constructed atop its urban burial ground provides a scattershot cemetery for bits and pieces of the past, now de-contextualised and deprived of function: a homeless stoop which “still imposed its massive grandeur” here, a “carved oak staircase” leading nowhere, there (310). She understands the impossibility of imprinting oneself on such a landscape, but, wishing to memorialise, she tosses a silver bangle over her shoulder. Marshall captures the futility of such an act: “The bangle rose behind her, a bit of silver against the moon, then curved swiftly downward and struck a stone. A frail sound in that utter silence.” Instead of being contained in the houses, life is here on the *outside*, on the street itself: “the roomers’ tangled lives spilled out the open windows, and the staccato beat of Spanish voices, the frenzied sensuous music joined the warm canorous Negro sounds to glut the air” (309).

In *A Walker in the City*, published in 1951, Alfred Kazin writes of his childhood haunts in Brownsville, Brooklyn, as experienced in the late 1920s to early 1930s. Like Selina Boyce, his sense of the past is achieved through the visibility of *difference*. As he passes by the various sites of transformation, Kazin notes the familiar spots which have become strangers to him: the lumber yard which is now a housing project; the wholesale dry-goods store where his mother bought his first shirts; the clapboard Protestant church on Blake Avenue, now torn out like a tree

uprooted.⁷² Townhouses and lumberyards are replaced by housing projects, brownstone mansions become boarding houses, movie theatres are converted for a different use. For Kazin, buildings mark boundaries in space. Memories bind these buildings to the land, upon which invisible lines are drawn, made tangible by the tenements and stores in which the speaker's memories are housed. The new housing project he sees, for example, has created a new space "down the center of Brownsville, from Rockaway to Stone," and "clean diagonal forms" have been carved into the streets that look out onto the project, with everything but his childhood school excised from the newly-streamlined area (12). Walking past these "indistinguishable red prisms of city houses," Kazin is forced into the remembrance of "what they had pulled down to make this *project* - and [...] I could not quite believe that what I saw before me was real" (13). The juxtaposition between the past and the present, the expected and the empirical, creates a surreal schism in his mind:

There is something uncanny now about seeing the old vistas rear up at each end of that housing project. Despite those fresh diagonal walks [...] the streets beyond are so obviously just as they were when I grew up in them, that it is as if they had been ripped out of their original pattern and then pasted back again behind the unbelievable miniatures of the future. (14)

In Kazin's uncanny vision quoted here, like the observations of Marshall Berman as he wanders the streets of the Bronx, we find an example of what Osman defines as

⁷² The parents of one participant at the 'Brooklyn Transitions' book discussion group came to the Park Slope neighbourhood in 1978, and they continue to live in the same house that they originally moved into between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. This man professed that his ability to point out what each store or house or bar used to be was his birthright as a New Yorker. This melancholic awareness of the imminent erasure of the places that one loves is echoed by many New York writers, and perhaps best exemplified by Colson Whitehead in his famous assertion that "You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and *solid* than what is here now" (4 emphasis added). Being in a position to know exactly what has changed, to *see* what you have lost and to quantify that loss, seems to come somewhere close to defining what it means to be a long-time citizen of this particular city.

Brooklyn's "tectonic cityscape" (22). Despite the attempt to render the area virgin land, the very visibility of the old tenements that remain on either side of these "fresh diagonal walks," and the irrepressible nature of the streets themselves, demonstrates that the city's skeleton can still be found (Kazin 14). The past is available, but not in the form one might have expected, and perhaps it is not your past, but that of the city itself, which has internalised a million histories and layered them on top of each other.

With its visible ties both to a colonial past and to the birth of the grid system, Brooklyn exhibits many "architectural and social imprints" in its built environment (Osman 22). Remnants "of past and present" lie on top of one another, "the sediment from each historic cityscape seeping into the others" (22-23). Likewise, Boyer contends that in what she calls the *City of Collective Memory*, we will find "different layers of historical time superimposed on each other" which will "culminate in an experience of diversity" (19). In order to "read across and through different layers and strata of the city" city-dwellers must "establish a constant play between surface and deep structured forms, between purely visible and intuitive or evocative allusions" (21). Berman posits a literal translation of this advice when he suggests the construction of a Bronx Mural, but perhaps there are other ways to both see and read these different layers of the city's history. The experience of "diversity" which is generated from the spectacle of these myriad layers made visible in the cityscape, and indeed from the very perception of difference felt but not always seen, necessitates the interplay between that which is empirically visible, and that which is beneath the city's surface but is understood to exist through intuition and allusion – through memory.

For Francie Nolan, Brooklyn is "'a magic city and it isn't real [...] It's mysterious here in Brooklyn. It's like – yes – like a dream. The houses and streets don't seem real. Neither do the people'" (*A Tree* 306). The inference is that Brooklyn is a distant phantasmagoric vision; an intangible memory on the cusp of obscurity. In

her 1985 Brooklyn-set novel *Mainland*, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer writes that “In the past, nothing ever changes. In Brooklyn, nothing does either. It’s not so much a place as a vale of time” (19). In agreement with both assertions, Osman describes Brooklyn as “a palimpsest of memories, symbols, and imagined places” (23). It is this ambivalent quality, its position as not-quite-belonging to New York yet inescapably defined by it, that has made Brooklyn sufficiently obscurely defined enough to become so many things to so many people simultaneously (see also its ambiguous neighbourhood boundaries).⁷³ As Martha Nadell states in “Writing Brooklyn,” it is, as presented in Smith’s bildungsroman, “both an old and a new country, and for some, a transitional place in between” (114).

Brooklyn-born author Lynne Sharon Schwartz described New York in an interview with me as a *pentimento*, because, she said, “when you paint a picture, if you start scraping off the top layer, other layers from below start showing up.” The National Gallery defines the term *pentimento* as a change made by the artist in question during the course of painting: “These changes are usually hidden beneath a subsequent paint layer. In some instances they become visible because the paint layer above has become *transparent with time*” (“Pentimento” emphasis added). In the collection of oral histories from mid-twentieth-century Brooklyn residents, *It Happened in Brooklyn*, Karl Bernstein (who was the assistant principal at Meyer Levin Junior High School, situated between East Flatbush and Kazin’s Brownsville) expresses a clear alignment with this way of thinking about his city, and specifically here about Brooklyn: “I search the borough for my past. I drive past an

⁷³ One example of the preservation of historical traces in Brooklyn specifically is the discovery and restoration of Weeksville in Crown Heights. At the *Saving Place* exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York in December 2015 I learned about this “once-thriving, 19th century rural settlement of free black New Yorkers” which was rediscovered in the late 1960s. In 1968 remnants of the neighbourhood were found in the form of “four small, wooden buildings facing a lane that cut across Brooklyn’s grid,” and in 1970 the houses became official city landmarks.

abandoned building on Atlantic Avenue in East New York. Once it was the Borden Dairy Plant; now, all that remains are two beautiful mosaics of Heidi and the cows on a yellow-brick wall” (Frommer 238). Here the palimpsest of endlessly overwritten texts becomes the pentimento, a more forgiving way of seeing the Brooklyn cityscape as it allows for the re-emergence of the past over time, rather than its erasure. The past, in “tectonic” and material form, endures, though it may not map precisely and recognisably on top of memory (Osman 22).

As Betty Smith suggests, if you do not wish to bear witness to the inevitability of change in a place which is fixed in memory if not in time, perhaps you should close your eyes to it: “If in the years to be she were to come back, her new eyes might make everything seem different from the way she saw it now. The way it was now was the way she wanted to remember it. No, she’d never come back to the old neighbourhood” (363). The alternative is, perhaps, to wait for the past to become visible; to become transparent with time. Houses and their occupants may change, but these changes signify something that is consistent in Brooklyn; some historical traces, slowly repeating and revealing themselves, always remain.

Conclusion

It was not long after I moved out of the house I had lived in with my family for more than twenty years that I visited the childhood home of my oldest friend. She had grown up there, remained until she went to university, and it was only after her mother had died that she went home less and less, finding it too difficult to spend time in a space so filled with now painful memories. I too had spent most of my time there after school until I was twelve years old, as her mother would pick us both up while my parents worked. Her father finally sold the house when my friend was in her late twenties. He knew the couple who had bought and renovated it, and years later invited my friend and I to go and take a look. It proved to be a disquieting experience. My friend saw the swing-set which we had used as a launching pad to pull out all the flowers from the rhododendron bush opposite with our feet, and the kitchen table where her mum had sat us both down to explain why this had been a very bad idea, and where on other occasions we had sat and failed to do our homework together because we were giggling too much (her mum told us off all the time for that too). She saw the bedroom upstairs with the mirrored-cupboards we had always thought were so glamorous, and the long velvety curtains in the living room downstairs that we used to hide behind, and the bathroom where we had acted out sketches in front of each other and where we always, always burnt our hands on the too-hot towel rail. She saw the bedroom door that she had slammed so many times during arguments with her mum.

But the house itself did not show us these things. The swing-set had been removed and there was a greenhouse in place of the old shed which housed the giant mythical spider I was terrified of but never saw. The velvet curtains and the mirrored cupboards were no more; the kitchen table had been replaced; the bedroom door now closed on a study. Even the shape of the house was different, having been expanded and extended so it no longer resembled even in dimension what she saw when she looked at it in her mind's eye. The rhododendrons

had not flowered. I decided I could never go back to my own childhood house. My friend felt one of the last physical connections to her mum grow fainter.

What does all this have to do with the representation of urban space in postwar American literature? Well, it has something to do with memory and history. Thinking about this experience made me consider the ways in which the two might be distinct. Memory – what we saw when we looked around the house we knew so well. History – what the house itself showed us. We experienced a kind of double-vision. This is a very small example of what those who live in cities experience on a much larger scale. History as experienced in the city is something all of its citizens share. It is both private and public; intimately connected to our sense of personal memoir, and explicitly an expression of a collective past. It is built by both our own self-narrative, and the very public, material evolution of urban space.

Modernity in the city is made manifest by a cycle of destruction, renewal, and preservation. This cycle, characterised by conflict and collision, frequently causes physical fractures in urban space which in turn cause psychic, figurative ruptures in the internal “metaphorical city” that we carry within us (de Certeau 110). Space is interrupted, and history begins to feel likewise discontinuous. Here and throughout this thesis I have used the term ‘space’ to signal both physical space and subjective or psychic space.

Instead of carefully unpicking the stitches that had held neighbourhoods together for generations, such processes as urban renewal slice through the tapestry. What had come together naturally over time is ripped up, replaced, patched together. This leads to the separation of memory from history. The past which was previously discernible in a material sense (in the form, for example, of a childhood house, a boulevard, or a string of stores with a long local history) is no longer visible, and so a distinctly *absent* past develops that runs parallel to the past which has retained its visibility. The double vision of history (the urban space of the physical landscape) *versus* memory (the spaces of the psychic landscape) comes

into existence. In other words, the emotional experience of space is synonymous with memory and the physical experience of space is synonymous with the processes of history.

So, I have started from the idea that the sense of conflict in urban space is a result of the disorienting and destabilising cycle of modern urban renewal and destruction. After this, the hermetically-sealed urban landscape, which should surely externalise both memory and history as one, is now open and porous, liminal and discontinuous. Remember what Koolhaas said about in-between spaces: “Despite the sense of control emphasised by the mathematical division and subdivision of space imposed on the land by the grid, *within those spaces* the freedom of individual will thrives unimpeded” (87 emphasis added). It is in these in-between spaces where individual memory reveals itself, where collisions between alternative perspectives of time and space and between rival conceptions of history and memory play out in the built environment. Such spaces are defined by their inherent liminality, in that they are open and borderless; in-between spaces are transitional spaces where one supposedly self-contained thing threatens to spill over into or merge with another. As I have outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 in particular, Freud would deem such spaces uncanny because they are defined by the collapse of integrity and the perception of difference. The double vision in which we are able to see both history and memory but at the same time perceive the difference between them, represents the liminal edges of our spatial experience of the city. It is important to emphasise that the revelation of memory as a distinct prospect to history is dependent upon making discontinuity visible in the built environment. The psychic or emotional experience of space occurs most frequently in the physical spaces that are characterised by this conflict, by discontinuity, because here it is obvious that there has been a rupture of some kind and we can thus clearly perceive the difference between the image we have in our minds of what this space should look like (according to our own personal recollections) and the reality in front of us in the landscape.

Sometimes as a result of this perception of difference we feel the urge to recreate the city we see before us in the image of how it appears to us in memory, which feels more complete. This is a form of nostalgia, and it finds physical expression in the remaking of material space via methods like gentrification. Nostalgia is, in short, the space between where we are now and the places of the past. As noted in Chapter 2, David Lowenthal tells us that in its original seventeenth-century form, nostalgia was diagnosed by a Swiss physician as a physical complaint experienced by those whose brains clung to “traces of ideas of the Fatherland” (*Past is* 46). It is also defined by Anne Friedberg as “an algia, a painful return” (189). It represents a longing for a place which can only cause pain should you succeed in going back to it. Nevertheless, the desire to return home persists.

In this thesis I argue that, rather than something which prevents the reconciliation between history and memory, discontinuity is a necessary (and unavoidable) component of life in the modern city. Discontinuity makes visible the messy contortions of history. Discontinuity has a greater power to reveal the past than nostalgia, because where the former points out the city’s wounds, the latter pretends they never existed.

In my introduction to this thesis I referred to Lewis Mumford’s maxim that “In the city, time becomes visible” (*Culture of Cities* 4). The focus of each of the writers I have discussed has been how this maxim has manifested itself. I chose each writer because of the particular ways that they each consider how the built environment is able to make time visible and, indeed, to cultivate what we remember of the time that has passed through these spaces. In the context of this thesis, the “time” that Mumford writes of is translated as history. In other words, urban spaces are able to make *history* visible.

At the centre of my thesis has been an examination of both the distinction and the relationship between history and memory, and how this is experienced spatially and articulated by each author. Integral to this exploration is the modern and modernity, in terms

of how they manifest themselves in the urban spaces of New York, Los Angeles and, in particular instances, in California more widely. M. Christine Boyer writes that the modern view of the city reflected a desire to “master and dominate” it and to experience it in “a coherent and integrated manner” (3). Yet conversely, as I have shown, modernity in the city achieves the opposite, making urban spaces feel incoherent, dispersive and uncanny. One aim of modernity in this context, as we saw in my discussion of Marshall Berman, was to question and distance “the relationship between history and the city,” instead of “holding onto an Enlightenment or nineteenth-century view where even architectural styles, it was argued, followed a progressive and linear development.” Yet despite the machinations of modernity, “our desire for authentic memories and city experiences reveals an empathy for lost totalities” (Boyer 4). What happens to memory when what we expect to see in physical monuments to our past is not in fact visible? Does memory die too, or become more powerful in its invisibility? As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the double-vision through which we continue to see both what is intimate, personal, lost, and what is collective, tangible, and evident, endures.

How to retain a connection to a personal sense of history in such places? If we follow the advice of Frances Yates, the solution is to be found in the memory palace. It is necessary, she tells us, to find a “loci” that is familiar and filled with items to aid recollection, such as an unfrequented building inside which we may wander and repeat her mnemonic technique (18). But not all memory palaces provide a sanctuary for authentic memory. Some are more like Klein’s *imago*: false friends rather than safe harbours. For Chandler, the memory palace is Philip Marlowe’s apartment, a place where the detective can make himself a whole person again. But the Sternwood mansion on the other hand, has very little in it on which to focus anyone’s mnemonic technique. Berman’s palace is 1460 College Avenue, a place to which he cannot bring himself to return and which thus becomes swathed in myth. In fact, for Berman,

the whole borough of the Bronx (and by extension much of the city of New York) is his memory palace, yet it is so full of holes that memory seeps out, dissipating in the wide open spaces of the modern city. Maria Wyeth, whose childhood home was blasted into oblivion, has internalised this insular blankness and purposefully avoids settling in anything resembling a home that could remind her of a painful history. The Mar Vista property of Mr and Mrs Cattleman, devoid of any personal effects, is under constant threat of obliteration by bulldozer or perhaps even flooding. The many ancestral houses referred to by Didion in her personal essays are similar to Yates' memory palace in that they are filled with significant objects to be memorialised. But does she see herself in the objects she examines, or just remnants of other peoples' history? Perhaps it is California's Holy Land which is her true memory palace. Waldie lives in his palace rather ambivalently, Lake has purloined a palace full of the memories of others, and the Bentwoods find the sanctity of theirs cannot outlast the changes brought by history to their doorstep. Every house, or equally meaningful space, in this thesis is in one way or another a "visible and concrete means of defining and articulating the self," even if that home, and indeed that sense of a self with any kind of hinterland, is absent (Chandler, *Dwelling* 3).

Home is where we embed our autobiography, becoming a text in which we ourselves are inscribed and can be read. This familiar physical locus may be what is needed, but what we are left with instead in cities like Los Angeles and New York is, as Norman M. Klein explains, "an empty lot where a building once stood" (4). The search for, or the rejection of, a stable home, one which is often associated with childhood, recurs throughout each chapter. But such a place is hard to come by in cities like these. Each chapter in this thesis is filled with examples of absences and empty spaces in every text, which signify that something has been silenced or removed. All speak to a degree of grief, loss, and homesickness (itself a form of nostalgia) for this very absence that sits at the heart of everything. As I have shown,

the act of remembering is complicated by the proliferation of these empty lots and what Kevin Lynch refers to as “external historical shell[s]” bereft of any internal meaning in the urban spaces of both New York and Los Angeles, cities which for many lack familiar architecture and topography (32).

Waldie and Berman both articulate an anxiety about empty spaces. “Now, for the first time, your room is empty, not merely unoccupied” writes the former about the chasm created by his father’s passing, after which his house is “largely a void” (*Holy* 3, 42). For Berman it is in the space outside his old home, which he describes as “open and empty as the desert,” where this same sense of absence is discovered (“Roots, Ruins” 20). In *Play It As It Lays* the porousness of internal spaces, like the apartment on Fountain Avenue, threatens to overwhelm that space with the repressed content of unwanted human waste, bubbling subterraneously like the oil beneath the surface of the earth in *The Big Sleep*. Every physical structure in *All That is Solid* has already collapsed when we find Berman wandering the Bronx, while in both *A Meaningful Life* and *Holy Land* the houses which are central to each narrative are insubstantial spaces that threaten to fall apart. At the end of *A Meaningful Life* Lowell Lake’s brownstone rooming house is characterised by a disturbing vacuity, with “holes [...] scattered here and there,” (190) and in the home of the Bentwoods: “The old sliding doors that had once separated the two first-floor rooms had long since been removed, so that by turning slightly [they] could glance down the length of their living room” (*Desperate* 3). These houses seem borderless, so completely exposed to the world outside that they threaten to dissolve into their external surroundings. Lake comments as his brownstone is being refurbished that the walls “weren’t really solid” and would “yield and engulf anyone unwary enough to lean on them,” ultimately discovering that whilst on the property you had to be “extremely careful where you walked to avoid falling into the room directly below” (*Meaningful* 115, 212).

Before I continue, I return here to the chronology of this thesis. I have traced the trajectory from the control and effacement found in modern city planning and organisation as established in New York and Los Angeles (and by extension much of California too), all the way to the resultant spatial and temporal rupture and attendant anxiety regarding coherence in personal history. The journey progresses as follows. First the modern city imposes its rigour on the landscape, interrupting its pre-urban origins, starting with the grafting of a gridded system (*The Big Sleep* and *Holy Land*) and continuing with further plans such as the imposition of an integrated system for automobiles (evident in Chandler's novels, in *Play It As It Lays*, and in *All That is Solid*), the paving over of rivers and gardens (Chandler), the clearance of unwanted housing stock in favour of newer, at times quite thoughtlessly incongruous, models (*All That is Solid* and *The Nowhere City*), the substitution of historically significant structures for a more modern convenience (the Grand Concourse turns into the Cross-Bronx Expressway), and finally in both the preservation which necessitates the dismantling of aspects of history and the restoration which is more like a total reimagining (*A Meaningful Life*). Built-up spaces cannibalise their own histories (see for example the Embarcadero in "Notes from a Native Daughter" with its firehouses turned into bars), until only signs of the past remain that no longer have any meaning in the de-contextualised present.

These grids and altered topographies make the machinations of the modern highly legible in both cities (if not obviously rational, as in the case of California's *ad hoc* growth). For example, the concrete troughs that run through Los Angeles in order to control and redirect the river find an echo in the concrete highway that runs through the Bronx. The extension of the freeway is important in *The Nowhere City* too, as it drives through previously intact neighbourhoods which topple easily in its wake, as the Cross-Bronx did when it was first constructed. The Cross-Bronx Expressway created a barrier to accessing the

past in space, wending its way directly through the centre of formerly tightly-woven neighbourhoods and creating a new space with no past, no meaning beyond its own capacity to run people out of their own history. In Los Angeles, the freeway system (representing the modern) rather ironically follows the bed of the river (representing the city's pre-urban natural history), duplicating the path that it paved over and creating a parallel version of what came before.

In a similar fashion, as Waldie has written, L.A.'s crooked heart represents the superimposition of a new grid over the original, making its new history just off-centre, which in turn invokes Alfred Kazin's observation that certain buildings in Brownsville, Brooklyn, have been "ripped out of their original pattern" (735). Likewise, in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe's disorienting visit to the canyons outside the city leave him with the feeling that he has "an amputated leg," (210) an echo of Henry James' comment upon his return to New York in *The American Scene* that its unfamiliarity is akin to having been "amputated of half my history" (46). Such "traces of erasure," as Anthony Vidler puts it, form a "negative path" (180). These erasures and substitutions take place physically on top of a now-suppressed landscape, be it the lost garden and paved river of California's agricultural past or the communal streetscapes of New York. The desire to blot out and extirpate the past creates uncanny pockets of space where evidence that it once existed there in a different, now invisible, form, endures, as in for example the Sternwood mansion, the streets of the Bronx, disturbing L.A. hotel rooms, empty Lakewood bedrooms, confused San Francisco houses, and dilapidated brownstone buildings.

Every iteration of the modern city in the various forms displayed in this thesis, be it gentrification and preservation or clearance and renewal, paves over the past and creates a duplicate that runs parallel. This is how memory is dislocated, to paraphrase Vidler (181). It is displaced and relocated in this parallel world, creating the double-vision I articulated

earlier in this conclusion through which we see both the mobile city and the planned; Plato's imprinted wax tablet and the rigid historical grid; the autobiographical cartography of a mental map and the material reality of the streetscape.

Berman, unable to reconcile the physical ruins with what he remembers, becomes a ghost haunting the streets of his "inner city" (*All That is* 344). He can still retrace old steps and orient himself, but his interior cartography is frequently blocked by external reality. Likewise for Didion when she goes home to Sacramento; each time she is greeted by a "presentiment of loss" ("On Keeping" 108). The California of her childhood disappears – as Berman articulates, grief seems endemic to modern life. Her view of the past is fixed on a point of loss just as the whole crossing story is predicated on the same idea. Loss is in fact built into the landscape of her childhood and is part of her history and heritage. Leaving home is part of this too – she contributes to her own loss. "Hurry along as fast as you can," as Virginia Reed advises (*Where I* 75), words Maria Wyeth submits to and Didion herself seems unable to ignore, as though they are both the embodiment of the California land itself, reaching out towards the ever-retreating horizon. There is constant anxiety that Didion will one day entirely lose her sense of the place; that it will be totally unrecognisable. Home is always "somewhere else" because it can never settle on a landscape that is itself never permanently settled (Didion repeats this particular phrase in *Play It As It Lays* (87), "Notes from a Native Daughter" (137), "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" (18) and "Goodbye to All That" (178), so clearly this is significant to her). The previous cohesion of the landscape, which authors like Berman and Didion imagine used to exist, has been violently ruptured.

This sense of spatial disruption is also found in the fragmentation of Chandler's architectural interiors; the continual disruption of construction in *The Nowhere City* and its de-centred exteriors; and the displacement not only of citizens' conceptions of their

environment (*Where I Was From*), but more literally of the citizens themselves *from* that environment (*All That is Solid*). In New York, the sense of a lack of permanence in urban spaces is created not through the danger posed by nature, but by modern city planning and its creation of rootlessness. In Los Angeles this same impermanence is a consequence of the whole garden having been turned into a machine. The synthetic environment of both cities as a result of these disruptions has been exposed as flimsy and liable to collapse, as exhibited in every text in various forms: in houses on the edge of cliffs; flooded living-rooms; bulldozed neighbourhoods; bodies dragged out of the ocean; feet crashing through an attic ceiling; broken windows; and invaded, vandalised country houses.

The spatial transformations in Los Angeles in particular seem to have had an effect on the experience of time in the city. Here, the space lost is equal to the time that cannot be accounted for. “I rang the bell,” Marlowe reports towards the end of *The Big Sleep*, “It was five days since I had rung it for the first time. It felt like a year” (148). The passing of time affects the logic found in dreams by speeding up and slowly down when necessary. The “dreamtime” of L.A. (Didion, *Where I* 17) makes the place feel “as if it weren’t real” (Lurie, *Nowhere* 200). This is not unlike the way time functions in Brooklyn, which often seems “like a dream” as Betty Smith puts it (*A Tree* 306), or indeed a “vale of time” (Schaeffer, *Mainland* 19). According to Lurie, L.A. is the “nowhen city” where time seems to be of no consequence (“Nowhen City”). Indeed, the city is time-less. What if, instead of becoming visible, time in some cities becomes unseen? Los Angeles is spatially formless, indistinct, and so it seems inevitable that time within this space should pass in an equally structureless fashion. “Everything runs together,” says Katherine in *The Nowhere City*; it is “so easy to lose track of time,” remarks her husband (144, 208); “time passes and I lose the thread,” reports Didion, halfway between a dream and a nightmare (“Slouching” 80).

The texts which represent both cities express an equal fixation with things being, or not being, intact and cohesive. The “broken, meaningless messages” that Paul tries to assemble for his history of the Nutting Institute (*Nowhere* 156) are like Marlowe’s description of trying to piece a disjointed, broken narrative together, creating something solid out of something “looser and vaguer” than he might wish it to be (*Big Sleep* 151). Seemingly arbitrary details are incrementally collated until they form a montage of sorts, which expresses in its way the whole case, the sum of its intricate parts. Both Paul’s messages and Marlowe’s broken narrative are like Maria’s attempt to establish a pattern in the images she sees of her friend BZ’s death: “I played and replayed these scenes and others like them, composed them as if for the camera, trying to find some order, a pattern. I found none” (*Play It* 14). The “scenes” of her past are disjointed and it seems impossible to render a cohesive narrative. Paul is unsuccessful because his client has no real interest in creating a historical narrative, just like Marlowe’s clients never have a desire to know the truth beneath the story with the smoother finish, and like Maria who does not wish to relive the true sequence of events that led to her friend’s death. Waldie also resists piecing together his own past, as does Lake, for whom the exaggerated tale of Darius Collingwood’s history, the book telling the story of which crumbling into “a pile of brittle brown flakes that got smaller and smaller the more you handled them,” is taken for a more impressive fact than the events of his own life, which by the end of the novel is synonymous with a house which could disintegrate at any moment: “Lowell had the uncomfortable feeling that at any moment the place could come popping apart like a cardboard cutout” (*Meaningful* 167, 169). In each case, fragmentation is the rule and not the exception.

In researching and writing this thesis, I have learnt over and over again that all that is solid eventually falls apart. The urban fabric splits, is worn down, becomes threadbare. The modern city is inevitably uncanny because of this; because it internalises both the invisible

memory of the individual and the visible history that replaces it at street-level. It contains multitudes, and sometimes these push at the seams that attempt to hold together the city's before and after. Artist Naima Rauam, whose studio around Water and Pearl Streets looks out over the former location of the Fulton Fish Market (now replaced by a very upmarket version of the South Street Seaport), explained to me in an interview that in New York it is "the incongruity of everything" that makes it such a rich urban space to examine, as well as a deeply unsettling city in which to live. "If you want to live in that environment," she continued, you "rise to the occasion. And if you can't, then you leave." Nostalgia in this city, I discovered to my surprise, is not sustainable. As Howard Kaminsky, first introduced in Chapter 2, explained to me: "If you don't like it, if you're uncomfortable with change, if you're going to fight it, then don't live in the city, and certainly don't live in New York."

At the end of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Francie Nolan decides that, like Berman, she would rather retain the still image of her old home as she remembered it and therefore is loath to return to note the difference: "No she'd never come back to the old neighbourhood" (363). But this kind of nostalgia is in fact the enemy of memory. Acts of preservation, gentrification, renewal, clearance, and so on, are all much the same as acts of nostalgia in that they are mechanisms for restoring an idea, or an ideal, of past places. They each represent the same process of "re-creating a place as someone thinks it was" (Huxtable, *The Unreal* 16) in the search for "organic and authentic" spaces (Osman 14). The more I read about it, the more I felt that, rather paradoxically, gentrification can be a similarly disruptive process as that which was prescribed by Robert Moses as the means for forging a modern city. But simultaneously it affects the pretence that the processes of modernity have not passed through this space, trying to smooth over the cracks, plug the holes in the walls and restore the original features in order to pursue this façade. In *A Meaningful Life*, we watch as Lake's neighbourhood goes through the same cycle of modernity that Berman decries in *All That is*

Solid, with buildings being chosen for clearance and destruction and the lives of Lake's "impoverished predecessors" not much cause for concern (*Meaningful* 133). In both instances the theory seems to be that the only way to rebuild the city is to simultaneously start over and pretend that nothing has changed.

As I completed this thesis I began to wonder if not just the recognition but the pursuit of discontinuity could actually be helpful in its ability to jolt memory that may have been buried, dormant, beneath the smoothing-out of history. Nostalgia, expressed at various moments by each of my authors, smooths everything out; it "hide[s] the discontinuities" (Friedberg 188). It begins as a refusal to accept change, which manifests itself in the built environment as a concealment of any bumps, cracks or fissures. When Gay Talese writes about the construction of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge that "all was flattened and smoothed by concrete," this is a description equally befitting the effects of gentrification (122). Moses' highways likewise sought to prevent attachment, to iron out a journey so one is taken seamlessly from one impersonal space to another. Didion's own personal nostalgia tries to smooth over inconvenient truths through fabrication and mythology which provide a false sense of cohesion. Willy Staley uses the same vocabulary to describe the contemporary effects of gentrification when he writes in the *New York Times* that it represents the "wearing down [of] every bump and cranny" until the neighbourhood is as "featureless as a river rock." As we see from the eventual erasure of the past in tangible form inside Lake's house, one consequence of his nostalgia is his glossing over of all displays that anything resembling a history before his own had ever existed there. Likewise, when Berman writes that "even the rubble was gone" after his family's departure from the Bronx, this represents the recognition that any sign of a forcible change had been removed ("Expressway and Me"). A city built on nostalgia is one that has had its layers of memory stripped back; it would be, as Vidler warns,

a city that allows us a too-smooth journey across and through it, in which “we cross nothing to go nowhere” (185).

In Georg Simmel’s 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” he argues that the human mind is stimulated by difference, particularly the difference between “past impressions and those which have preceded” (11). Boyer writes that the spectacle of the myriad “layers of historical time” made visible can trigger the “experience of diversity” (19). We can draw a line from these layers to Freud’s “different contents” of time preserved in space (*Civilization* 18), which also galvanise the perception of “diversity” in the form of discontinuity (Boyer 19). As Freud suggests when he describes these “different contents” of the past, the layers of a city’s history are buried but not dead. They all exist simultaneously in palimpsestic form. The remembered and the visibly real can co-exist, but in the overlap between them there is a sense of difference.

For example, Selina Boyce and Alfred Kazin both perceive the past through signs of difference in the street, of discontinuity with their expectations, and are both forced into remembrance as a consequence. In Waldie’s *Holy Land* memories are found in the silences and in the intentional gaps in the narrative, existing behind the Douglas fir walls and in the in-between spaces that the grid tramples over. In *A Meaningful Life*, Lake attempts to strip, both symbolically and literally, the “layers off the built environment” to get closer to the past that he feels can only be discerned in the original layer of this architectural pentimento (Osman 23). But destroying the historical layers destroys his capacity to see the discontinuities in-between each, which would have galvanised the perception of true memory. In the end Lake turns what should be a space imbued with history into a space that is characterised by novelty – think of the “newly sawed wood and fresh plaster” – and ultimately it becomes “blank and seamless” (*Meaningful* 213, 214). The seam, or the “suture”

as Klein puts it – a tangible sign that is necessary in order to perceive difference and therefore authentic memory – is not in evidence (313). A city of nostalgia is seam-less.

This seam, or suture, is similar to James Donald’s “split within” modernity, or a sign that modernity has overextended itself, with the uncanny representing that which it has repressed pushing back against its limits (72). If we can see this split then we can see memory. With no sign of a split or suture – the seam in urban space that makes visible the places where history has covered over memory – there is no way to see that anything else used to exist. I have shown in this thesis that both Los Angeles and New York are full of sown up wounds that would speak to the processes of history and what it has erased, if only they were *more* visible, not less.

Other splits, seams, or sutures come in the form of liminal spaces characterised by a tangible ambivalence or in-between-ness. One recurring example comes in the form of the many doors which populate each text. Maria Wyeth is unable to “go back” to her memories of the past when she is under hypnosis, because, as her therapist explains, she is unable to “open enough doors to get back” (*Play It* 143). Naima Rauam, mentioned earlier in this conclusion, said to me that the elevated highway of the FDR Drive opposite her studio acts as “a curtain,” behind which is the historic district of the South Street Seaport, and that to walk beneath the first to access the second is “like going through a door.” Waldie finally allows himself to recollect his father’s death “behind a well-made, wooden bathroom door” (*Holy* 24) and it is on the other side of the Bentwoods’ glass back door and imposing front door that stray cats, strange men, and former business partners stand, threatening intrusion into their insular world. Similarly, elsewhere in *Desperate Characters* the Holsteins’ broken window represents an opening to the transformed world outside they try to ignore. The door (and on some occasions, the window) makes space ambivalent because it is both open and closed, an exit and an entrance, a hinge within space that makes it both one thing and its opposite. Doors

interrupt the smooth surfaces of space, making them discontinuous. Boyer writes of the “liminally conjoined spaces” which are formed when a link between what is visible and what is intuitive is established (21). In such a space it is possible to perceive, to come to a more authentic understanding of, the history that is both present in the surface of the city and hidden somewhere within it. Doors, when opened, provide a physical representation of these spaces, and as such can expose one to discomfort, danger, and heartache, which is why the prospect of opening them causes such anxiety. But opening them is also, symbolically, the key to the reconciliation of history and memory.

Another liminal space is the street. As Michael Kimmelman observed at the Museum of the City of New York’s 2015 “Redefining Preservation” Symposium, buildings “don’t exist in a vacuum, they belong to streets, neighbourhoods, communities, which need to be nurtured holistically. And it is very often the spaces between these buildings which need to be safeguarded,” continuing that Robert Moses, for example, may have built many housing units in New York, “but he didn’t build neighbourhoods.” The subtext here of course is that it is the “spaces between” buildings that require nurturing and a degree of preservation because it is in these spaces that a sense of shared history, of memory, is forged. As Halbwachs writes about personal memories, as distinct from historical memory, these are characterised by their ability to live “in the consciousness of the groups” that keep it alive, and by their “irregular and uncertain boundaries” (80, 82). Nowhere in New York is it more possible to feel this sense of group consciousness and ambivalent borders than on the street.

In his *Arcades* project, Walter Benjamin ponders if it is possible to locate the past of the city (in his case, Paris during the early twentieth century) somewhere within its material environment. He discovers that it is in the street, “in *the space between* the building fronts,” that one is able to walk “into a vanished time [...] into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private” (828, 416 emphasis added). When I was

first in New York conducting archival research, I spent a lot of time trying to find ways of feeling at home and create a space where I could feel a degree of familiarity. I wanted to somehow plug myself into the city's history and try vicariously to feel connected to it. By some amazing act of fate (or random chaos, depending on what you believe) I managed to meet Berman's wife, Shellie Sclan. During one of our conversations she mentioned that when she first moved to the city in the late 1970s she would force herself out of bed on a Saturday morning, frustrated that she didn't know what she was doing with her life, and would go out and "just start walking. And things would happen." I took it upon myself to follow her advice, spending so much time walking to fend off a deep sense of loneliness (which felt a lot like homesickness) that, like Waldie, my mind was taken up by the grid; by numbers and corners and avenues and coordinates. Some days I would retrace the quotidian steps of Berman when he lived on the Upper West Side, taking in his beloved Upper Broadway, Book Culture on West 112th Street, Metro Diner at 2641 Broadway. It took time and concerted effort to make places more contained by frequenting them and rendering them local. I created an intimacy with the city any way I could. Despite the grid and the very defined areas – UWS, UES, LES, Downtown, Tribeca, the West Village, Soho, and so on – everything seemed to flow inconspicuously, casually, from one space to the next. There is really no stopping there. You are caught in a flow all the time, despite traffic and density and distraction, it goes on and on. It is bigger than you. I felt part of something on the street itself, together with other walkers, moving in the same direction, navigating correctly and so acceptably enfolded into the city. You move with the gridded streets, and with the subway lines, and New York is with you, pushing you forward. One evening after a particularly long wander it started to rain. I ambled about the surrounding streets getting progressively more wet hoping it would stop before giving up and getting on the subway. While down there waiting there was a man playing the flute and his sweet sound could be heard in between that

metallic jolt and rumble of the train carriages going past. I thought – this is New York. That clash that is actually comforting, rather than a deafening collision.

In Chapter 5, I demonstrated that at the end of both *A Meaningful Life* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* the authors make it clear that real life, that which is able to endure in these Brooklyn neighbourhoods beyond the experiences of their respective protagonists, is not inside landmarked or preserved buildings, but outside on the cacophonous street. The street is the city, not just a series of separate passageways that connect and organise it, but a cumulative dissemination of what it means to be a city. In a famous passage from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes New York street life downtown as an “intricate sidewalk ballet,” following the flow of the people that inhabit and enliven Hudson Street in the midst of what seems to be rampant disorder (61). This flow is composed of “movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance [...] to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole” (60). William H. Whyte, urbanist and author of, amongst other texts, *The Organization Man* (1956) and *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), was also a mentor to Jacobs and details, as she does, the vast scope of people who comprise the city’s crowd and unwittingly organise its space. There are the regulars who populate the streets, entertain or harass those moving past them, dictate the trajectory of the crowd, create pockets of people stood still momentarily to observe or partake, draw scrutiny, and occupy sections of the street. Positioning himself at various points of urban density, Whyte observes the movements, chosen or forced, of the people on the street, writing that “Bad or good, the variety of street people is astonishingly wide. To appreciate this, stand still” (270).

Echoing Walter Benjamin, who wrote in *Arcades* that the street is “the dwelling place of the collective” and the “familiar interior of the masses,” (423) Paul Goldberger comments

in the Foreword to *The Essential William H. Whyte* that Whyte had a deep understanding of the fact that “as the architect Louis Kahn once said, ‘a street is a room by agreement’” (viii). Just as Selina Boyce and Lowell Lake notice at their end of their respective Brooklyn narratives, in the city the street becomes a more intimate living space than one’s living room. People live on the outside. Berman likewise extols the virtues of life outside on the streets, professing that in New York “if you look up to the top of the buildings, it is brand new, but at the level of the street, it is a couple of hundred years old” (Introduction 35). For Benjamin, Jacobs, Whyte, Berman et al, the street is really where a sense of home, community, history and memory can be found, and this is particularly true of New York.

In the Holy Land of California external space is always bordered at some point by the “white barrier” (Chandler, *Farewell* 207) or the “red rags” (Lurie, *Nowhere* 162) that mark the point where the garden ends and development begins. In *The Nowhere City*, Paul and his girlfriend Ceci drive along Mulholland, “a narrow road along the crest of the mountains, badly paved, twisting and turning around heaps of earth and rock, skirting sheer cliffs of mud” (161). At first it seems they will be able to drive out far enough to track down the arcadian fantasy that Paul is seeking: “Together, they started uphill along the dirt road, now only a track. After all, this landscape had its own kind of beauty, Paul thought. The smoky green and indigo of the hill behind the construction site, the intense blue sky, were exotic and interesting.” But the devouring capacities of the external world in Los Angeles are curtailed by modern encroachments. There is always a limit imposed, often in the form of a literal machine in the garden where the trail of nature comes to an abrupt end: “But round the next bend, with the trucks and bulldozers still in sight, the road ended in a trash pile: a heap of smashed bottled, cans, and dead sticks and leaves” (162). Similarly, in *The Big Sleep*, when Marlowe accompanies Carmen Sternwood down to the oil fields, following, as Paul does, a “narrow dirt road” which is “fringed with tall eucalyptus trees” that takes them to the

abandoned wells, they find nothing but decay and detritus: “rusted pipe, a loading platform that sagged at one end, half a dozen empty oil drums lying in a ragged pile” (154-155).

The accumulation of trash as a symbol of the accretions of historical progress portrayed here is reminiscent of Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” who sees history as a “single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet” (“On the Concept” 392). The Angel would like to “piece together what has been smashed” but is prevented from doing so by the storm of progress which “drives him irresistibly into the future.” The pile of rubble is left to grow. Of course, here one thinks immediately of Berman and his quest to sift through the rubble left behind by Moses’ storm of progress in the Bronx. But the Angel’s struggle is also mirrored by Paul in his search for some prelapsarian past found piecemeal in the midst of the wider Los Angeles construction site and his discovery of the dilapidated hidden history of Venice Beach. It is also echoed by Didion in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” as she picks through the debris of the atomised lives of the children in San Francisco as they are blown into an uncertain future; by her surveyance of the California landscape and its exploitation, mile after mile of sales and subdivisions piling up in her rear view mirror; and by Maria Wyeth’s fears of being overwhelmed by the human waste that threatens to flood every flimsy interior in which she takes brief refuge, her narrative collapsing behind her as she hurls herself towards the horizon. Echoes are also found in Marlowe’s repeated discovery of the very fine line that delineates the wild from the cultivated in L.A., a line which is both disclosed and covered by the refuse of the city, and in his long list of bodies discovered out in the wilderness of the Greater Los Angeles area, seeming to pile up from one Chandler novel to the next like the Angel’s “rubble-heap” that grows “sky-high” (Benjamin, “On the Concept” 392). It is mirrored by Waldie, trying to ignore remnants of difficult recollections in the structurally unsound buildings of Lakewood, built where the frame houses of encroaching urbanisation meet the frayed edges of the garden. The City of

Angels seems a fitting home for the Angel of History. In California, at the edge of the garden, in the slight gap between the built environment and its pre-urban shadow, there is a thin line of detritus that makes the transition from one to the other visible – another liminal space.

What is needed in order to perceive memory are the same discontinuities that processes like preservation and gentrification are designed to hide. The in-between, liminal spaces in cities are where the distance between history and memory comes alive. In New York, this is found in the dynamism of the street; in Los Angeles, in the margin or verge of the garden.

In my introduction I wrote about Boyer's notion that walking through the city would make it more understandable and would allow its citizens to see both its urban spaces and its narrative history as cohesive rather than continuously disrupted. In this thesis I have argued that in fact there is more discontinuity in evidence in the urban spaces of New York and Los Angeles than integrity or congruence. I also referred to Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle," in which he tries to understand and read his own past through the selection of the various significant buildings which have been important to him throughout his life, buildings which become "a system of signs" on his own personal map (5). He explains that his perspective on autobiography is that it is about sequence, but not necessarily about one unbroken chronological sequence: "autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. I am talking of a space, of moments and *discontinuities*" (28 emphasis added). I contend that discontinuity is a necessary component of life in the modern city due to its capacity to unveil the presence of a buried or evicted history. Attempts to reconstruct the past and impose a cohesive narrative on a discontinuous form can actually rob it of its authenticity. The "fragmentary meanings" we discover on our walk through our own inner cities, as they alternately meet and part from the material city, should be left as they are (Boyer 25).

So, we must accept that a house built by nostalgia can never be a real home. But the question remains. How to make a home in a world in ruins? In the process of writing this thesis I came to the realisation that a common theme amongst these authors is a strong sense of grief. Where is my home? they seem to be asking the reader, or themselves, over and over. Even the authors and characters who are still able to access their childhood homes (or to live in them, as Waldie does), and even, conversely, those who run from home, seem to be in mourning for it. They long for the restorative feeling of home, but often this longing is for a world that no longer exists. The space that they walk through is not topographical, but internal. It is another country, one that they can no longer inhabit. Perhaps their memories, which cannot be located spatially, represent an attempt to create an ideal and intact home that cannot be confronted by reality. After visiting my friend's old house I wrote in my diary that it didn't seem to belong to us anymore. I told her, and myself, that the new people didn't live in what I saw as "our house": "They live in their house. Ours is somewhere else." Each of the texts in this thesis present a similar vision of the city that lives on in the imagined spaces of memory, continuing to exist even after the city itself has melted into air.

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